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**The problem of subjectivity in Marxism**  
**Karl Marx, George Lukacs and Antonio Gramsci**

Jackson, Robert

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*Karl Marx, George Lukacs and Antonio Gramsci*

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# The Problem of Subjectivity in Marxism

Karl Marx, Georg Lukács and Antonio Gramsci

***Robert Paul Jackson***

*European and International Studies Department,  
King's College London, University of London.*

*Thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD).*

*29 March 2013*

## DECLARATION

*The work presented in this thesis is my own.*

*Signed*

*Robert Paul Jackson*

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## ABSTRACT

The recent revival of interest in Marxism has addressed the question of subjectivity in new ways. This thesis undertakes a critical investigation of the theme of subjectivity in key texts from the classical Marxist tradition in preparation for assessing its contribution to contemporary debates. My aim in this project has been to explore how one might construct a defensible version of the solution to the problem of subjectivity advanced by Marx and his successors.

Examining Marx's effort to develop the dialectical unity of subject and object in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, I propose the coexistence of two conceptions of subjectivity in these *Manuscripts*. A tension is created within the text that I argue pre-figures the development of his theory of commodity fetishism. This theory addresses the problem of the authentic or quasi-subjectivity of capital.

This theme is developed through an exploration of the obstacles confronting proletarian subjectivity in Marx's *Capital*. Within this framework, I show how Marx elaborates concrete forms of working class self-activity, such as in his chapter on *The Working Day*. The relationship between human actors and social structures is studied, in particular the role of the knowing subject in the process of class struggle, such as with the case of the factory inspectors. I also critically examine the interpretation of *Capital* advanced by Moishe Postone in his work: *Time, Labour and Social Domination*.

In the third chapter, Lukács's theory of reification is examined, extending commodity fetishism to locate the commodity-form as the structuring principle fragmenting subjectivity in all spheres of social life. Following Marx's discovery of the proletariat as the 'universal' class, Lukács poses the proletariat as the philosophical basis for overcoming these obstacles. I attempt to locate the questions that Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* allows us to ask and those it excludes.

Whilst Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* do not directly address the theme of alienation and fetishism, in the final chapter, I argue that his distinctively concrete account of class subjectivity has a de-

fetishising function related to the central role played by intellectuals in political leadership. I discuss the apparent autonomy of the State in Gramsci's framework and examine whether this poses a problem for his conception of class subjectivity. In order to assess this challenge, I propose a new categorisation of two modes – holistic and constitutive – by which Gramsci analyses the State. Finally, I consider the possibility that Lukács and Gramsci's heterogeneous frameworks might yield complementary contributions towards contemporary discussions of the problem of subjectivity.

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# Introduction

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## 1) The Return to Marx and Contemporary Debates in Subjectivity

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, there has been a widely acknowledged return to the ideas of Karl Marx arising from and resonating with new political movements. This attempt to use Marx's ideas to make sense of the contemporary world has been in continuing dialogue with and against the dominant intellectual currents of the twentieth century. For a number of thinkers, such as the radical philosophers Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, their engagement with Marxism in the aftermath of post-modernism, post-structuralism and other schools of thought has taken the form of addressing the problem of subjectivity.

Thus Žižek, in his book *The Ticklish Subject*, reworks the opening passages of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels's *Communist Manifesto*.<sup>1</sup> He replaces the spectre of communism hanging over bourgeois society in the nineteenth century with the threat of the subversive core of Cartesian subjectivity to the consensus of contemporary academic thought. It is the abandonment, he claims, of the Cartesian subject by the deconstructionism of the post-modernists or its replacement by some in critical theory with 'discursive inter-subjectivity' that undermines the possibility of a genuine emancipatory project.<sup>2</sup> For Žižek, a defensible theory of subjectivity does not simply dissolve the subject into flows of meanings or desires, as do the post-structuralists. At the same time, neither does he believe that we can uncritically follow Descartes and Hegel in treating the subject as self-constituting.

Žižek's investigation of subjectivity has been influenced by the work of Alain Badiou. Since the late 1960s, in the context of the disintegration of the Marxist intellectual milieu in France, Badiou has attempted to identify an elusive and rare political subjectivity that is constituted by its fidelity to,

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<sup>1</sup> Žižek, S *The Ticklish Subject: the Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), p.1

<sup>2</sup> Žižek *The Ticklish Subject*, p.1

what he calls, the *Event*.<sup>3</sup> Through a rigorous investigation of this concept, Badiou seeks to explore the philosophical structure of the exceptional, that which breaks from the course of normality. Badiou's notion of fidelity, as interpreted by Alex Callinicos, refers to "the stance or orientation that a subject takes up in order to sustain a particular truth through time".<sup>4</sup>

The approaches to the question of subjectivity adopted by Badiou and Žižek both reject the relativism of post-modernism and seek to offer a "politics of truth".<sup>5</sup> They make an apparent return to themes associated with classical Marxism, such as the class subjectivity of the proletariat. Whilst both thinkers accept a break with the orthodoxy of the classical Marxist tradition, Žižek argues that it is necessary to undertake the Leninist operation of re-inventing the revolutionary project. For Žižek, a return to the Marxist tradition is not simply a re-enactment, but a Kierkegaardian repetition of Marxist thought, aiming to "retrieve the same impulse in today's constellation".<sup>6</sup> These thinkers propose an emancipatory project that, in Žižek's words, seeks to "re-formulate a leftist, anti-capitalist political project in our era of global capitalism and its ideological supplement".<sup>7</sup>

For the classical Marxist tradition, proletarian self-emancipation is central to the anti-capitalist project. This certainly poses the question of a break with the normal functioning of capitalist society. In this respect we find a correlation between the themes of Badiou and Žižek and classical Marxism. There is also of course a conceptual gulf between them. However, a fruitful dialogue may be established in which these new approaches to the question of subjectivity can illuminate the relationship between the crisis of capitalist society and the conscious revolutionary intervention of the working class. I will return to the ideas of Badiou and Žižek in my conclusion. However, it is my basic contention that a significant preparatory work is necessary before advancing to clarify the relationship between these post-Marxist accounts of subjectivity and the classical Marxist tradition.

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<sup>3</sup> Badiou, *A Being and Event* (London: Continuum, 2007), p.180, p.392 – For Badiou, an Event can take a political form, such as the French revolution, the Russian revolution of 1917, or the events of May 1968, but can potentially also take other forms, such as that of a sublime work of art.

<sup>4</sup> Callinicos, *A The Resources of Critique* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), p.102

<sup>5</sup> Žižek, S "A Plea for Leninist Intolerance" *Critical Inquiry* 28:2 (Winter 2002), p.547

<sup>6</sup> Žižek "A Plea for Leninist Intolerance", p.553

<sup>7</sup> Žižek *The Ticklish Subject*, p.4

## 2) The Problem of Subjectivity and the Classical Marxist Tradition

In this context, I propose to undertake an investigation of four key texts by Karl Marx, Georg Lukács and Antonio Gramsci in order to establish the ground-work from which the contribution of the classical Marxist tradition to renewed debates in subjectivity can be assessed. I examine the role of the problem of subjectivity in the foundation of Marxism and its elaboration by Marx's successors. The former is achieved through an analysis of the development between Marx's *Early Writings* and his mature thought.

For the latter, I have chosen to study Georg Lukács and Antonio Gramsci as two key thinkers who sought to renew Marxism in opposition to the fatalistic reading advanced by the leading theoreticians of the Second International. Following the revolutionary struggles in the first decades of the twentieth century, these radical critics sought to reinstate subjectivity to a central location in the Marxist theory of history. It is perhaps not coincidental that contemporary thinkers such as Badiou and Žižek again regard this theme as central to the project of re-inventing Marxist thought.

In the thesis, a substantive impression of each thinker's notion of subjectivity emerges from their formulation of the obstacles facing the proletariat in becoming a subject. In order to address Marx's conception of subjectivity, I will examine his theories of alienated labour and commodity fetishism. This theme of the obstacles confronting the proletariat is presented first through a close reading of his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, and subsequently through an analysis of his later thought in *Capital*.

I will then draw out the conceptions of subjectivity advanced by Lukács and Gramsci in their works *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) and *The Prison Notebooks* (1929-35) respectively. Lukács extends Marx's theory of commodity fetishism by analysing the relationship between the structuring forms of the economy and the creation of class consciousness, producing a distinctively polarised conception of subjectivity. This gives rise to radical insights but also to theoretical difficulties, as I seek to demonstrate. Although Gramsci conceptualises the processes that produce obstacles to

proletarian subjectivity very differently to Marx and Lukács, I will examine the connections between the theme of alienation, fetishism and reification, and Gramsci's particular concerns.

This thesis contends that tracing the theme of subjectivity through the writings of Lukács and Gramsci illuminates, with increasing definition, aspects of the problem that are embryonic in Marx's thought. Lukács's desire for the proletariat to become the "identical subject-object" of history and Gramsci's aim to develop a proletarian hegemonic project each address the question of proletarian revolution posed by Marx.<sup>8</sup> Both attempt to identify the revolutionary character of Marx's dialectical method. This is reflected in their efforts to elaborate the essential core of Marxism as a philosophy of praxis.

The aspects of Marx's thought developed by Lukács, particularly the theory of reification, have become an important foundation for the subsequent critical theory of the Frankfurt school, and a key reference for the contemporary debates in subjectivity discussed above. Likewise a version of Gramsci's concept of hegemony has been mobilised by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in support of their post-Marxist approach.<sup>9</sup> Parallels have been drawn between Gramsci's writings on language, his critique of the empiricist notion of 'objective reality', and the relativistic approach of post-modernism.<sup>10</sup>

However, each of these 'developments' requires the detachment of key aspects of these thinkers' frameworks from its connection to class struggle and social revolution, and its corresponding economic basis. Whilst the development of the classical Marxist tradition in distinctive directions by Lukács and Gramsci might be considered a divisive tension within it, their work also motivates a clarification of our interpretation of this tradition. I will examine both the elements of division and compatibility in the frameworks of Lukács and Gramsci, and ask whether there can be a mutually reinforcing reading of their work.

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<sup>8</sup> Lukács, G *History and Class Consciousness* (London: Merlin, 1971), p.149

<sup>9</sup> Laclau, E and Mouffe, C *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985)

<sup>10</sup> Ives, P *Language and Hegemony in Gramsci* (London: Pluto, 2004), p.135



## a) The Modern Notion of the Self

The problem of subjectivity inherited by Marx can be traced back through the traditions of classical German philosophy to the origins of the modern notion of the self. In turn, pre-figurations of this notion can be found in conceptions passed down by the ancient Greeks. Its development can be charted through medieval and Renaissance thought to the 17th century shift to what Charles Taylor calls the modern “self-defining subject”.<sup>11</sup> Taylor argues that this process arrives at “two seemingly indispensable images of man”: a subject defined in relation to something external to it, and a subject that is self-defining.<sup>12</sup> These two images appear to have “deep affinities”, and yet at the same time seem to be “utterly incompatible”.<sup>13</sup> They both arise as reactions to or developments of the radical Enlightenment.

The culmination of this process, in what Taylor calls Georg Hegel’s ‘expressivism’, forms an essential part of the background of Marx’s own thought. Hegel articulates the central expressivist aspiration to transcend what he argued was the dualism in Immanuel Kant’s philosophy. He sought to unite moral freedom and communion with nature in a self-constituting, absolute subject. This project is a precursor to Marx’s effort to develop the idea of the dialectical unity of subject and object, notably in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*.

Marx, like Hegel before him, seeks, in Taylor’s words, to “escape from a predicament in which the subject is over against an objectified world”.<sup>14</sup> Marx’s confrontation with these problems would give rise to a radically new outlook and the ‘discovery’ of a new subject: the proletariat. The development of Marx’s thought is entwined with the problem of subjectivity and the complex of theoretical threads through which modern notions of selfhood are constituted.

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<sup>11</sup> Taylor, *C Hegel* (Cambridge: CUP, 1975), p.7

<sup>12</sup> Taylor *Hegel*, p.3

<sup>13</sup> Taylor *Hegel*, p.3

<sup>14</sup> Taylor *Hegel*, p.29

## b) Marx and Subjectivity

As a Young Hegelian, Marx conceived the problem of subjectivity as the problem of universal human emancipation. In his *Early Writings*, this emancipation is realised primarily through philosophy. However, Marx develops the notion that human emancipation comes about through revolution, and recognises that a revolution needs a “material basis”, even if seen as a “passive element”.<sup>15</sup> The passivity of this material basis is reflected in Marx’s analogy, adapted from Feuerbach,<sup>16</sup> of philosophy as the head of emancipation, and the proletariat as its heart.<sup>17</sup>

In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, motivated by his study of the French Revolution and the writings of political economy, Marx moves towards identifying a material basis for the dynamic conception of human nature that he detects in modern society. The impulse of this development is an understanding of the subjectivity of labour and that of private property. The theory of estranged labour that he develops in the *Manuscripts* begins to lay the basis for a conception of the proletariat as a subject. I will argue that this shift in Marx’s conception of subjectivity demonstrates that he is on the threshold of a new project.

Marx’s discussion of the problem of subjectivity will set the parameters within which my investigation of subjectivity is located. Thus I will mainly be concerned with the question of collective subjects and, for Marxism in particular, with the problem of the subjectivity of classes. Since Marx never formulated a definitive statement of his conception of class, it is necessary to infer this from his writings. It is also apposite to ask how classes are composed as subjects, how a class is capable of action, and what processes might inhibit its activity. These questions are linked to an understanding of the relationship between consciousness and collective action. It is further necessary to enquire whether a theory of the subjectivity of classes is compatible with notions of other collective subjects, such as society, or the State.

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<sup>15</sup> Marx, K *Early Writings* (London: Penguin, 1992 [1975]), p.252 (emphasis in original unless otherwise stated)

<sup>16</sup> Löwy, M *The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2005), p.58

<sup>17</sup> Marx *Early Writings*, p.257

Given the wealth of texts produced by Marx, and the even greater volume of subsequent Marxist theory, this thesis has been highly selective in its sources. In order to trace the development of the theme of subjectivity in Marx's work, I have selected a close reading of key texts: his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, and his later writings in *Capital*. This excludes other texts by Marx, such as his *Grundrisse*, or his political and historical writings (e.g. *The 18th Brumaire*, *The Civil War in France*) from a similar treatment. However, as indicated in my methodological comments below, I have demarcated the boundaries of this project, in order that the framework that it develops can be fruitfully tested and expanded in the future.

### 3) The Obstacles Confronting the Proletariat

In this thesis, I will focus on the political aspect of the problem of revolutionary subjectivity, in particular the potential for the proletariat to become a collective political agent. A theme that emerges across the texts is the attempt of each to characterise the obstacles confronting the proletariat in this task, or as David Harvey, another exemplar of the return to Marx, puts it, what the proletariat are “forced to cope *with* and defend *against*”.<sup>18</sup>

Thus Marx, in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, formulates the theory of alienated labour, the way in which workers create an autonomous, alien power over and against themselves. In the *Manuscripts*, the centrality of labour, and the theory of its estrangement, comes into conflict with the framework associated with the concept of species-being. By investigating the presence of two conflicting subjectivities within this work, the subjectivity of private property and the subjectivity of labour, I seek to demonstrate how Marx initially formulates the problem of the authentic or quasi-subjectivity of private property.

Examining the former, I trace the historical development of the concept of industry and its relationship to the internally dynamic nature of political economy, and its status as “modern

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<sup>18</sup> Harvey, D *Limits to Capital* (London: Verso, 1999), p.113

industry as self".<sup>19</sup> The latter conception – the subjectivity of labour – underpins Marx's first critique of political economy, and his project to rise above it. I ask whether this project can be identified with his theory of communism, rising above crude communism through various stages of transcendence in a Hegelian manner.

I propose that the two conceptions of subjectivity, identified above, coexist in the *Manuscripts*, but are placed under tension by Marx's project to reduce them to a single conception. This internal tension is a productive force that leads Marx towards the identification of the division of labour with the "perceptibly alienated expressions" of human activity and to the threshold of a new project.<sup>20</sup> Although Marx operates with a different analytical framework in the *Manuscripts* to that found in his later writings, the internal development of his thought presses towards the formulation of the theory of commodity fetishism.

### **a) Between Alienation and Commodity Fetishism**

The close relationship between Marx's conception of alienation and the development of his theory of commodity fetishism binds the interpretation of these two works together. The embryonic treatment of the relationship between capital and labour in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* arises from the tensions that I identify within this work. In *Capital*, the development of Marx's critique of political economy leads to the articulation of a more richly determined framework of concepts with which he investigates the capitalist mode of production.

In his later work, Marx re-formulates the problem of the authentic or quasi-subjectivity of private property. Whereas in the *Manuscripts* the movement of private property is the primary focus, in *Capital* private property as a juridical expression is subordinated to an investigation of the relations of production.<sup>21</sup> The movement of capital is conceptualised as a process of self-valorization, of value generating itself, through which past labour confronts living labour and becomes authentically

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<sup>19</sup> Marx *Early Writings*, p.341

<sup>20</sup> Marx *Early Writings*, p.374

<sup>21</sup> As Marx explains in his *Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Marx, K and Engels, F *Selected Works* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1991 [1968]), p.173).

transformed into capital. His theory of commodity fetishism explains the economic mechanism by which this personification of things and reification of persons take place.

Although the subsequent historical debate regarding the role of the concept of alienation in his later work will not be rehearsed here,<sup>22</sup> it should be noted that even in the latter stages of producing a draft of *Capital*, Marx continues to develop this notion. Thus in the chapter, published in 1933, entitled *The Results of the Immediate Process of Production (Resultate)*, Marx argues that the rule of the capitalist over the worker is the “rule of things over man”, “the alienation [*Entfremdung*] of man from his own labour” [C, I, p.990].<sup>23</sup>

Indeed in Volume I of *Capital* itself, Marx discusses how the worker “constantly produces objective wealth, in the form of capital, an alien power that dominates and exploits him” [C, I, p.716]. And in Volume III of *Capital*, Marx discusses the inversion of the relation between subject and object at length.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, Michael Lebowitz claims that *Capital* does not treat the worker as a human being, but rather as an object within the labour process.<sup>25</sup> For Lebowitz, Marx “does not explore the side of the capital/wage-labour relation which involves the creation of new social needs for workers”.<sup>26</sup> In the chapter on *Capital*, I will investigate Lebowitz’s claim that this subjective aspect is not fully developed in Marx’s later writings. It is evident however, that the relationship between the theme of alienation and the subjectivity of the working class is not a straightforward one.

In his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx’s theory of communism is presented as the positive supersession of private property, the overcoming of the system of estranged labour. In my study of Marx’s *Capital*, I investigate whether Marx’s mature critique of political economy is capable of advancing a corresponding theory of the working class as a subject with the potential to

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<sup>22</sup> Having said this, a condensed summary of the debates between the humanists and anti-humanists will be to a certain extent unavoidable in the chapter on *Capital*.

<sup>23</sup> Marx, K *Capital* Vol. I (London, Penguin, 1990 [1976]), p.990 – Henceforth referenced in the text as [C, I, p.990], i.e. [*Capital*, Vol. I, p.990].

<sup>24</sup> For example, “the way that surplus-value is transformed into the form of profit, by way of the rate of profit; is only a further extension of that inversion of subject and object which already occurs in the course of the production process itself” (Marx, K *Capital* Vol. III (London: Penguin, 1991 [1981]), p.136).

<sup>25</sup> Lebowitz, M *Beyond Capital* (London: Macmillan, 2003 [1992])

<sup>26</sup> Lebowitz *Beyond Capital*, p.51

overcome commodity fetishism, a theory of proletarian revolution. I will ask whether his study of the laws of development of the capitalist system conflict with the notion that revolutions are the result of a process of class struggle, and whether he gives a concrete account of the nature of the communist activity proposed in his *Early Writings*.

Moishe Postone's interpretation of *Capital*, in his work *Time, Labour and Social Domination*, argues against the 'traditional' Marxist conception of the working class as the potential revolutionary subject in capitalist society.<sup>27</sup> Postone claims that Marx's mature theory is a critique of industrial labour, rather than a critique from the standpoint of labour, and that *Capital* gives rise to the non-personal social domination of capital as a subject. Against Postone, I argue that Marx's later writings take up, in Chris Arthur's words, the "critically adopted standpoint of labour".<sup>28</sup>

From this perspective it is possible to read *Capital* as both a theory of determinate forms of social mediation and as a class-based analysis. Even if the possibility of proletarian self-emancipation is not present in the same manner as Marx's earlier work proclaims the project of communism, I will demonstrate how he develops more concrete forms of working class self-activity in *Capital*. Furthermore, I will suggest that it is possible to find, as Karl Korsch contends, the latent "revolutionary will" of Marx's earlier writings present throughout his later work.<sup>29</sup>

## **b) From Commodity Fetishism to Reification**

Famously, Georg Lukács, without having access to Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, was able to re-construct many of the themes of Marx's early exploration of the theme of alienation in his work *History and Class Consciousness*. At the same time, Lukács bases his writings on the theory of commodity fetishism developed by Marx in *Capital*. Marx's solution to the problem of the quasi-subjectivity of capital is essentially a conception of the economic mechanism of fetishism, whereby social relations take on the natural properties of things.

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<sup>27</sup> Postone, M *Time, Labour and Social Domination* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993)

<sup>28</sup> Arthur, C "Subject and Counter-Subject" *Historical Materialism* Vol. 12:3 (2004), p.101

<sup>29</sup> Korsch, K *Marxism and Philosophy* (New York; London: Monthly Review, 1970), p.60

In his *Resultate*, a draft chapter for *Capital*, Marx describes the process of material production as the “life-process in the realm of the social” [C, I, p.990]. Although Marx’s *Resultate* were also unavailable to Lukács, it is this wider interpretation of the economic sphere, in the sense of a life-process, which he takes as the basis for his investigations. Lukács extends Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism to explain its manifestation in all spheres of social life.

Lukács’s theory of reification examines the connection between mediation and class structure to explain why the proletariat is the only class capable of generating the necessary mediations to penetrate “authentic” reality and thus to transform it.<sup>30</sup> Lukács develops the subjective aspect of Marx’s thought, particularly his observation in the *Resultate* that the worker “stands on a higher plane than the capitalist”, since he “has his roots in the process of alienation” and “confronts it as a rebel” [C, I, p.990]. Lukács attempts to give the worker’s unique standpoint a philosophical basis.

This conception of the proletariat as the solution to the antinomies of bourgeois thought has been criticised for its apparently teleological approach, in which the proletariat is seen as the realisation of the universal absolute. By postulating the proletariat as the ‘identical subject-object’ of history, Lukács appropriates Fichte’s solution to the schism between subject and object.<sup>31</sup> It is not self-evident whether his transposition of this solution into a Marxist framework is able to overcome the weaknesses that Lukács himself identifies in Fichte’s philosophy. Later I investigate the difficulties associated with giving a concrete account of this subject of revolutionary action, and its relationship to Marx’s notion of the proletariat as the ‘universal’ class. I will ask whether this philosophical conception of the proletariat is inevitably separated from the empirically-existing working class, and whether this gap can be overcome.

In contrast to the central unifying role that the concept of labour plays in Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Lukács’s discussion of the work process is structured around the relationship between workers’ social existence and the forms of their consciousness. I will assess

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<sup>30</sup> Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.262

<sup>31</sup> Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.149

whether the absence of an explicit theorisation of labour in Lukács's framework makes it difficult for him to formulate the distinction between objectification and alienation found in Marx's *Manuscripts*. Lukács himself argues this point in his *Preface to HCC* from 1967.<sup>32</sup>

Lukács's conception of the philosophy of history is a very important element to the defensibility of his position. This theme unites Lukács and Gramsci in a common concern to understand the meaning of Engels's pronouncement that the proletariat is the inheritor of classical German philosophy. I argue against the commonly-held conception that Lukács conceives modern philosophy as a linear development from Kant, through Fichte and Schelling, culminating in Hegel. Whilst Hegel represents the most profound attempt to overcome the antinomies of bourgeois thought, Lukács sees all the failed attempts to overcome these antinomies as vitally instructive aspects that must be incorporated into a many-sided understanding of the Marxist dialectic.

Lukács makes a link between the category of totality and the revolutionary standpoint in order to oppose the apparent 'scientism' of the opportunist tendency; those who would artificially isolate the 'facts' from the whole, or who conceive the subject that perceives these 'facts' as outside of the historical process.<sup>33</sup> Although it is a somewhat abstract notion, Lukács sees a standpoint oriented on totality as necessary for generating the mediating links to overcome reification. I will attempt to show how the framework developed by Lukács allows direct questions to be posited about the creation of revolutionary subjectivity and the proletariat becoming a 'class-for-itself', but also raises difficulties.

### **c) A Theory of Fetishism in Gramsci?**

Antonio Gramsci tends to construct the question of the obstacles confronting the revolutionary subjectivity of the proletariat in a very different way to the problematic of alienation, commodity fetishism and reification. In Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* I discover a distinctively concrete account of

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<sup>32</sup> In his *Preface to the New Edition* (1967) in Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.xxxvi

<sup>33</sup> Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.29



class subjectivity in his generalised theory of class power. His hostility to speculative or metaphysical arguments makes him averse to a foundational account of the proletariat as a potential absolute. Nevertheless I will contend that there is a relationship between these conceptions and his rather different concerns.

Following recent scholarship, I dispute the account of Gramsci's anti-'economism' as demonstrating a lack of sophistication in political economy.<sup>34</sup> In particular, I contend that the absence of an explicit focus on the economic mechanism of commodity fetishism in his writings, implies neither that he would reject such a mechanism, nor that his work fails to treat the manifestations of commodity fetishism at levels other than the economic. In a similar way to Lukács, Gramsci is motivated by Marx's conception of the economy in the wider sense of the "life-process in the realm of the social" [C, I, p.990]. Gramsci's distinctive characterisation of this mediated relationship between man and matter is that of the unity between the levels of the economy, philosophy and politics [SPN, p.402].<sup>35</sup>

Indeed Gramsci analyses the tendency by which political organisations become fetishized, or "mummified" [SPN, p.211], over and against individual members, who no longer recognise their active role as an element of a collective will. Gramsci formulates the harmful passivity that arises amongst the lay membership, and the corresponding autonomy of the bureaucratic elements within it. Thus the political organism appears as a "phantasmagorical being ... a kind of autonomous divinity", which has neither a "concrete brain", nor "specific human legs", but nevertheless thinks and moves for itself [SPN, p.187 fn.83]. I argue that Gramsci's conception of a revolutionary party, the Modern Prince, is intended to play a de-fetishising function in overcoming these organisational problems.

This analysis is rooted in the economic structure of capitalism, since Gramsci is searching for the organisational forms that can support the practices through which the proletariat can develop its

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<sup>34</sup> See Thomas, P *The Gramscian Moment* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2009), p.347

<sup>35</sup> Gramsci, A *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* ed. and trans. Hoare, Q and Nowell-Smith, G (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), p.402 – Henceforth referenced in the text as [SPN, p.402], i.e. [*Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, page 402].

own independent leadership of a historical bloc of the subaltern classes. Central to Gramsci's analysis, is his conception of the contradictory consciousness of the working class [SPN, p.333]. Under capitalism, the consciousness of workers is composite, consisting of a conception of the world expressed in their "effective action" in struggle as an "organic totality" [SPN, p.327], and another that is more superficial, inherited and taken up from the dominant world-view of the hegemonic class. Gramsci's conception of a revolutionary organisation is one that works on making coherent the world-view arising from the experience of working class self-activity, which requires overcoming the "mummified" conceptions of the world in popular culture [SPN, p.417]. In this sense, the Modern Prince again plays a de-fetishising function in Gramsci's thought.

Thus both Lukács and Gramsci are concerned with overcoming the obstacles to proletarian subjectivity and with the development of the revolutionary consciousness of the working class. For both, the consciousness of workers is conceived as a part of social reality, not simply a passive reflection, but as a critical practical activity [SPN, p.333].<sup>36</sup> Gramsci's framework emphasises the emergence of a new conception of the world through the criticism of 'common sense' and its renovation into a coherent world-view. Thus, in contrast to Lukács, he confronts the problem of superseding existing modes of thinking without the application of a transcendent principle.

Whereas Marx frequently employs an analogy between the "inversion of subject into object" in religion at the ideological level with the phenomena of fetishism [C, I, p.990], Gramsci engages with the theme of religion as a way of analysing the strength of tradition as a force that organises the masses through "doctrinal unity" [SPN, p.328]. Whilst Gramsci might not reject the theoretical importance of penetrating fetishistic appearances, his primary focus is with the immanent development of new social forces.

Gramsci's concern with the development of ideas is concentrated on the process by which they acquire "fanatical granite compactness", the way in which "popular beliefs" assume the energy of

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<sup>36</sup> Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.169

“material forces” [SPN, p.377, p.404]. His emphasis on the practical efficacy of philosophy as a measure of its value tends to give the impression that ‘truth’ is something pragmatically relative. By contrast, Lukács’s identification of totality as the bearer of revolution in Marxist thought seeks to deliver an overarching principle for establishing the truth of a revolutionary position. The gulf separating these positions may not be unbridgeable however, when we consider that Gramsci’s criterion for establishing whether a philosophy is “historically true” is the extent to which it can become “concretely – i.e. historically and socially – universal” [SPN, p.348].

Therefore Gramsci’s concern with the concrete does not exclude him from orienting on a totalising project. Whilst Gramsci never reaches towards a universal outlook without forging a concrete analysis at each level, there is a consistently revolutionary impulse embedded within the developing autonomy of the counter-hegemonic project of the subaltern classes. In particular, the distinctively concrete nature of Gramsci’s account of the construction of the hegemonic project of the dominant class, and the counter-hegemony of the subaltern classes, develops Marx’s concrete analysis of the effects of working class struggle on the functioning of capital in his chapter on *The Working Day*.

For Gramsci there is “no organisation without intellectuals” [SPN, p.334], and he studies the particular role played by intellectuals in political leadership. I argue that one of the specificities of Gramsci’s framework is the central role played by the intellectual as a unit or building block in his understanding of political leadership. Where Marx’s observations on the relationship between the working class movement and the factory inspectors give particular insights into the role of the knowing subject in the process of class struggle, Gramsci develops a more comprehensive and explicit theory of the relationship between intellectuals and the class struggle, and the relationship between philosophy, political organisation and ideology. I consider Gramsci’s expansion of the term ‘intellectual’, and will contend that the category of the “traditional intellectual”, despite its bearers’ claims to autonomy from a class framework, in fact constitutes a complexity, rather than an anomaly, in his conception of class subjectivity.

The universal moment of Gramsci's thought discussed above is closely connected with the realisation of a hegemonic project and the formation of a State. This raises the question of whether Gramsci's notion of the collective subject extends beyond the subjectivity of classes, or, in other words, whether Gramsci's account in fact gives the State the status of a subject. I assess examples of the apparent autonomy of the State in Gramsci's framework and ask whether they pose a challenge to his conception of class subjectivity. In order to theorise this problem, I propose a new categorisation of two modes by which Gramsci analyses the State: the holistic and the constitutive.

The first, constitutive mode is found in Gramsci's demonstration that the molecular processes by which the State bureaucracy is formed have their basis in a class framework. This mode brings the apparent autonomy of the State, for example in the case of Caesarism or Bonapartism, within the domain of his class analysis. By contrast, the second, holistic mode of analysis employed by Gramsci, considers the relations between State and class at a totalising, holistic level. This mode is exemplified in Gramsci's analysis of the way that prestige is reflected by a State onto the dominant class. It is also found in his analysis of the conception of 'State Spirit'. This holistic mode demonstrates the active role that the State plays in the formation of a class subject. The discussion will attempt to demonstrate that Gramsci's analysis of the State requires the articulation of both of these modes, and suggest possible ways to explain their interrelationship.

Although the particular framework adopted by each thinker reveals different approaches to the problem of subjectivity, I will try to demonstrate that there are certain common characteristics of the classical revolutionary Marxist conception. For example, examining Gramsci's use of the concept 'catharsis' to denote the "starting point for all the philosophy of praxis" [SPN, p.367],<sup>37</sup> I will consider whether this can be compared with Lukács's conception of the 'leap' from empirical to imputed/ascribed class consciousness. This possible complementarity in the Gramscian and

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<sup>37</sup> Peter Thomas draws attention to this concept in his book *The Gramscian Moment* – Thomas, P *The Gramscian Moment* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2009), p.294

Lukácsian frameworks could provide a point of departure for developing an adequate Marxist conception of subjectivity.

## **4) Methodology**

In this project, I adopt a method of close reading in order to establish the framework of concepts adopted by Marx, Lukács and Gramsci in their texts. I aim to elaborate the problem of subjectivity within the theoretical framework of each thinker before taking up the analysis from a critical perspective. The difficulties of attempting to rise from an immanent to a critical standpoint can be addressed through a comparative analysis of the different frameworks developed.

I attempt to provide the necessary space for such comparative analyses of the various thinkers over the course of the thesis. This imposes the problem of translating the particular terminology that arises within each chapter. I seek to counter this tension by constructing a generalised set of concepts that can be deployed across the thesis, and by drawing out the common themes in each chapter.

This method does not claim access to an authentic or an originating moment of reading these texts, rather it seeks to illuminate elements that may have remained dormant or undeveloped: the paths not taken. Thus I contend that a re-immersion in these texts will help to articulate a richer determination of the conceptions of Marx, Lukács and Gramsci, and to avoid particular one-sided interpretations.

To a certain extent this process necessitates a stripping back of the partisan history of subsequent debates in so far as they constitute an obstruction to a live engagement with the texts. At the same time, I aim not to disregard the continuing relevance held by these controversies. This method will therefore limit to a certain extent the exposition of secondary literature in favour of a close engagement with the texts. The goal of this thesis is not to retrieve an ossified relic relevant only to

the historical conditions of each thinker, but to re-conceive the ‘authenticity’ of the work as the transfer of a living method that can contribute to contemporary debates.

## 5) Further Investigations

I have suggested that the timely nature of re-examining the theme of subjectivity within key texts of classical Marxism arises from contemporary debates on this topic. Whilst this provides a justification for adopting the concept of subjectivity as the organising theme, it is also important to note other potential focuses, such as the notions of consciousness or agency. Whilst these topics do not play a central role, it will become evident that they are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and appear as elements throughout the thesis.

The breadth of possible discussions on the theme of subjectivity has necessitated the focus of this thesis on a particular aspect of this question. Thus it deals with the issue of political class subjectivity in selected works from the classical Marxist tradition. As I have indicated, any selection necessarily entails certain exclusions and the bracketing of the object of study. For example, Karl Korsch’s *Marxism and Philosophy* could have been studied as a different example of the trend identified here in Lukács and Gramsci.

Similarly, an evaluation of the issues raised by Chris Arthur with respect to the structural relationship between Marx’s *Capital* and Hegel’s *Logic* would require a close reading of Hegel’s later work. As has been suggested by Taylor, an interest in the young Hegel, particularly his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, can be found amongst those with affinities for Marx’s earlier writings, including the *Manuscripts*.<sup>38</sup> In both cases, a detailed study of major works by Hegel has not been possible in this project.

The attempt to bracket the focus of this thesis on the issue of class subjectivity is of course not always effective. This is demonstrated by the discussion of the individual subjectivity of the factory inspectors in *Capital*. Thus Jean-Paul Sartre’s valorisation of individual subjectivity could have

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<sup>38</sup> Taylor *Hegel*, p.72, fn.1 – most obviously Lukács, who wrote an in-depth study, entitled *The Young Hegel* (Lukács, G *The Young Hegel* (London: Merlin, 1975)).

provided a sharp contrast to the subordinate position of the individual in Lukács's framework, who intransigently declares: "No path leads from the individual to the totality".<sup>39</sup> Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960) and his attempts to examine the relationship between biography and history, between singularity and totalisation present another angle from which to address Marx's conception of personalisation. His later project to fuse Marxism and psycho-analysis also provides a further link, albeit against the grain, with contemporary debates in subjectivity, in particular Slavoj Žižek's presentation of Marxism in Lacanian terms.

The thesis focuses on a close reading of selected texts in order to create an apparatus for subsequent critical readings of other texts and debates impossible to cover in the scope of the present study. The effectiveness of this method may be judged from its application in the critique of Moishe Postone's *Time, Labour and Social Domination*. In turn this helps to highlight certain analytical points within the preceding interpretation of *Capital*. In the conclusion, I will elaborate the key themes and general characteristics of the classical Marxist conception of subjectivity developed in the different frameworks of Marx, Lukács and Gramsci.

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<sup>39</sup> Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.28

# How Many Subjectivities in Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*?

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## 1) Introduction

### a) One or Two Subjectivities in the *Manuscripts*?

Karl Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*<sup>1</sup> form a relatively brief work, or ensemble of texts,<sup>2</sup> when placed in comparison alongside the three published volumes of *Capital*. They present the task of interpreting Marx's commentary on various excerpts from the writings of classical political economy as well as dense, and often elliptical, philosophical passages. It is not easy to assess whether a plain and coherent overall narrative can be extracted from these exploratory writings. At the same time, reading the *Manuscripts* provides the experience of Marx's first concrete attempt to produce an intellectual synthesis of political economy and philosophy. However problematic or incomplete this attempted synthesis might be, it has been described as the moment of birth of a new project for Marx,<sup>3</sup> the understanding of which is crucial to the interpretation of his later work.

The specific aspect of this question of synthesis with which this chapter is concerned is the problem of subjectivity. In particular, I will investigate whether it is possible to extract a defensible framework for an understanding of subjectivity from the *Manuscripts*. I will question whether the *Manuscripts* in fact present us with a single conception of subjectivity at all, or whether we can rather find within them two discordant and competing conceptions of subjectivity. I will seek to address this question by first considering the latter possibility, and then by asking whether Marx attempts to unify these

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<sup>1</sup> Marx, K *Early Writings* (London: Penguin, 1992 [1975]) – Henceforth referenced in the text as [EW, p.page], i.e. [*Early Writings*, p.page]

<sup>2</sup> The *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* were not prepared or intended for publication by Marx. They are in a number of sections fragmentary. Their internal structure is documented in the Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe (Marx, K and Engels, F *Gesamtausgabe (MEGA) 1. Abteilung, Bd.2: Apparat* (Berlin: Dietz, 1975)), and has also been the object of study for several writers (see Fay, M "*The Influence of Adam Smith on Marx's Theory of Alienation*" *Science & Society* Vol. XLVII No.2 (Summer 1983)). The significance of this structure for Marx's thought cannot be studied in this project, but merits further investigation.

<sup>3</sup> István Mészáros calls this project a work of "*synthesis in statu nascendi*" (Mészáros, I *Marx's Theory of Alienation* (Delhi: Aakar, 2006), p.15). Although Mészáros places a forceful emphasis on the aspects of continuity in Marx's writings, this formulation seems flexible enough to incorporate a continuing development and evolution of Marx's thought.

two, either in thought, in practice or both, and to what extent he is successful in formulating a project capable of achieving this.

Initially, I will consider the case of two conceptions of subjectivity: the subjectivity of private property and the subjectivity of labour. In doing so, I will advance a further bifurcation by positing the possibility of isolating two different levels from which to consider these conceptions of subjectivity. Thus the *Manuscripts* can be examined at one level from the perspective of a critique of theory, or from another as the investigation of the actual subjects themselves. On the first level, I will argue that Marx's criticism of theory analyses the expression in *consciousness* of the "real energy and movement" of these subjects, whilst at the same time ascribing to theory an active and transformative role [EW, p.341].<sup>4</sup> Applying this to the case of two discordant conceptions of subjectivity, I will propose that political economy and communism are two discordant theories of subjectivity.<sup>5</sup>

Marx conceives political economy as "modern industry as self" [EW, p.341], an internally dynamic and contradictory theory that develops a "cosmopolitan, universal energy" [EW, p.342]. Political economy, as a theory, initially appears to recognise man, but becomes increasingly cynical of its own original (human) conception. Marx also considers the development of the consciousness of communism, from its crude form as the abolition of private property "as such" through successive stages to a communism apprehended as the positive transcendence of private property [EW, p.345]. These bodies of thought, whilst dynamic and interrelated, nevertheless suggest that these two different conceptions of subjectivity can be represented as two distinct theoretical entities.

In the second reading, Marx is concerned with establishing the essential nature of the subjects themselves. The *Manuscripts* were Marx's first close and systematic engagement with political economy, from which he extracted an understanding of the economic system. This investigation led

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<sup>4</sup> Emphasis in original unless otherwise stated.

<sup>5</sup> We should of course be mindful to consider the differing respects and senses in which political economy and communism can be thought of as theorisations of subjectivity, as we shall investigate later.

him to weigh seriously the way in which the movement of private property as modern industry develops as a real power, and thus, in the form of capital, attains independence as an authentic subject. Thus I will assess the evidence presented in the *Manuscripts* that Marx treats private property, and in particular private property as capital, as an authentic subject.

At the same time, one of the defining features of the *Manuscripts* is the central and active role that Marx attributes to labour. He seizes firstly upon, what he sees as, the progressive core of “enlightened political economy” [EW, p.342]. This is its recognition of labour as the “sole essence of wealth”, the “subjective essence of wealth” [EW, p.343], as the means through which the worker appropriates nature. The increasing historical power of labour, its capacity to produce an ever-growing wealth of products, both materially and intellectually, seems to indicate that here we have an, and in the future possibly *the*, authentic subject. I will further examine to what extent Marx poses this second conception of subjectivity, of the self-creation of man through human labour, as an authentic subject.

Thus I find two opposing conceptions of subjectivity, of private property and labour, each of which I will attempt to consider on two distinctive levels. At this point initial concerns can be raised already about the feasibility of developing each conception of subjectivity in sharp isolation from the other. For example, it could be asked whether this separation constrains an investigation of labour as a potential power for transcending the current economic system. However, such a contrast of these two conceptions does provide a suitable vantage point from which to discuss a different, synthesising approach to subjectivity, and to assess its points of strength and weakness. At the same, time this approach might also help to investigate the pitfalls in expressing adequately the relationship between subjectivity and theorisation, to analyse Marx's conception of this in the *Manuscripts*, and to point towards a terrain explored and extended by later Marxist thinkers.

In the second part, I will investigate whether these two conceptions of subjectivity can be unified in thought and/or practice. I will examine to what extent Marx has encountered an insuperable

boundary that prevents the synthesis of a unified theory of subjectivity in thought alone. I will question whether this limitation in theory leads Marx to grasp the correspondence of this boundary to a real set of contradictions.<sup>6</sup> I will assess the viability of Marx's attempt to reveal an inner connection in the class struggle between these two apparently independent subjects rising from the first part of this investigation, and thus whether Marx can successfully demonstrate them to be aspects of a more fundamental relationship. I will then ask what lessons Marx draws from his engagement with the enduring tension implied by this framework. I will claim that the formulation of this problem pre-figures the development in Marx's thought of a conception of fetishism and the creation of a new project to produce a differentiated unity of these two conceptions of subjectivity. I will now demonstrate more concretely how this argument is developed in the *Manuscripts*.

## **b) Alienated Labour and Transcendence**

In demonstrating that the goal of the economic system is the distress of society and suffering for the majority of mankind [EW, p.286], Marx's analysis of the system of private property gives rise to the concept of estranged labour. In fact, Marx's argument turns on this pivotal notion. His analysis of the concept of estranged labour shows that "although private property appears as the basis and cause of alienated labour", it is "in fact its consequence" [EW, p.332]. The system of private property is revealed as arising out of a system of estranged labour, or, as Marx argues, private property is the "material, summarized expression" of estranged labour [EW, p.334]. If we wish to assess the validity of Marx's assumption that private property as a subject can be expressed fully as the product of alienated labour, we must investigate the process of estrangement by which Marx conceives this transformation of the system of labour into the system of private property as taking place.

Marx places human activity, as labour, at the centre of his theory of estranged labour. He seeks to show how the relationship of man, as worker, to labour and the product of his labour is fundamental to the creation of the de-humanised world of private property. Its contradictions, he argues, are

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<sup>6</sup> For Marxists such as Georg Lukács, as I will argue in a later chapter, this problem of synthesis is bound up with the practical creation of a unified subject-object of history, the proletariat as class-for-itself.

driving it towards its limit, culmination and decline [EW, p.337]. This theory seems to place labour, the source of all value, as the potential subject in the transcendence of this economic system. It is however currently dis-empowered in its estranged form.

The formation of labour as a subject requires the elaboration of a process of mediation through which estranged labour is transcended. The workers, initially defined by their passive suffering, are now, in the context of estranged *labour*, enabled to conceive even this suffering, in an active sense, as an enjoyment of self [EW, p.351]. Thus we find a pivot from which even, or especially, the most developed estrangement can present the potential for a transcendence of this estrangement. At the same time, whilst in present-day production man is produced as a human commodity, “a *self-conscious* and *self-acting commodity*”, he is also produced as a “*mentally* and physically *dehumanized being*” [EW, p.336].

Since I argue that Marx's theory of estranged labour is founded on the negation of a positive conception of species-being and species-activity, it is necessary to inquire into the origins of this conception. I will later consider the importance of Marx's contention that political economy's scientific examination of the division of labour is the expression of real species-activity within estrangement [EW, p.369]. I would suggest that these questions can be explored by examining the argument concerning the number of authentic independent subjects that we can identify in the *Manuscripts*. For this reason, I will consider the notion of a quasi-subject, an entity which takes on the characteristics of a subject but is not in fact an authentic subject. I will inquire how to interpret the inauthenticity of this quasi-subject, either as a false appearance, merely illusory or non-real, or as an appearance with an objective social reality. Since private property is the means through which labour is alienated, Marx argues that its alien character does appear to be something real [EW, p.335].

Let us consider the possibilities for subjectivity within the *Manuscripts*. If labour is considered the sole authentic subject in the *Manuscripts*, it must be determined whether the system of private

property can be fully expressed as a system of estranged labour. If this expression is found to be insufficient, then an alternative explanation is required. It is possible either that private property is the only authentic subject,<sup>7</sup> that there are multiple authentic subjects, or that there is some other explanation for the relationship between labour and private property. If private property is assumed to be a quasi-subject, not an authentic subject, then only one authentic subject remains. Considering Marx's investigation of "private property in its active form" as pointing towards the notion of quasi-subjectivity poses some difficult questions [EW, p.343]. Although Marx is only beginning to define "capital" in the *Manuscripts*, he identifies the process by which the increasingly conscious estrangement of the political economists makes private property in its active form into a subject [EW, p.343-344].

I will argue that Marx is searching for a position on the question of subjectivity in the *Manuscripts*. He appears to express two notions of subjectivity in the *Manuscripts*, whilst trying to synthesise them. In other words, the *Manuscripts* contain a superposition of both two authentic subjects and one authentic subject. It seems that Marx explores both aspects in the *Manuscripts* and attempts to construct a framework that is able to give a full expression to both. To express this satisfactorily however, I will argue that Marx requires a theory of fetishism. I will suggest that he makes some important pre-figurations of such a theory arising from his discussions of primogeniture and fetish-worship.

It could be suggested that Marx is asking two sets of questions in the *Manuscripts*. Firstly, he investigates why there is a hostile opposition between these two conceptions of subjectivity. And secondly, he asks how it might be possible to achieve a differentiated unity of these antagonistic visions, a unity of opposites. István Mészáros argues that both find their unifying thread in the

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<sup>7</sup> We must then consider if capital is the authentic subject (as has been suggested of *Capital*, e.g. by Moishe Postone, who we will consider in the next chapter). This is difficult to defend consistently given the central position Marx ascribes to labour in the *Manuscripts*. Although in the *Manuscripts*, he describes money as "the existing and active concept of value" (Marx *Early Writings*, p.379)

synthesising idea of estranged, alienated labour.<sup>8</sup> Marx's project is to show how it is possible to overcome the division between theory and practice not simply in an abstract form, but translated into a tangibly concrete project.

I will argue that these issues are related to the development of Marx's concept of abstraction. In the *Manuscripts*, Marx gives abstraction a predominantly negative connotation. It is primarily placed in opposition to the real, living, particular and personal. Similarly in Marx's writings prior to the *Manuscripts*, abstraction is often seen as a separation, as an estrangement.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, in *Capital* and Marx's later writings, abstraction is considered more as a power to be harnessed by man in order to break through the misleading, but sensuously objective, appearances that obscure the real functioning of the economic system. This raises the question of how to define the connection between abstraction as a tool of science, and real abstraction, not in the sense of a generalising operation of thinkers, but as "something occurring in the machinery of the social order, in reality".<sup>10</sup>

At stake for Marx in resolving this problem is the possibility of transcending the estranged, alienated labour on which he argues that the current economic system is based. As a consequence, it concerns the liberation of the whole of mankind from all forms of human servitude. In rigorously following the logic of both conceptions of subjectivity that I have identified in the *Manuscripts*, I will argue that Marx begins to develop a critique of capital and certain pre-figurations of his theory of fetishism. By considering the problem of subjectivity in this way, I will argue that Marx stands on the threshold of a new project in which the full complexity of these aspects can be investigated. I will make a close study of the *Manuscripts* that argues that their synthesising impulse initiates for Marx a project that finds expression in a more concretely determined form in his later writings.

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<sup>8</sup> Mészáros *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, p.19

<sup>9</sup> The developing usage of the notion of abstraction by Marx is discussed by Lucio Colletti in his *Introduction to Marx's Early Writings* (Colletti, L "Introduction" in Marx, K *Early Writings* (Penguin, 1992 [1975]), p.33, p.38-39)

<sup>10</sup> Colletti "Introduction" in *Marx Early Writings*, p.38

## 2) Two Subjectivities

I will begin by considering the *Manuscripts* as containing two conceptions of subjectivity, and attempt to detail what is distinctive about each. For each conception of subjectivity I will seek to distinguish two separate aspects, a theory of subjectivity and the corresponding subject itself. I will assume for the moment that it is possible to outline an identifiable body of theory and place it in some form of association with a particular subject. I will posit that there is some connection for Marx, on the one hand, between political economy as a theory of subjectivity and private property in the form of modern industry or capital as a subject, and on the other, between communism as a theory of subjectivity and labour as a subject. Finally I will consider the limitations of trying to compare such differing, and perhaps incommensurate, entities and the possible implications of attempting to isolate two distinct subjectivities from each other.

### a) The Subjectivity of Private Property in the Form of Modern Industry or Capital

#### i) Private Property (Modern Industry/Capital) as a Subject

I will first consider whether private property appears as a subject in the *Manuscripts*. Marx theorises the development and antagonism of different forms of private property. He looks first at the conflict between landed property and industry, associated with the concepts of immovable and movable property respectively, and then theorises private property as a commodity, and the inevitable “triumph” of money over other forms of property [EW, p.340].

If the economic system has developed in such a way that even the masters of labour are subject to the laws which they impose, it might appear that the condition of misery endured by the majority in present-day society is produced by the “power of things” [EW, p.307].<sup>11</sup> Despite our increasing productive capacities, humans are therefore not (or are no longer) the subjects of world history.

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<sup>11</sup> Marx is here quoting from the French writer Eugène Buret (Buret, E *De la misère des classes laborieuses en Angleterre et en France* Vol. I (Paris, 1840), p.82 quoted in Marx *Early Writings*, p.307).



Marx seems to confirm this when he claims that private property in its ultimate form perfects “its rule over men” and becomes a “world historical power” [EW, p.345]. If so, we must examine what is distinctive about this particular form of private property and how it arises.

I will propose that industry, specifically in its form as modern industry, is the form of private property that Marx has in mind in the *Manuscripts* when considering private property as a subject. I will attempt to justify this choice in the course of the argument, since it is more common, in view of Marx's later writings, to consider private property as *capital* as a subject. I will examine the origins and development of the concept of industry in the various sources quoted by Marx. I will assess whether Marx's conception of modern industry as a subject comes under tension in the *Manuscripts*. I will argue that Marx identifies this tension as corresponding to a contradiction in reality, which he diagnoses as the “discordant *reality of industry*” [EW, p.343].

### 1. *What is Industry?*

The concept of industry has its origins in the French term *industrie* in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, having originated from the Latin *industria*, meaning the virtue of study and diligence.<sup>12</sup> In English, the term accumulates an increasing breadth of meaning over the following centuries, from the application of cleverness and skill, to the notion of systematic and useful work, to indicating a “particular form or branch of productive labour”.<sup>13</sup> During the industrial revolution the concept developed rapidly, in particular through debates about the doctrine of ‘industrialism’ at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>14</sup> In this chapter we can only touch summarily on this debate.

Marx appropriates the concept of industry from a number of different sources. He quotes political economists such as Adam Smith and Jean-Baptiste Say, as well as those critical of political economy

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<sup>12</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd Edition – s.v. “industry”

<sup>13</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd Ed. – s.v. “industry”

<sup>14</sup> For further discussion see Stedman-Jones, G “*Saint Simon and the liberal origins of the socialist critique of Political Economy*”, Gustave Gimon Conference on French Political Economy (Stanford University, 2004) – Source: [http://www-sul.stanford.edu/depts/hasrg/frnit/pdfs\\_gimon/stedman\\_jones.pdf](http://www-sul.stanford.edu/depts/hasrg/frnit/pdfs_gimon/stedman_jones.pdf) [accessed 18 Mar 2013] – Stedman-Jones places an emphasis on the liberal contribution to the critique of industrialism and political economy.

like Eugène Buret and Wilhelm Schulz. Whilst only briefly acknowledged in the *Manuscripts*, the thought of the utopian socialists Charles Fourier and Saint-Simon also forms the environment for Marx's use and development of the concept. In particular, Saint-Simon stresses the notion of the “industrial revolution”, laying an emphasis on the dynamic nature of industry.<sup>15</sup>

In the passages that Marx quotes from Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, industry is primarily conceived as a value or virtue in opposition to idleness. Thus Marx quotes Smith's argument that, “The proportion between capital and revenue [...] seems everywhere to regulate the proportion between industry and idleness. Wherever capital predominates, industry prevails: wherever revenue, idleness” [EW, p.301].<sup>16</sup> These values correspond to the terms in which the advocates of industry, as movable property, conceive their struggle as taking place against the “idle, cruel and egotistical lords of yesterday”, the owners of landed property [EW, pp.338-339]. For Marx, as we shall see later, this distinction, in the context of the historical process of the industrial revolution, “is a *historical* distinction, a *fixed* moment in the formation and development of the opposition between capital and labour” [EW, p.337].

Marx also draws on Jean-Baptiste Say's *Traité d'économie politique*, from which he extracts a number of quotes.<sup>17</sup> Say builds on Smith by elaborating a theory of entrepreneurship. He formulates Smith's values in the shape of two distinct groups of persons, the “industrieux” and the “oisifs”. The “industrieux” are those associated with the process of production, those who engage in “industrie”, conceived by Say as agriculture, manufacture and commerce. Conversely the “oisifs” are the “non-working land-owners and rentiers”, those who merely own stock as a “residue of conquest or occupation”.<sup>18</sup> Say's intervention sought to sharpen Smith's broader definition of capital that included less entrepreneurial forms within industry. Interestingly Saint-Simon makes a similar

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<sup>15</sup> See Kouvelakis, *S Philosophy and Revolution* (London: Verso, 2003), p.182 – Kouvelakis argues that liberal and radical English critics, unlike Saint-Simon, avoided the term “industrial revolution” for fear of jeopardizing the unity of their “front” with the aristocracy in that country.

<sup>16</sup> Marx quotes from Smith, *A The Wealth of Nations Books I-III* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p.437

<sup>17</sup> Marx *Early Writings*, p.295, p.299, p.309, p.311-312, p.371

<sup>18</sup> Stedman-Jones “*Saint Simon*”, p.16

distinction of the “industriels”, the socially useful, the competent and industrious bourgeois, as opposed to the “oisifs”, the socially useless, the parasitic and lazy aristocracy, clergy, etc.<sup>19</sup>

Smith's notion of industry quoted above is associated with his concept of capital, but is not immediately manifested as a particular form of organisation of labour. Smith may have considered a relationship between his conception of industry and the particular form of manufacture of his time (e.g. the division of labour in manufacturing), but it would have been inconceivable for him to associate industry with the system of factory labour. Such a modern organised technical force only began to emerge in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In the later sources drawn upon by Marx (e.g. Buret, Schulz, Constantin Pecqueur, etc.), industry does appear to be increasingly connected to this form of social organisation of labour (i.e. the factory system). Industry, says Marx, is associated with the introduction of “labour-saving machines” [EW, p.289]. The “factory system”, he argues, “is the perfected essence of industry” [EW, p.345]. In the *Manuscripts*, even when discussing Smith, Marx's usage tends to pick up on this sense of industry (e.g. “branch of industry” [EW, p.297]). Thus Marx suggests that “industrial labour is highly developed” where “all manual crafts have become factory labour” [EW, p.303].

I would argue that a process can be identified through which the concept of industry develops. Initially understood as a value, industry can be conceived increasingly as a collective human subject involved in a historical struggle with landed property. This first part of the process is manifested in consciousness by the classification of this struggle between industry and landed property as that between the “industriels” and the “oisifs”. In this process a second aspect can also be discerned, in which the concept of industry is increasingly associated with a particular form of the social organisation of labour and a specific type of private property, capital. In the second part of this process, industry appears as a non-human subject, with needs of its own. The possession of the form

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<sup>19</sup> We should note that, for Marx, the critical tradition appears to have developed alongside economic theory. Marx points out that Fourier absorbs the Physiocratic notion that agriculture is the “best form of labour”, whilst Saint-Simon adopts Say's conception that “industrial labour” is the essence of wealth (Marx *Early Writings*, p.345).

of private property associated with this industry, capital, bestows upon capitalists the “power to command labour”, but in turn, this capital “is able to rule the capitalist himself” [EW, p.295]. It is this second aspect of industry that increasingly begins to mark out the specificity of modern industry, as I will argue in the next section.

## 2. *What is Specific about Modern Industry?*

In the *Manuscripts*, Marx considers the historical development of economic systems largely in terms of their corresponding economic theorisation. He considers the crude “metal-fetishism” of the Monetary system [EW, p.364], which evolves through Mercantilism, Physiocracy, and Political Economy (Smith). This in turn develops into a more “consciously estranged” or “cynical” Political Economy (from Say, to Ricardo and Mill) [EW, p.343]. This understanding is organised around a single unified theme, the logical unfolding of the forms of private property. The consequence of this, arguably teleological, theory is that history has arrived at the final form of private property, whose internal contradictions are driving it towards a resolution, the positive super-session of private property.

This contradiction, in its limiting form, argues Marx, is “necessarily the limit, the culmination and the decline of the whole system of private property” [EW, p.337]. Once all wealth has become “*industrial wealth, wealth of labour*”, Marx argues, we have arrived at “the fully developed objective form of private property” [EW, p.345]. In this context, the working out of the inner nature of the relationship of private property appears as a progression of the conflict between immovable and movable private property, between landed property and industry, in which the latter is ultimately victorious. I will now elaborate this problem in more detail.

In the *Second Manuscript*, Marx begins to employ the concept of industry for himself, and does so in the sense of both aspects described above: as industry’s struggle against landed property, and as modern industry’s appearance as an agent with non-human subjective properties. These two senses

appear to be under an internal tension with each other, and yet the first is seen as logically and historically impelled towards dissolution in the second.

On the one hand, Marx sets up an opposition in which two forms of private property, movable and immovable, represented in the forms of industry and landed property, develop together in a symbiotic relationship. In this relationship, industry is associated with “town life”, and defined in its opposition to landed property, which is in turn associated with “aristocratic feudal life” [EW, p.337]. The “town life” aspect of industry is marked by its immaturity, since it still bears the “feudal characteristics of its opposite”, under which labour retains an “apparently social meaning, the meaning of genuine community” [EW, p.337].

On the other hand, Marx suggests that once labour reaches a stage of “*indifference* towards its content and of complete being-for-itself” [EW, p.337], a new aspect of industry arises from this necessary development of labour: industry constituted for itself as such, or “liberated industry” [EW, p.337]. Marx closely associates liberated industry with the notion of “liberated capital” [EW, p.337]. Marx determines the specificity of modern industry as being contained in this sense of “liberated industry” or “liberated capital”. But, if industry is liberated from that which it is defined in opposition to, two questions arise. First, what becomes of its opposite? And second, what is the positive foundation of this new liberated industry?

In answer to the first question, landed property itself undergoes a transformation. Agriculture emerges as an industry through a process of internal transformation, as a manifestation of the power of industry over landed property, and the landowner becomes a “master of industry” [EW, p.338]. Marx identifies this process as taking place, first through the agency of the tenant farmer, who increasingly provides the landowner with his economic existence. Thus landed property, defined as distinct from capital, is in fact “private property, capital”, albeit “not yet entirely emerged from its involvement with the world and come into its own” [EW, p.340]. In contrast, liberated industry, fully-developed liberated capital, must for Marx, in the “course of its *formation on a world*

scale”, “attain its abstract, i.e. *pure*, expression” [EW, p.341]. In order to address the second question, Marx must investigate the extent to which liberated industry, as liberated capital, has become a subject for itself. This entails a closer engagement with the concept of industrial labour and its relationship with capital.

### 3. *Modern Industry as a Subject*

The question I will try to address is whether the rise of industry in its modern form is associated in the *Manuscripts* with the subjectification of a specific form of private property. I will argue that Marx’s analysis of the system of private property overlaps with his first attempt to analyse the category of capital. By analysing the relationship of private property in the present-day economic system, Marx appears to be attempting to investigate both the general nature of production under private property and the specific form of commodity production. Marx declares that production creates the “*self-conscious and self-acting commodity...the human commodity*” [EW, p.336].

On the one hand, later political economists, like Ricardo and Mill, recognise that capital regards the “human productivity” of its investment as an irrelevance, even harmful to the real aim of production: interest and yearly savings [EW, p.336]. On the other hand, the recognition by classical political economy (Smith et al.) that industrial wealth is based on the wealth of labour implies that labour might play a role as a subject within industry. Later in this chapter we will consider the subjectivity of labour, but presently we are concerned with analysing whether modern industry as capital plays the role of a subject, or a quasi-subject, in the *Manuscripts*.

Political economy, suggests Marx, regards labour, “abstractly as a thing”, as a commodity [EW, p.293]. Furthermore, as he points out, any commodity is forced to obey the laws of competition [EW, p.321]. The significance of making an analysis of a system determined by the conditions of competition is that it is no longer under conscious human control. Such a system, as Marx argues in the *Manuscripts*, emerges historically from the roots of private property in land, and, once developed, appears as the “naked rule of private property, of capital” [EW, p.319]. At this point the

relationship between property owner and worker “should be reduced to the economic relationship of exploiter and exploited” [EW, p.319].<sup>20</sup>

Industry has become a war, and it requires increasingly large armies that can be summoned and destroyed at will [EW, p.294]. This “*perpetual war*”, says Marx quoting Eugène Buret, “in the view of science, is the only means of achieving peace; this war is called competition” [EW, p.294].<sup>21</sup> Analysing Smith's propositions on the accumulation of capitals and the competition amongst capitalists, Marx finds that, from the standpoint of political economy, the “sole defence [of the consuming public] against the capitalists is *competition*” [EW, p.300].

This competition is only possible if there are many capitals, “multiple capitals held by many different people” [EW, p.300]. This requires multilateral accumulation, “since capital in general stems from accumulation” [EW, p.300]. However, Marx argues that accumulation results in the “*concentration* of capital in few hands”, if capitals are allowed to follow their “natural course” [EW, p.300]. Further, he claims that: “It is only through competition that this natural proclivity of capital begins to take shape” [EW, p.300]. The apparent subjectivity or quasi-subjectivity of capital that Marx seeks to investigate arises through the process of competition.

Does Marx consider capital to be the subject of this process? Although he seeks to reduce the system of private property to the system of alienated labour, the “alien character” of capital for the worker “inevitably appears as something *real*” [EW, p.335]. I contend that Marx begins to explore this contradiction through his conception of modern industry as industry liberating itself of the conflict between movable and immovable property. He explores the relationship between capital and industry. Whilst it is important that the two concepts are not identical, there is an intimate connection between them. Thus Marx argues that “the accumulation of capital increases the quantity of industry” [EW, p.286].

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<sup>20</sup> In contrast to *Capital*, Marx does not systematically employ a conception of exploitation in the *Manuscripts*, although here we can see that the concept is present in a less-determined form.

<sup>21</sup> Buret *De la misère des classes laborieuses*, p.23 quoted in Marx *Early Writings*, p.294

I would argue it is necessary to understand the development of the different conceptions of industry outlined. I will ask whether there is continuity between Marx's conceptions of industry and modern industry, or whether there are problems in advancing from one to the other. By what means does Marx propose that modern industry has liberated itself, and can this process be considered at any point complete? Marx gives only an elliptical answer to these questions, when he suggests that industry "had to ruin itself both in the form of monopoly and in the form of competition before it could believe in man" [EW, p.322].

There are real human subjects associated, on the one hand with landed property, the landowners, and on the other hand with rising industry, the capitalists. But Marx also operates with a conception of liberated industry or capital, whose subject appears not to be a set of persons or class. It is a non-human subject, private property as capital. The manner in which the human and non-human elements of subjectivity within industry relate to each other is a problem that seems to be unresolved in the *Manuscripts*, although, as we will argue later, its formulation pre-figures the development of Marx's theory of fetishism.

Marx has identified that in the bitter struggle between capitalist and landowner, "each side tells the truth about the other" [EW, p.338]. The capitalist regards the landowner as the "enemy of *free* industry and *free* capital" [EW, p.338]. Yet, the "feudal reminiscences" of the landowner critique the greedy profiteering of the capitalist. The capitalist trades away the community and breeds "competition and pauperism, crime and the dissolution of all social ties" [EW, p.338]. Marx claims that the "real course of development (to be inserted here) leads necessarily to the victory of the capitalist, i.e. of developed private property, over undeveloped, immature private property, the *landowner*" [EW, p.340]. But he also subjects to scrutiny the claims of movable property, which sees itself as a product of the "modern age" [EW, p.339].

The partial truth of these latter claims, he suggests, is manifest in the fact that the "civilized victory of movable capital has precisely been to reveal and create human labour as the source of wealth in



place of the dead thing” [EW, p.340]. Yet, the universalising claims of movable property also conceal a developing hostile opposition. Marx highlights a “foreboding of the danger” that some states bear towards the “full development of free industry” [EW, p.340].<sup>22</sup> He suggests that their attempts to stop the capitalization of landed property through protectionist measures is a recognition of the danger to the system of private property as a whole of allowing these contradictions to develop.

#### 4. *Discordant Reality of Industry*

J.C.L. Simonde de Sismondi, a liberal republican and student of Smith, gives an account of industry that emphasises its increasingly problematic nature.<sup>23</sup> As Stedman-Jones explains, “The progress of industry meant the growth of inequality. There was no single industrial class. Rather, there were two classes - capitalists and proletarians - and the gulf between them was widening”.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, as Schulz recognises, the “frequent and sudden reductions in employment” associated with the “industrial war”, give “rise to feelings of bitterness among the class of wage-earners” [EW, p.304]. The increasing misery caused by industry in the ranks of the proletariat, argues Schulz, “inevitably increases the conflict between the propertied and the propertyless classes” [EW, p.309]. This is one aspect that leads Marx to argue that the “consequences of *industry*” appear “more developed and more contradictory” to the later political economists [EW, p.343].

The theoretical division between the “industriels”/“industrieux” and the “oisifs” is one appropriate to a class struggle between producers and idlers, a conception binding the productive workers to the entrepreneurial bourgeoisie as a revolutionary class. However, in his writings of 1843/1844, Marx increasingly argued that the “role of emancipator” [EW, p.255] in the search for human freedom had

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<sup>22</sup> Interestingly Marx associates this development with “pure morality” (Marx *Early Writings*, p.340).

<sup>23</sup> Sismondi's *Nouveaux principes d'économie politique* (Paris: Delaunay, 1819) is another source for Marx, albeit quoted by Marx only from Buret (Marx *Early Writings*, p.306, p.339). See Stedman-Jones for a more detailed account of Sismondi (Stedman-Jones “*Saint Simon*”, p.35).

<sup>24</sup> Stedman-Jones “*Saint Simon*”, p.35

definitively passed from the bourgeois class in all countries, either by the result or the impossibility of partial emancipation, to a new class.<sup>25</sup>

The concept of industry develops alongside the developing capitalist class: from being the battle-cry of the bourgeoisie against the old regime, it latterly universalises the value with which the bourgeoisie justifies its own rule over society. This requires the values of industry to be taken up not just by the industrious bourgeois, but in some sense by other sections of society, such as the productive workers. Thus the “industriels” could feasibly include both productive labourers and the masters of labour, and the “oisifs” could refer to the dependent poor as well as the parasitical rich.

The concept of industry thus begins to obscure the relationship that Marx identifies as being latent within the relation of private property: “the relation of private property as labour, the relation of private property as capital and the connection of these two” [EW, p.336]. Marx suggests that the “reality of industry” is a discordant one [EW, p.343]. The principle of this discordance has been formulated by political economy, and it is only through a critique of political economy that the content of a theory of subjectivity can be developed further.

## ii) Political Economy as a Theory of Subjectivity

Inspired by Engels’s *Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy* in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, Marx set himself the task of making an “exhaustive critical study” of political economy [EW, p.281].<sup>26</sup> The *Manuscripts* represent Marx’s first systematic engagement with the field. I am interested here in considering Marx’s conception of political economy at this time as a theory of subjectivity. I am looking to investigate what is distinctive about the conception of subjectivity that is

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<sup>25</sup> Marx developed his ideas through his practical experiences as the editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung*, his critiques of Hegel and political economy, and his engagement with the revolutionary movement in France (See Nimitz Jr., *A Marx and Engels Their Contribution to the democratic breakthrough* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2000), p.4-8). Marx’s understanding that the bourgeoisie could no longer play a leading role in the revolutionary movement was to be brutally confirmed in practice by the crushing of the revolutions of 1848 (See Nimitz *Marx and Engels*, p.89).

<sup>26</sup> The bulk of material drawn upon in the *Manuscripts* is from Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, whereas David Ricardo, for example, appears through the work of other writers (e.g. Buret). In contrast, Marx has a prolonged engagement with Ricardo in *Capital*. Marx’s description of an ‘exhaustive critical study’ might in fact be a more fitting description of his later works, *Capital* and the *Theories of Surplus-Value*.

portrayed by political economy, and the connection between it and private property as a subject. I will ask to what extent, in the *Manuscripts*, political economy itself can be considered as an active component, the consciousness aspect, of private property as a subject.

### 1. *Political Economy: Modern Industry as Self*

Marx argues that political economy, of the type which recognises labour as its principle, such as that practised by Adam Smith, is the “independent movement of private property become conscious for itself” [EW, p.341]. It is, he suggests, “modern industry as self” [EW, p.341]. We can see immediately from this definition that modern industry and political economy are closely linked for Marx. Political economy appears in the *Manuscripts* both as a subject, “modern industry as self”, and as a body of theory. It is both a “product of modern *industry*”, and a “factor which has accelerated and glorified the energy and development of this *industry* and transformed it into a power belonging to consciousness” [EW, p.341-342]. The active role of political economy, Marx seems to argue, is to excite greed and encourage competition: “the *war of the avaricious*” [EW, p.322]. But despite setting these wheels in motion, it does not fully control them. Political economy formulates “abstract formulae which it then takes as *laws*” which reflect the real material process through which private property passes [EW, p.322].

It could be argued that political economy is the expression of the consciousness of private property as a subject. This independent movement of private property includes a non-human element of subjectivity. If modern industry is intimately linked with capital, as we have argued in the previous section, this raises the question of the relationship between capital and this non-human subjectivity. At the same time however, political economy, as the theorisation and scientific existence of the interests of industry and its advocates, still requires the capitalists, as the masters of industry, to put it into practice. Political economy therefore seems also to express a human element of subjectivity. It seems therefore that these two elements are inextricably intertwined, and that Marx's dynamic understanding of political economy suggests that they are involved in a process of development.

## 2. *Marx's Theory of the Development of Political Economy*

In the *Manuscripts*, we can discern a theory of the development of political economy. Far from being an internally static and fixed doctrine, Marx characterises political economy as an energetic body of thought that develops through its “*cosmopolitan, universal energy*” [EW, p.342]. There is a movement, argues Marx, from the political economy of Smith, through Say to Mill and Ricardo. This movement is one of increasing cynicism, and “inasmuch as the consequences of *industry* appeared more developed and more contradictory to the latter; the latter also become more estranged – consciously estranged – from man and their predecessors” [EW, p.343]. Political economy, he argues, is forced through its own consistent development to “cast off its *hypocrisy* and step forth in *all its cynicism*” [EW, p.342].

Thus Marx contrasts the “original conception” of the political economy of Smith from the “*anti-human*” conclusions of the later proponents of political economy in the Ricardo school [EW, p.343]. There is however, for Marx, no fundamental break between the two, rather that the latter have merely developed the science of political economy “more logically and more truly” [EW, p.343]. By adopting the principle of labour, political economy had originally appeared to recognise man, and yet political economy, argues Marx, “is in fact nothing more than the denial of man carried through to its logical conclusion” [EW, p.342].

The crucial contribution of the political economists, Marx claims, was to bring man within the realm of private property. Marx quotes Engels’s declaration that Adam Smith was “the *Luther of political economy*”, in order to demonstrate the fact that wealth is no longer seen as something external to man, but rather that “man himself is recognised as its essence” [EW, p.342]. Thus political economy heralded the abolition of the appearance of private property as something external and independent of man, and made possible the abolition of its “*mindless objectivity*” [EW, p.342].

In contrast to Smith, it was the great advance of the Ricardo school, “to declare the *existence* of the human being [...] to be *indifferent* and even *harmful*” [EW, p.336]. Thus the production of humanity,

or the number of workers that a capital supports, is irrelevant, rather it is the expansion of wealth that is all important.<sup>27</sup> Marx hails the contribution of this “recent English political economy” as having reduced the landowner to a “prosaic capitalist”, and thus for having “anticipated and prepared the[se] changes in reality”, and in their act of “simplifying the contradiction” between capitalists and workers, thus “bringing it to a head and hastening its resolution” [EW, p.337].

It is these political economists who make private property in its active form the subject, and man as a non-being the “tensed essence” of private property [EW, p.342-343]. Thus it appears when we arrive at the culmination of modern industry, the ‘liberated industry’ discussed in the previous section, the non-human element of subjectivity in political economy correspondingly reaches its apex, a situation in which, even for the capitalists, “an *inhuman* power rules over everything” [EW, p.366].

### 3. *The Political Economist and the Layman*

I will now consider the human element of political economy as a theory of subjectivity. It can be seen that the potential exists for a gap between the actual consciousness of the capitalists, and the theorisation of their interests by the political economists.<sup>28</sup> The political economist is a specialist who functions as a scientist of the empirical interests of the capitalist. However, at times in the *Manuscripts*, Marx employs the terms ‘capitalist’ and ‘political economist’ somewhat interchangeably. Marx considers the theoretician as an expression of the practitioner, and likewise the theoretician is inextricably entwined with real practice. This is highlighted when he reveals that by referring to political economists, he really means “empirical businessmen”, for political economists “are the *scientific* exposition and existence of the former” [EW, p.260].<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> If political economy takes as its principle the absence of needs, as Marx points out later in the *Manuscripts*, we might see even the existence of man as a pure luxury and the production of people as a public disaster (Marx *Early Writings*, p.363).

<sup>28</sup> Although Marx traces the struggles of industrial and landed property, workers and capitalists in very suggestive ways in the *Manuscripts*, he does not formally theorise the consciousness of classes.

<sup>29</sup> Contrast this with Marx's references in *Capital* to the political economist as the “ideologist” (Marx, *Capital* Vol. I (Penguin, 1990 [1976]), p.718) of the capitalist, the separation of the “practical agents of capitalist

It might be useful to consider this in the light of the aforementioned analogy of Smith with Luther, who, according to Marx in the *Manuscripts*, “negated the idea of priests as something separate and apart from the layman by transferring the priest into the heart of the layman” [EW, p.342]. In terms of political economy, the implication is that Smith transferred the political economist into the heart of the empirical businessman. This line of argument indicates the importance of theorising the role of intellectuals in society.<sup>30</sup> However, in the *Manuscripts*, Marx does not further develop a theory of ideology and the relationship between practical and ideological agents.

Bourgeois ideology aims towards the universalization of its claims. While political economy “takes the interests of the capitalists as the basis of its analysis” [EW, p.323], its pretensions towards universality draw into its practice actors who reach beyond the purview of the capitalists. It is therefore not simply a theory of the interests of one specific and distinct sphere of society. In its inability to remain within the borders of its own compartmentalisation, through its internal contradictions, political economy as a theory of subjectivity seems inherently prone to destabilisation. A consequence of recognising this potential instability is Marx's statement that the revolutionary movement must “find both its empirical and its theoretical basis in the movement of *private property* or, to be more exact, of the economy” [EW, p.348]. It would therefore appear that economic theory has the potential to be transformed, through critique, into a tool for the working class movement.

#### 4. *Critique of Political Economy and Critique of the Economic System*

I have been considering political economy as a theory of subjectivity. Marx refers throughout the *Manuscripts* to political economy rather than to the economic system as such. This might seem to indicate that political economy is itself the object of study.<sup>31</sup> However, the terms are sometimes translated interchangeably and thus we are unsure whether to treat political economy simply as a

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production” from their “ideological word-spinners” (Marx *Capital*, I, p.757), or the notion of political economy as an “ideology” (Marx *Capital*, I, p.931).

<sup>30</sup> In a later chapter I will consider the relation between this advance of political economy and Antonio Gramsci's theory of the organic intellectual.

<sup>31</sup> In *Capital*, Marx refers to the “capitalist mode of production” (Marx *Capital*, I, p.90).

doctrine or also as denoting the actual economic system itself. There is potentially a stark difference between political economy as a doctrine, a body of ideas, and political economy as an economic system. Firstly, the proletariat only plays an active role in the latter. Secondly, if no rigid distinction is made between the two, then political economy as a theory might be considered to have a much stronger role in the (re-)creation of the economic system, and the political economist to have a level of agency that would extend beyond the role of an ideologist.

In the *Manuscripts*, there is a sense in which Marx is both overly and insufficiently critical in his estimations of political economy. This observation, if well-founded, is at the core of the argument for there being two discordant subjectivities in the *Manuscripts*. Marx, as we shall see in the next section, seizes on the notion of labour as the truly creative power, and argues that the “essential relationship of labour” [EW, p.326] is revealed in the direct relationship between the worker and production. Marx’s first critique of political economy is based on its concealment of “*the estrangement in the nature of labour*” [EW, p.325].

In order to develop an account of the estrangement of labour, to determine the nature of this concealment, Marx must advance his critique of political economy itself concretely. It is only through a critique of political economy that one might gain access to this direct relationship. But, if we find that Marx has not fully substantiated his criticism of what he calls the “anti-human” conclusions of the doctrine, then he stands accused of being overly critical of political economy [EW, p.343]. On the other hand, to the extent that Marx uncritically absorbs or reproduces certain elements of political economy (the concepts of fixed and circulating capital, the iron law of wages, etc.), it can be argued that he is insufficiently critical of political economy.<sup>32</sup> Marx's examination of money, in its mediating role, as “the truly creative power” [EW, p.378], and the seriousness with which he considers the political economists’ treatment of private property in its active form as the subject, suggests an

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<sup>32</sup> The extent to which Marx reproduces the iron law of wages is most evident in Marx's description of the inevitable victory of the capitalist over the worker in the struggle over wages (Marx *Early Writings*, p.282). He later describes the raising of wages as “an anomalous situation that could only be prolonged by force” (Marx *Early Writings*, p.332).

opposed and antagonistic conception of subjectivity to that of labour as the source of all wealth. Thus I would claim that the development of Marx's theory of political economy bears a critical relationship to the development of his thought on the question of subjectivity.

## **b) The Subjectivity of Labour**

### **i) Labour as a Subject**

The notion of labour is central to Marx's argument throughout the *Manuscripts*. By contrast, other concepts (e.g. communism, industry, and political economy) shift in and out of the frame of his discussion at various points in the text, depending on the particular focus of each section. Although labour is present as a concept at all points in the *Manuscripts*, we cannot assume that Marx's use of the concept is uniform in its meaning throughout. This is an important point given that Marx engages closely with various thinkers of significant but not necessarily coincident perspectives, most notably Smith and Hegel.<sup>33</sup> In this section, I will attempt to identify the extent to which labour appears as a subject in the *Manuscripts*. The answer is not easily provided. But, if it is difficult to identify labour as a concrete subject in the *Manuscripts*, it could be possible to classify labour as a potential subject, one that has yet to be realized as a power belonging to consciousness. Later, I will also investigate the relationship between communism as a theory and the potential realization of labour as a subject.

I will begin by examining, as Marx does, the relationship of political economy to labour. It is the progressive core of "enlightened political economy" [EW, p.342],<sup>34</sup> to have identified labour as the sole essence of wealth from within the system of private property. And yet, Marx implies that none of the political economists point to or elaborate labour as a concrete subject. Labour appears, if at

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<sup>33</sup> The *Manuscripts* represent an encounter between Smith's and Hegel's conceptions of labour. Note in this regard Marx's observation that "Hegel adopts the standpoint of political economy" (Marx *Early Writings*, p.386). In the concept of labour there is a point of traversal between Smith's political economy and Hegel's philosophy that Marx attempts to mobilise for the mutual benefit of his attempted synthesis. Although this argument has a bearing on our analysis, its full elaboration lies beyond the remit of the current study.

<sup>34</sup> i.e. Smith and later the political economists – those who have been lifted out of the backwards age of the fetishism of metal-money or land.



all, only as an abstract subject for political economy. Indeed, for Marx in the *Manuscripts*, those who labour, the workers, are characterised at all points by their lack of power, and, in the estrangement of labour, by the almost total destruction of their subjectivity. Marx is centrally concerned with the meaning of the “reduction of the greater part of mankind to abstract labour” [EW, p.289].<sup>35</sup>

In the *Manuscripts*, Marx recognises that the historical rise of modern industry and capital has coincided with the reduction of the majority of mankind to abstract labour. He stops short however of developing a theory of the connection between abstract labour and capital. I would argue that the relationship between the element of non-human subjectivity that has been identified in the investigation of modern industry above, and that is formulated in the laws of political economy, poses unresolved question for Marx about the notion of abstract labour. It is only in his later writings however that abstract labour appears as a norm that is both imposed on producers by the process of competition, and that both results from and is reproduced by the active choices made about the distribution of production and productivity by the masters of industry.

This process causes a further modification in the content of abstract labour.<sup>36</sup> Abstract labour, being determined by external factors (competition and the ‘masters of industry’), is therefore not a subject in any conventional sense, but is rather better characterised as the absence of a subject. As an external constraint on the producer, abstract labour is the medium through which the social character of labour is transmitted, while at the same time it is not the product of any conscious regulation of production.

For Marx in the *Manuscripts*, abstract labour is the means by which he defines the proletariat, as someone who lives only by “one-sided, abstract labour” [EW, p.288]. For political economy, the

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<sup>35</sup> Marx associates this question with a more practical question, although the connection between the two is not self-evident. He asks what mistakes are made by those who seek to improve the situation of the working class by piecemeal reforms, or those who see these reforms as the goal of a social revolution (Marx *Early Writings*, p.289). Marx believes it is necessary to investigate both questions in order to illuminate in the problem of the subjectivity of labour, and we shall attempt to deal with the second in the section on communism.

<sup>36</sup> The modification of the content of abstract labour must necessarily be a quantitative one, as abstract labour by its nature is labour abstracted from its qualitative content.

existence of the proletarian as a human being is not considered, and he or she is regarded as “nothing more than a worker” [EW, p.288]. The restriction of labour to the form of “wage-earning activity” [EW, p.289], is the denial of the life activity of the proletarian as a human being. Marx therefore seems to associate the denial of the living reality of the humanity of labour with abstraction.

The pejorative aspect of abstraction is its connection with the idea of separation. It is the abstraction of genuine human functions, their separation from the other aspects of human activity, from the totality of this activity, and their transformation into “final and exclusive ends” that crystallises their de-humanisation [EW, p.327]. Indeed, Marx identifies one-sidedness and abstractness as key characteristics of present-day labour, and it is from the very essence of this present-day labour, he argues, that the misery of the workers, their decline and their impoverishment proceed.

The notion of separation is what links the concept of abstract labour to that of external labour, but these two concepts belong to very different categories. Abstract labour relates to abstraction, the realm of intellect and thought, whereas external labour relates to the concrete, sensuous experience. Whilst abstract labour is only a category of theory, external labour denotes the real experience of the subject of labour. In particular, for Marx, external labour is what constitutes the alienation of labour, the experience of the labourer.

External labour, as Marx characterises it, has become separable from the worker. External labour is external from the point of view of the subject, the labourer. Marx's theorisation of the experience of the worker through estrangement and the externalisation of labour is important because of the emphasis, following Feuerbach, that he places on sense perception as the “basis of all science” [EW, p.355].<sup>37</sup> It could be argued that labour is only present in the *Manuscripts* as a concrete subject in so far as it is determined by the experience of a certain type of labour.

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<sup>37</sup> This claim locates an original positive foundation for the transcendence of estrangement in sense experience. However, the problems with this conception have been well documented by Chris Arthur in his

I would argue that the division between the realms of experience and abstraction poses a significant problem for Marx's thought in the *Manuscripts*, especially given the strategic importance that the notion of abstract labour has for Marx's later theory, i.e. in *Capital*. Despite the pejorative connotation of abstraction in the *Manuscripts*, Marx's attention has been drawn to the importance of the notion of abstract labour for his work. If we deem the *Manuscripts* to contain two discordant subjectivities, this points towards Marx's inability to synthesise the necessary categories of abstraction developed by political economy and the experience of labour by the worker. We could argue that Marx is both too rooted in the particularity of experience, which we will later discuss as the suffering of the worker, and at the same time in the universality of abstraction without the necessary mediating concepts to make such a synthesis possible. As we will try to demonstrate however, by giving such a structure to this problem, Marx begins to develop a number of analytical tools that lead him in the direction of its solution.

## ii) Communism as a Theory of Subjectivity

Marx's discussion of the notion of communism in the *Manuscripts* is at times both abstract and complex. Having sought to elaborate the relationship between private property and labour through the employment of his understanding of estranged labour, Marx then explores the relationship of private property and communism. He advances a summary critique of different attitudes towards private property, such as Proudhon, Fourier and Saint Simon [EW, p.345]. For Marx, the abolition of private property must be its positive supersession, not a crude levelling down. Marx traces out the stages of a Hegelian process of supersession, passing through what he terms 'crude communism' to reach higher levels [EW, p.346].

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*Dialectics of Labour*. Marx posits Feuerbach's unity of man and nature in an un-problematized fashion. Firstly, it involves the assumption that "just because man is natural, nature can be humanized through the mediation of industry" (Arthur, *C Dialectics of Labour* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p.133). Secondly in emphasizing the "affirmative character of appropriation", there is no real recognition of the "sheer recalcitrance of nature to human use" (Arthur *Dialectics of Labour*, p.133). Arthur points out that, for man, nature is a "continually surprising interlocutor" (Arthur *Dialectics of Labour*, p.135). He argues however that the centrality of labour in Marx's analysis has already begun in the *Manuscripts* to destabilise this insufficiently problematized notion of the unity of man and nature.

Since the term, for us, has been subsequently charged with historical meaning, it is appropriate to clarify what the notion of communism in the *Manuscripts* is not. Marx asserts that “communism is not as such the goal of human development – the form of human society” [EW, p.358].<sup>38</sup> Interpreted literally, this appears to contradict the commonly held view of communism as the form of society which comes about as a process following the achievement of a socialist society. Communism, far from being the end of history, says Marx, is “a *real* phase, necessary for the next period of historical development, in the emancipation and recovery of mankind” [EW, p.358]. In this context, communism appears to be a point of transition to an ever higher stage of humanity. Communism, he says, is the “act of positing as the negation of the negation”, giving rise to the possibility of socialist man and socialism, as the “positive self-consciousness of man” [EW, p.357].

Is there a tension between the three notions of communism as a body of ideas, an act, and as a real phase of history? In his theory of communism, we might consider whether Marx has produced something analogous to the relationship between political economy as “modern industry as self” [EW, p.341]. Communism could be viewed as the expression of labour-as-self, a theorisation of the consciousness of labour, or as the theoretical expression of the proletariat. This is clearly a very problematic formulation, as it touches on questions of ascribed and empirical consciousness that we will deal with in later chapters.<sup>39</sup> We might remark that political economy and communism, if considered as theories of subjectivity, are theories of subjectivity in very different ways.

The structure of Marx's approach to discussing communism in the *Manuscripts* merits further examination. I would argue that the section on *Private Property and Communism* does not make a binary distinction between ‘crude communism’ and a ‘true’ or ‘real’ communism [EW, p.345].<sup>40</sup> Rather Marx elaborates five points which appear to be five stages or levels of the development or

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<sup>38</sup> This statement is sometimes interpreted as referring to ‘crude communism’, however the meaning of the text at this point is somewhat ambiguous (Marx *Early Writings*, p.358)

<sup>39</sup> i.e. in relation to Georg Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*

<sup>40</sup> This is however what the editors of the *Early Writings* seem to suggest (Marx *Early Writings*, p.345 fn.2) – An analogy is also sometimes drawn between crude and higher levels of communism and the stages of communism identified in Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Programme*.

coming-to-be of a communistic consciousness. This displays the structure of a phenomenological process, similar to Hegel's "alienations".<sup>41</sup> Marx therefore appears to be representing a process in thought or the construction of subjectivity.<sup>42</sup> In this sense, communism as a theory of subjectivity represents the development of labour from its immediate perception to the self-consciousness of man. Arguably Marx is trying to emulate what he sees as Hegel's "positive achievement": to have brought together "universal *fixed thought-forms*" and to have presented them as "moments in the process of abstraction" [EW, p.397].

But there are limitations to viewing Marx's discussion of communism as an investigation of consciousness. As Marx makes clear within the section itself, the theoretical antitheses of the economic system can find a resolution only in a practical way, "through the practical energy of man" [EW, p.354]. Their resolution is "by no means only a problem of knowledge, but a *real* problem of life, a problem which *philosophy* was unable to solve precisely because it treated it as a *purely* theoretical problem" [EW, p.354].

Let us therefore return to the notion of communism as a 'real phase' of history, as this is the main sense in which Marx discusses communism in the *Manuscripts*. Communism's focus on practice, the fact that it's "philanthropy" is "at once real and directly bent towards *action*", sets it apart from political economy as a theory of subjectivity [EW, p.349]. The analogy between political economy and communism breaks down, and presents us with a new set of problems. Marx argues that although the idea of communism is sufficient to supersede the idea of private property, to supersede the real existence of private property requires something he calls "real communist activity" [EW, p.365]. But there is, at best, some ambiguity as to the content of this activity.

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<sup>41</sup> David McLellan describes these 'alienations' as the stages of man's own reason which he comes to recognise in the world. They are thus "creations of the human mind yet thought of as independent and superior to the human mind" (McLellan, *D Marx before Marxism* (London: Macmillan, 1980), p.18).

<sup>42</sup> These stages, considered thematically, I would tentatively characterise as: 1) Crude, unthinking communism, 2) Political/despotic communism, which has 'grasped the concept, but not the essence of communism', 3) Social communism, as the positive transcendence of private property, the 'return of man as social being', 4) Basis of science in sense perception and the history of industry, 5) Self-creation of socialist man through human labour.

Marx points towards the experience of communist workers, for whom, he argues, “the brotherhood of man is not a hollow phrase”, but a reality in their “work-worn figures” [EW, p.365]. Marx observes that the direct aim of the workers, to produce propaganda, has the unintended by-product of creating for the workers a new need, the “need for society”, as a goal in-itself [EW, p.365]. Marx contrasts this relationship between means and ends in the working class movement, the need for society and the existence of man, with the doctrine of political economy, money as the sole end and the ‘inhuman power’ that rules over everything [EW, p.366].

Marx, whilst giving several indications of his belief in an impending social revolution in the *Manuscripts*, does not elaborate a substantive theory of revolution. This is manifested most clearly in his dismissive attitude towards struggles for the reform of working class conditions. Marx argues that fighting for a rise in wages is “nothing more than better *pay for slaves*”, which results in no “increase in human significance or dignity for either the worker or the labour” [EW, p.332]. This view seems to arise on the one hand from an acceptance of the iron law of wages, that an “enforced *rise in wages*” is an “anomalous situation” prolonged only by force [EW, p.332], and on the other hand from the determination that a social revolution must achieve full human emancipation. Marx’s earlier inquiries into the limitations of the piecemeal reformers are now framed by this conception.

Wages and private property both arise, for Marx, as the immediate consequence of a certain type of labour. Thus Marx argues that the “emancipation of society from private property” is expressed in “the political form of the *emancipation of the workers*” [EW,p.332]. The emancipation of the workers, he claims, contains within it “universal human emancipation”, because the “whole of human servitude is involved in the relation of the worker to production”, and “all relations of servitude are nothing but modifications and consequences of this relation” [EW,p.332].

The importance of Marx’s revolutionary critique in the *Manuscripts* lies in advocating a radical break with private property at the level of the system as a whole, and at the same time grounding the potential for the transcendence of these relations of servitude in the experience of workers. As we

have seen however, the content of this transcendence is perhaps necessarily ambiguous and indeterminate in the *Manuscripts*. Although Marx has identified the importance of political economy to his critique, his criticisms at this point are primarily directed at its philosophical presuppositions. I would argue that this is reflected in his failure to valorise the process by which concrete reforms of the conditions of the workers are achieved.

### 3) One Subjectivity

The meaning that is ascribed to the *Manuscripts* is in part determined by the project that Marx was engaged in whilst writing them. Thus, if it is supposed that the meaning of the central concepts with which Marx was operating in the text undergo a transformation in the course of their elaboration, then Marx himself was likely to have been in a process of re-evaluating the nature of the project which he was pursuing.<sup>43</sup> I have already provided some evidence for the configuration of these concepts, such as modern industry, labour, etc., when considered from the point of view of the *Manuscripts* containing two distinct conceptions of subjectivity.

I will now consider whether Marx was in fact seeking to formulate a synthesising project in which these two conceptions of subjectivity could potentially be unified in thought and/or in practice. By doing so I will evaluate to what extent Marx has been successful in this endeavour and by extension whether such a goal is in fact possible. If Marx was not fully successful in this synthesis, I will ask whether the persistence of two theories of subjectivity, of more than one meaning, as an internal tension within the work, has interesting consequences for the development of Marx's project.

#### a) Estranged Labour and Private Property

##### i) The System of Private Property Revealed as the System of Estranged Labour

The concept of estranged labour is central to the *Manuscripts* and to the question of subjectivity within it. In particular, it is a key concept in the consideration of the *Manuscripts* as a work containing one conception of subjectivity, because it is a unifying concept that emerges at a crossroads between political economy and philosophy. The concept arises both from a concrete description of the economic facts, as described by political economy, and from a judgement of these facts that Marx roots in an historical and philosophical conception of man.

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<sup>43</sup> This is not an unreasonable assumption, I would argue, given the experimental and exploratory nature of these manuscripts that were intended for self-clarification rather than publication.



Marx attempts to reduce the system of private property to one that is based on and explained by the system of estranged labour. To make this claim, Marx must elaborate his conception of estranged labour. He does this by beginning from a "*present-day economic fact*" [EW, p.323]. Thus his analysis appears to have a foundation in objective fact, to be grounded in the descriptions of political economy. From this starting-point Marx unpacks four aspects of estrangement, elaborating a structured account of estranged labour.

These four aspects of estrangement are, broadly: the worker's estrangement from the product, the worker's estrangement from the activity of production, the worker's estrangement from species-being, and the worker's estrangement from other workers. Although this account of estranged labour refers to the experience of the worker, it is not simply constructed from it. On the other hand, I will argue that the interdependence of the different aspects of estranged labour makes the concept reliant on a defensible notion of species-being.

The concept of species-being attempts to uncover the essential characteristics of what it means to be human. This entails both the subjective aspect of the experience of man, species-consciousness, and the objective recovery of man as a social being. Marx attempts to derive this third aspect of estranged labour, estrangement from species being, from the first two. To what extent Marx achieves a synthesis of a somewhat abstract account of species-being and a more concrete determination of the experience of the worker remains to be seen. I will attempt later to give an account of the usage and limitations of Marx's account of species-being.

The immediate consequence of the economic fact of estranged labour is that the product of this labour stands "*opposed to it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer*" [EW, p.324]. Marx then raises the question of the relationship between this product and the process of production, the activity itself. The relationship of the worker to the product is only one aspect of estrangement, he suggests, and this estrangement is only possible because the worker is "*estranging himself from himself*" in the "*act of production, within the activity of production itself*" [EW, p.326].

Marx argues that the product is simply the “résumé of the activity” [EW, p.326]. It seems therefore that he is arguing that private property is fully and exhaustibly explainable by estranged labour. By uncovering the particular form of activity at the heart of present-day production, Marx is arguing that the real content of private property is reducible to estranged labour. But how does Marx propose to perform this reduction? Can private property be sufficiently described as the “material, summarized expression” [EW, p.334] of estranged labour? Certainly a number of commentators have found this manoeuvre suggestive of some form of sleight of hand.

In particular, Allen Wood criticises Marx’s “‘theory’ of alienation” precisely for its attempt to unify the diverse aspects of estrangement within a single system or whole, and to locate a “paradigm form” of estranged labour.<sup>44</sup> Wood rightly suggests that the search for commensurability between such diverse phenomena relies on the conception of some sort of essence whose nature has been violated or set into disharmony. What status is accorded to such an essence, and how defensible it might be is then at issue for debate. Such criticism is not easily pushed aside, and it raises serious questions about the synthesising project of estranged labour, or perhaps the suitability of the concepts in which it is rooted (e.g. species-being) to perform the functions which are being asked of them in the *Manuscripts*.

For Marx, private property derives entirely from “an analysis of the concept of *alienated labour*” [EW, p.332]. It can be seen how this treatment of private property simply as an expression of estranged labour would undermine its status as an authentic subject. The autonomy of private property as a power dominating human actors would stand revealed as a product of their own creation. On the other hand, we have also seen how, at times, Marx does appear to treat private property as an authentic subject, as indicated in the first part of this chapter. Is the concept of estranged labour capable of this synthesis, or is it one that does violence to reality?

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<sup>44</sup> Wood, A *Karl Marx*, 2nd Edition (New York; London: Routledge, 2004), p.4

I would argue that the answer is one that is perhaps necessarily indeterminate in the *Manuscripts*. The text itself opens up a rich seam of problems that stem from the attempt to formulate an adequate conception of estranged labour and its expression and presentation in reality [EW, p.330]. As we can see from Wood's critique however, whilst Marx has identified the complex interconnection of the ills of present-day economic society and its determinate and historically-rooted origins in the labour process, there appear to be serious limitations to the explanatory power of the set of concepts with which he is operating in the *Manuscripts*.

## ii) Objectification and Estrangement

In the *Manuscripts*, Marx identifies a process of objectification in which the subject objectifies itself in the object. The product of labour is "the *objectification* of labour" [EW, p.324]. Under the system of private property, revealed as the system of estranged labour, he argues that objectification only appears as the loss of and bondage to the object. Correspondingly, the appropriation of the object appears only as estrangement [EW, p.324]. Whilst Marx makes a clear distinction between the processes of estrangement and objectification, within the system of estranged labour they also appear to be internally linked.<sup>45</sup>

The process of estrangement is, for Marx, an inversion of the process of objectification in the sense that agency is transferred from the subject to the object. The object can then be described as displaying the properties of a subject, or it could be said, a quasi-subject. It seems therefore that, in "present-day" economic conditions as envisaged by Marx [EW, p.323], there is a process of estrangement that both preserves the kernel of objectification at the same time as having wholly inverted it. This theoretical framework, Marx claims, helps us to explain the inversion of activity and passivity that takes place under estranged labour. The activity of the worker appearing as passivity,

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<sup>45</sup> After having read the *Manuscripts*, Georg Lukács would subsequently criticise himself for not having made this distinction in *History and Class Consciousness* (in his *Introduction* of 1967 - Lukács, G *History and Class Consciousness* (London: Merlin, 1971), p.xxxvi).

and the passivity of the non-worker appearing as activity can now be understood through the appropriation of the products of labour.

Marx argues that political economy fails to comprehend this estrangement. It is concealed because political economy ignores the “*direct relationship between the worker (labour) and production*” [EW, p.325]. In his project to “rise above the level of political economy”, Marx attempts to unveil this concealment [EW, p.288]. But he also points to the real domination of the product, capital, over the worker and the fact that it actually confronts the worker as an “autonomous power” [EW, p.324]. This poses a set of problems which are at the same time both theoretical and practical. Is it possible for the product both to have an authentic “autonomous power” and to be a quasi-subject? How does Marx propose to gain access to the direct relationship between the worker and production, if not through political economy? Before attempting to answer these questions I must look further at the framework in which Marx is operating.

Marx appears to have appropriated and developed a social ontology with which he seeks to explain both the general relationship of man and nature, the fundamental mediation of human productive activity, and the historically specific form of further mediation which arises in the present-day economic system, estranged labour. Commentators on the *Manuscripts* have sought to make a distinction between these first and second-order mediations in Marx’s social ontology. This categorisation is proposed by István Mészáros, and further discussed by Chris Arthur.<sup>46</sup>

The first-order mediation expresses the relationship between man and nature at a level of abstraction that is able to discuss the concepts of objectification and appropriation in a non-estranged form. The second-order mediation operates at a more specific historical determination and deals with the more concrete expressions of estranged labour and private property and with the concept of estrangement. Although it might seem possible to isolate these different orders of mediation analytically, Marx’s usage of estranged labour in the *Manuscripts* seems to suggest that

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<sup>46</sup> See Mészáros *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, p.79 and Arthur *Dialectics of Labour*, p.11

the second-order “mediation of the mediation”, as Mészáros calls it, is not so easily disentangled from its basis.<sup>47</sup>

I have argued above that Marx treats objectification and estrangement as distinct processes but also as having an intimate internal connection. Marx’s critique of estranged labour is not a rejection of mediation altogether, but of this specific set of second-order mediations. Mészáros claims that Marx has developed “the first truly dialectical grasp of the complex relationship between mediation and immediacy”.<sup>48</sup> Arthur is more measured in suggesting that it is the “conceptual *inflection* rather than the mutual *exclusion* of the categories of ‘objectification’ and ‘alienation’ that permits theoretical space for grasping the objective necessity of a historical supersession”.<sup>49</sup> If Marx’s conception of communism is the vehicle for this historical supersession, both practically and theoretically, this ‘complex relationship’ reflects the task of communism to rise from within the system of estrangement, whilst simultaneously creating a qualitatively new system. This requires reflection on the form of non-estranged labour or human activity on which this new system might be based.

There is considerable debate over Marx’s use of the term labour in the *Manuscripts* in relation to estrangement. To what extent Marx conceives of labour as inextricably connected to estrangement, and as a term for human activity limited to the present-day economic system is a matter of contention. Certainly in his later writings, e.g. *Capital*, Marx examines labour as a process common to many different epochs of human production [*Capital*, I, p.283].<sup>50</sup> It would be dangerous however to read this understanding into his earlier writings in a teleological manner.

In the *Manuscripts*, there is a very strong association between labour and the process of estrangement, although Marx’s use of terminology in the *Manuscripts* is somewhat unhelpful in this regard. It is possible to extract quotations that seem to point to an interchangeable usage of labour and human activity, suggesting that Marx treats labour in the *Manuscripts* as at least partially trans-

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<sup>47</sup> Mészáros *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, p.79

<sup>48</sup> Mészáros *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, p.79

<sup>49</sup> Arthur *Dialectics of Labour*, p.12

<sup>50</sup> Marx *Capital*, I, p.283

historical in its scope. On the other hand, Arthur argues that an examination of the full context of the *Manuscripts*, and not just of selected fragments, discredits this interpretation, and points towards Marx having a conception of labour that is inextricably connected to private property and estrangement.<sup>51</sup>

At certain points, Marx explicitly suggests that “*labour* is only an expression of human activity within alienation” [EW, p.369]. The transcendence of private property, as a means of achieving some form of “*truly human and social property*” would thus require the creation of a qualitatively new form of free human activity [EW, p.333]. If Marx does not conceive of the possibility of a really-existing non-estranged labour, then this has implications for the transcendence of estrangement. It seems that the possibility of such transcendence is predicated on the possibility of bridging this gap. Therefore the problems that Marx encounters in stepping between the language of human activity and human labour are perhaps not merely theoretical, but stem from the existence of a problem in reality.

### iii) Estrangement and Suffering

Much like the concept of estranged labour, Marx’s conception of suffering can be said to play a bridging function between political economy and philosophy within the *Manuscripts*. In the *First Manuscript*, it can be argued that Marx engages in an immanent critique of Adam Smith’s political economy. In doing so Marx attempts to use Smith’s own moral criterion to demonstrate that the goal of the present-day economic system is an unhappy society. Taking Smith’s contention that a society in which the majority suffer is an unhappy one, Marx demonstrates that in every possible state of society, advancing, decreasing, and static prosperity, the result is suffering and misery for the vast majority.

In the critical case of a society with advancing prosperity, Marx establishes the concept of estranged, alienated labour in order to demonstrate that misery is the product of “the very *essence* of present-day labour” [EW, p.288]. Marx calls this suffering under conditions of advancing wealth a

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<sup>51</sup> Arthur *Dialectics of Labour*, pp.12-18

“complicated misery” [EW, p.286], because it is both a concentration of the workers’ activity in the hands of another and a distortion of that activity, so that the worker is more uniformly dependent on an abstract and one-sided type of activity. Therefore the concepts of suffering and estranged labour are both products of this project and are required to underpin the nascent critique of political economy that Marx is advancing.

Arthur argues that Marx’s “main critical category” changes within the *First Manuscript* from ‘abstraction’ to ‘estrangement’.<sup>52</sup> In the first sections it is the separation and abstraction of labour from capital and landed property that is purely negative and harmful, whereas in the later sections it is more specifically the estrangement of labour that is diagnosed. I would argue that the concept of suffering links these critical categories. I have suggested and will demonstrate below that Marx’s notion of estranged labour depends upon the concept of species-being, or human essence. Marx roots this conception of the appropriation of man’s essence in the concept of suffering.

As I will show later, Marx argues that man, “appropriates his integral essence in an integral way, as a total man” [EW, p.351]. Even the most debased and inhuman estrangement, the worst condition of suffering, is, for Marx, a confirmation of human reality. He argues that, “suffering, humanly conceived, is an enjoyment of the self for man” [EW, p.351]. The one-sidedness of man has arisen in all the senses as a result of private property, and it reduces all these senses merely to the uniform sense of having [EW, p.352].<sup>53</sup> Marx sees the reduction of human nature to this absolute poverty as a necessary stage in a process of human nature “giving birth to its inner wealth” [EW, p.352].

In this case suffering appears to represent the kernel of species-consciousness that remains for the estranged worker completely dominated by the autonomous power of private property. Recognition of this suffering as an expression of self, I would argue, preserves the potential for humanity to emerge from the system of estranged labour and become a self-conscious subject [EW, p.351]. In

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<sup>52</sup> Arthur *Dialectics of Labour*, p.15

<sup>53</sup> This is an understanding that Marx has derived from Moses Hess’s *Einundzwanzig Bogen*, as he acknowledges in the text (Marx *Early Writings*, p.352).

the transition from suffering to passion, “the sensuous outburst of my essential activity” [EW, p.356], the fulcrum can be located around which an inversion from passivity to activity takes place. Marx therefore begins his immanent critique of political economy in the *First Manuscript* by using Smith’s measure of suffering to demonstrate “society’s distress” on its own terms [EW, p.286]. But through the process of estranged labour, suffering is transformed by Marx into an ontologically important turning point.

In the later *Manuscripts*, during Marx’s more ‘philosophical’ discussions, he connects suffering fundamentally to sensuousness. For a human being to be an objective sensuous being, he argues, it must also be a suffering being [EW, p.390]. Furthermore, because man “feels his suffering, he is a *passionate being*” [EW, p.390]. Passion, argues Marx, is “man’s essential power vigorously striving to attain its object” [EW, p.390]. In the section on the *Critique of Hegel’s Dialectic and General Philosophy*, Marx appears to be seeking to reinvigorate the framework of sensuousness that he has adopted from Feuerbach with the tools of estrangement that he has drawn from Hegel. In this way Marx attempts to address the problem, as he formulates it, that man is both a natural being and, at the same time, a human being. There is therefore a relationship between being and knowing, which raises a number of questions for the problem of subjectivity and the understanding of human consciousness.

For Marx, the species-being of man is dependent on its confirmation and realization as a being-for-itself in both being and thought. His notion of the transcendence of private property is here translated into the discourse of senses. Such transcendence would mean “the complete *emancipation* of all human senses and attributes” [EW, p.352]. In particular, to achieve this Marx argues that the senses must become “*theoreticians* in their immediate praxis” [EW, p.352]. In this way the theoretical antitheses between activity and passivity, or suffering, lose their antithetical character not simply in thought, but in the social condition. Therefore, Marx seems to be



approaching the conclusion that the problems of philosophy are not simply problems of knowledge, but those of real life.

Although Marx's discussion of the development of human senses and needs raises many interesting insights, it is not within the remit of the present study to explore these further. I have argued above that Marx's notion of estranged labour is dependent on an adequate conception of species-being. On the one hand, Marx claims that the worker's estrangement from species-being is derived from the first two aspects of estrangement (estrangement from the product of labour and estrangement from the activity of production). On the other hand, it seems that man's estrangement from species-being requires a positive concept of species-being and species-consciousness. I will now go on to examine the concept of species-being in more detail.

## **b) Man as a Subject: Species and Species-Being**

I argued earlier that Marx's notion of estranged labour in the *Manuscripts* is reliant upon a defensible notion of species-being or species-essence. The concept of species-being is crucial for how Marx is able to define a worthwhile, meaningful or human life, and therefore to identify the dehumanised form it takes under the conditions of estranged labour. Further, it is through the concept of estranged labour that Marx is able to reveal the system of private property as being based on the system of estrangement. I would thus argue that the concept of species-being provides a key foundation for the project of unifying the two conceptions of subjectivity that I have elaborated in the earlier part of this chapter.

I will now attempt to give an account of Marx's usage of the term, its implications and possible limitations. It is difficult to pin down exactly Marx's conception of species-being in the *Manuscripts*. At times it might seem that his conception points towards a fixed definition, at others towards something quite elastic. Quotations can be extracted that suggest a trans-historical conception, and others that suggest a minimal content outside of the historically specific. It is worth acknowledging from the outset Marx's inheritance of the term from Hegel and subsequently Feuerbach, and

therefore the tradition from which it can be argued that he both borrowed and departed. I will begin with the aspect of continuity that Marx's conception of species-being shares with his predecessors.

The concept of a species, for Marx, is derived from Hegel. For both Marx and Hegel there is a relationship between the individual and the species in which the species is not simply an aggregate of the individual members. Following Feuerbach, this conception of a species seems to point to some species-being which is common to all individual members of that species. This may seem to contradict the first statement, but for Feuerbach and Marx, Wood argues, the source of the connection between each human individual lies in the fact that the essential qualities of the individual are connected to their relationship to the human species as a whole, as a single collective human entity.<sup>54</sup>

In contrast to Hegel, Marx takes up the philosophical position of "consistent humanism and naturalism" [EW, p.389]. He enthusiastically adopts this Feuerbachian formulation on a number of occasions in the *Manuscripts*. Marx equates the full development of naturalism with a fully developed humanism [EW, p.348]. Such a position is distinct, he argues, from both idealism and materialism and constitutes "at the same time their unifying truth" [EW, p.389]. Marx associates this position with communism, understood as the positive transcendence of private property. It is, argues Marx, "the complete restoration of man to himself as a *social*, i.e. human, being" [EW, p.348]. I will discuss later the significance of this identification with communism.

The restoration of man, the re-humanization of its species-being, poses the possibility of the overcoming of antagonisms between humanism and naturalism, between man and nature. I have already discussed the difficulties with such an un-problematised positing of the unity of man and nature.<sup>55</sup> The recalcitrance of nature to human use is a problem for Marx in his appropriation of this Feuerbachian framework. There is however already some evidence of Marx going beyond Feuerbach. Marx recognises in the *Manuscripts* the importance of understanding the "process of

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<sup>54</sup> Wood *Karl Marx*, p.17

<sup>55</sup> See my comments on Chris Arthur in section 2.b.i: *Labour as a Subject*

world history” and the vital role that naturalism plays in comprehending this [EW, p.389]. More important, although not unrelated, is the central role that Marx gives to labour in the *Manuscripts*.

In the *Manuscripts*, Marx proposes a social ontology, as discussed above, in which the relationship between man and nature is mediated by labour.<sup>56</sup> It is the introduction of labour into Marx’s analysis that destabilises the problematic positing of the unity of man with nature.<sup>57</sup> Marx seems to be attempting to examine the complex connections between those relationships that exist at the level of the worker and the materials of labour with those at a more fundamental level between the species and nature. I would suggest that one source of difficulties for Marx’s use of species-being is the blurring of distinctions between species and society, since all humans are members of the same species, but not necessarily of the same society. It is clear historically that human societies have the capacity to vary greatly in character.<sup>58</sup>

On the one hand, Marx employs Feuerbach’s conception of “consistent humanism and naturalism” [EW, p.389], and on the other has reframed this philosophical perspective and is re-shaping it by asserting the centrality of the labour process. In this context, Marx’s critique of Hegel is an attempt to creatively reinvent estrangement and to extract “*all* the elements of criticism [that] are concealed within it, and often prepared and worked out in a way that goes far beyond Hegel’s own point of view” [EW, p.385]. Hegel’s insights into the creation of man as a process, albeit abstractly in thought alone, allow him to grasp the nature of labour and “objective man – true, because real man – as the result of his *own* labour” [EW, p.386]. It is this aspect of Hegel that Marx seeks to synthesise with the framework of Feuerbach, and thus to create his own conception of species-being.

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<sup>56</sup> See section 3.a.iii: *Estrangement and Suffering*

<sup>57</sup> As Arthur argues in his *Dialectics of Labour* (Arthur *Dialectics of Labour*, p.133)

<sup>58</sup> Although it is not possible to investigate the effect of conflating the notions of species and society further, this would be a topic worth discussing elsewhere.

Although Marx never explicitly criticises Feuerbach in the *Manuscripts*,<sup>59</sup> he goes beyond him, as Arthur formulates it, by “recognizing that Hegel’s dialectic of negativity, freed from its estranged form of expression within philosophy, can be given concrete content in the pattern of historical genesis”.<sup>60</sup> Although still somewhat abstract, this important development will later be manifested explicitly in Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach*. Wood recognises the speed of the development of Marx’s thought during this period.<sup>61</sup> Within a year or so of writing the *Manuscripts*, in his *Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach*, Marx states that “the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations” [EW, p.423].

There are similarities between the dilemma at the heart of Marx’s conception of species-being and the problem expressed by all those thinkers who, following Hegel, grappled with the inheritance of the radical Enlightenment. As Charles Taylor defines it, the problem is how to unite “two seemingly indispensable images of man”.<sup>62</sup> The first image is of a subject defined in relation to something external to it, and the second is of a subject that is self-defining. These two images on one level have “deep affinities”, and yet at the same time seem “utterly incompatible”.<sup>63</sup> These two elements are intertwined in Marx’s conception of species-being, and yet are not self-evidently free from incompatibility. I will now examine these elements more closely.

Marx claims that man is a species-being for two reasons, which he argues are both different expressions of the “same thing” [EW, p.327]. Firstly, that man is a species-being, because “he practically and theoretically makes the species – both his own and those of other things – his object” [EW, p.327]. Secondly, it is because “he looks upon himself as a *universal* and therefore free being” [EW, p.327].<sup>64</sup> Thus, for Marx, man as a subject is both self-defining and defined by ‘his’ relation to

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<sup>59</sup> Arthur suggests this may be due to Marx’s hopes in 1844 of convincing Feuerbach to commit to socialism (Arthur *Dialectics of Labour*, p.122).

<sup>60</sup> Arthur *Dialectics of Labour*, p.122

<sup>61</sup> Wood *Karl Marx*, p.17

<sup>62</sup> Taylor, *C Hegel* (Cambridge: CUP, 1975), p.3

<sup>63</sup> Taylor *Hegel*, p.3

<sup>64</sup> Marx’s use of the concept of universality in reference to the constitution of subjects should be investigated further, e.g. in reference to the proletariat being defined by its universal suffering in his *Contribution to the*

'his' object. Both of these things are, for Marx, expressions of a single relationship between subject and object. Whilst he conceives of man as a social being, it is not simply sociality alone which defines humans as a species-being. It is also through their consciousness of themselves as a species that human beings achieve such a distinction.

Animals, argues Marx, are "immediately one" with their life activity; they *are* that activity [EW, p.328]. The *conscious* life-activity of humans distinguishes them qualitatively from animal life-activity. For man's life activity is a mediation, it is "not a determination with which he directly merges" [EW, p.328]. Man makes life activity an "object of his will and consciousness" [EW, p.328]. Man's species-being, argues Marx, is at the root of the freedom that characterises human activity, and 'his' position as a conscious being. This relationship is reversed by estranged labour, which, since man is a conscious being, "makes his life activity, his *being*, a mere means for his *existence*" [EW, p.328].<sup>65</sup> Since man "reproduces himself not only intellectually, in his consciousness, but actively and actually", for Marx, man is capable of contemplating "himself in a world that he has created" [EW, p.329].

The manifestation of Marx's positing of the Feuerbachian unity of man and nature can be seen again in his allusion to the "world that [man] has created", and his statement that man "reproduces the whole of nature" [EW, p.329]. In contrast to Feuerbach however, it can also be seen that, for Marx, the alienation to be overcome is one which is objective, created by humans practically through a real historical process. Marx's investigations in the *Manuscripts* trace the outlines of a new project that posits the possibility of examining the material content of this process. He begins to advance the role that political economy can play in this project.

It is in this sense that Marx argues that the division of labour is "nothing more than the *estranged, alienated* positing of human activity as a *real species-activity*" [EW, p.369]. It is precisely because of

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*Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, Introduction* (Marx *Early Writings*, p.256), or as one aspect of man existing as a species-being, arising from man's self-definition as a universal and therefore free being.

<sup>65</sup> Here 'being', the translation of *Wesen*, also implies the meaning of essence.

having grasped labour as the essence of private property, argues Marx, “that the development of the economy as such can be analysed in its real determinateness” [EW, p.369]. It stems from the fact that the division of labour is a “configuration of private property” that human life “needed *private property* for its realization and that it now needs the abolition of private property” [EW, p.374].

I have identified the limitations of Marx’s conception of species-being. Conceived from a merely philosophical perspective, it is incapable of solving the inherited riddle of history, the unification of two indispensable images of man. Marx’s emphasis on real practical activity precludes the idea that such a riddle could be conquered in thought alone. On the other hand, the internal tensions of Marx’s conception and the development of a new project lead him to some interesting pre-figurations of his notion of commodity fetishism that we shall now investigate.

### **c) Quasi-subjects and the Limits of the Manuscripts**

#### **i) Primogeniture and Fetishism: Capital as a Quasi-Subject**

In the *Manuscripts*, I have argued that Marx presents us with a compelling expression of two different subjectivities. Through his identification of labour as the sole essence of wealth, Marx seems to address the potential of labour as a subject.<sup>66</sup> On the other hand, in its developed form as modern industry or capital, private property displays the properties of a subject. Marx attempts to unify these two conceptions of subjectivity by revealing the system of private property as established on the basis of the system of estranged labour. The theory of estranged labour seeks to explain the creation of the quasi-subjectivity of the products of labour, private property taking on the properties of a subject. I have identified a number of limitations in this attempt at unification: the theory of estranged labour, and the notion of species-being on which it is based. Thus there remains an ambiguity as to whether the quasi-subjectivity of private property is reducible to the subjectivity of labour, or whether private property is in fact an authentic subject.

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<sup>66</sup> Although, the form of labour that increasingly characterises the present-day economic system, abstract labour, appears to represent the absence of a subject.

I will now examine this ambiguity between private property as a quasi-subject and as an authentic subject. I will argue that the co-existence of two conceptions of subjectivity in tension with each other suggests that Marx recognises both as having a social reality in the present-day economic system. I will argue that both conceptions of subjectivity are explored in the *Manuscripts*, and that Marx seeks to construct a framework that is able to give a full expression to each. In one sense, it could be argued that this theory is necessarily incomplete. For Marx, the riddle is to be solved by communism and since his conception of communism is one that relies on the interaction between thought and practice, by definition it cannot be solved in thought alone [EW, p.348]. What I will now examine however, is whether the continued presence of two conceptions of subjectivity alongside this attempted unification presents Marx with any insights that begin to reconfigure his project.

I will argue that in his exploration of the phenomenon of primogeniture in relation to the transition from feudal society to the present-day economic system, Marx identifies a theoretical apparatus that can begin to address the problem of private property as capital, as both a quasi-subject and an authentic subject. Although Marx employs the term fetishism in the *Manuscripts*, he does not yet have a conception of fetishism in relation to commodities.<sup>67</sup> I will argue however that his discussion of primogeniture gives some intimations of his mature theory of fetishism and demonstrates that Marx is pressing towards a conception of fetishism in relation to commodities.

In the feudal form, private property already appears as a quasi-subject, “the domination of the earth as of an alien power over men” [EW, p.318]. For Marx, feudal property is land that has already been sold off. It is, “land which has been estranged from man and now confronts him in the shape of a handful of great lords” [EW, p.318]. Both serf and lord belong to the land. The serf is an “appurtenance” to the land, and the lord himself is inherited by the land through primogeniture: “It inherits him” [EW, p.318]. The origins of the rule of private property, argues Marx, are to be found,

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<sup>67</sup> Marx discusses the “fetishism of the old, external wealth” (Marx *Early Writings*, p.344).

and have their basis, in property in land. Marx equates both landed property and capital as different forms of private property.

The specific difference of the feudal form of landownership is that, “the lord at least *appears* to be king of the land” [EW, p.318]. The relationship between owner and land appears to be “based on something more intimate than mere *material* wealth” [EW, p.318]. The land acquires both the status and the name of the lord. It is individualized and becomes a person: “It appears as the inorganic body of the lord” [EW, p.318]. There is a blurring between the nobility and landed property. In the same way, argues Marx, landed property “does not appear directly as the rule of mere capital” [EW, p.318]. Those dependent on the landed property relate to it like a “fatherland”, and it is, suggests Marx, like a “narrow nationality” [EW, p.318]. This relationship is “therefore directly political, and even has an *agreeable aspect*” [EW, p.318].

Once however, “it is only a man's purse, and not his character or individuality, which ties him to the land”, the appearance that I have been describing is abolished [EW, p.319]. It is inevitable, suggests Marx, that landed property, as the basis of private property, “should be drawn entirely into the orbit of private property and become a commodity” [EW, p.319]. The rule of the property owner then appears as “the naked rule of private property, of capital” [EW, p.319]. And furthermore the relationship between property owner and worker is “reduced to the economic relationship of exploiter and exploited” [EW, p.319]. Thus the root of landed property, self-interest, is able to manifest itself in its “cynical form” [EW, p.319].

Immovable monopoly, argues Marx, becomes mobile and “restless monopoly, competition” [EW, p.319].<sup>68</sup> Landed property, under conditions of competition, and thus in the form of capital, now “manifests its domination both over the working class and over the property owners themselves,

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<sup>68</sup> Marx discusses the *division of landed property* and the distinction between the existence and the essence of monopoly. He introduces the concept of the “industrial sphere” (Marx *Early Writings*, p.319). In considering the abolition of private property in land, Marx raises the notion of association as applied to the land, and argues that equality is a tendency inherent in the division of land. Marx posits the concept of an “authentic, personal property for man” (Marx *Early Writings*, p.320). This section culminates with Marx’s assertion of the necessity of crisis and revolution (Marx *Early Writings*, p.321-322).



inasmuch as the laws of the movement of capital are either ruining or raising them” [EW, p.319]. Marx summarizes this transition thus: from the medieval phrase, “*nulle terre sans seigneur*”, to the modern saying, “*l’argent n’a pas de maître*” [EW, p.319].<sup>69</sup> The latter, Marx suggests “is an expression of the complete domination of dead matter over men” [EW, p.319].

Thus Marx traces the historical appearance of private property as a subject from the fetishism attached to feudal property to the boundary of something new, a fetishism of a modern form associated with private property as a commodity. Marx does not develop this insight further in the *Manuscripts*, and therefore it is important not to overstate this as a pre-figuration of Marx’s later theory. It is clear however that Marx has recognised the theoretical significance of fetishism, albeit here primarily in relation to the metal-money fetish.<sup>70</sup> As Marx points out later in the *Manuscripts*, fetishism demonstrates the “extent to which the solution of theoretical problems is a function of practice and is mediated through practice” [EW, p.364]. It is by examining the importance of real practical activity that Marx will begin to formulate the implicit difference between his position and that of Feuerbach in the *Manuscripts*. And it is in this sense that Marx later asserts in the *Theses* that the purpose is not simply to interpret, but to change the world.

In the *Manuscripts*, Marx formulates the impasse reached by philosophy. There is an “abstract hostility between sense and intellect” [EW, p.364], he says, and this hostility is inevitable for as long as “the human sense for nature, the human significance of nature and hence the *natural* sense of *man*, has not yet been produced by man’s own labour” [EW, p.364]. Thus the antinomies that are found in the system of estrangement, between idealism and materialism, humanism and naturalism, cannot be resolved without the transcendence that is being proposed by Marx. Present-day “popular consciousness”, he suggests, is incapable of comprehending the self-mediated being of nature and of man, since such a being contradicts “all the *palpable evidence* of practical life” [EW, p.356]. The

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<sup>69</sup> From ‘*No land without its master*’, to ‘*Money knows no master*’.

<sup>70</sup> This is perhaps not surprising as the concept of fetishism would have been a common currency in the intellectual milieu of the time (see Dimoulis, D and Milios, J “*Commodity Fetishism vs. Capital Fetishism*” *Historical Materialism* Vol. 12:3 (2004), p.3).

sense perception of this consciousness is predicated on a real sensuous existence that must be overcome.

How does this sensuous reality relate to abstract thought in the system of estrangement? The answer, for Marx, is different depending on the relation of the person to production. The worker has a “real, *practical attitude*” towards production, and thus the world appears as an activity of estrangement [EW, p.334]. By contrast, the non-worker has a “*theoretical attitude*” and is confronted by a situation of estrangement [EW, p.334]. Marx had intended to investigate these relationships further in the *Manuscripts*, but the text breaks off at this point.<sup>71</sup> In the latter part of the *Manuscripts*, Marx sees the transcendence of the system of estrangement as overcoming this schism between sense and intellect. As I have indicated above, Marx argues that, in the supersession of private property, the senses must become “*theoreticians in their immediate praxis*” [EW, p.352].

## **ii) Capital as a Social Relation and the Positive Supersession of Private Property**

The relation of private property, Marx argues, contains latently the relationship of labour to capital: “the relation of private property as *labour*, the relation of private property as *capital* and the *connection* of these two” [EW, p.336]. Marx suggests that there is a necessary “movement through which these parts have to pass”, in order for the relationship of private property to fully express itself [EW, p.341]. However whilst private property “appears as the basis and cause of alienated labour, it is in fact its consequence” [EW, p.332]. The relationship of the worker to production is for Marx the “essential relationship of labour”, whereas the relationship of the non-worker to the object of production is “only a consequence of this first relationship” [EW, p.336].

Marx analyses the historical development of industry and landed property out of the feudal relations that previously characterised society. In doing so he argues that both landed property and industry are historical moments of the more fundamental category of private property. Marx attempts to reveal the *inner connections* of this historical development in the “real *energy* and *movement* of

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<sup>71</sup> Although Marx does examine and conceptualise the conflict between the abstractions capital and labour in the *Second Manuscript*, as I will discuss in the next section (Marx *Early Writings*, p.341).

private property” [EW, p.341]. It can be argued that by removing a sharp demarcation between feudal ownership and landed property, and between landed property and industry, Marx makes it difficult to discern the specificity of modern capitalist relations of production. This may however be placing demands upon the *Manuscripts* that it is not able, or does not intend, to provide.

One conclusion that can be drawn from the irreducibility of the relation between private property as a subject and labour, to that of estranged labour with itself, is that this relationship is a social relation that requires the full exposition of both poles of the relationship, capital and labour. The structure of these poles is not homologous and therefore the inner relationship between them must be investigated. In the *Manuscripts*, Marx attempts to find the essential connections between the terms that make up the “system of estrangement” [EW, p.323]. In his later work, Marx research is ordered by the recognition of the fundamental priority of the relationship between capital and labour.<sup>72</sup> Marx’s dedication to examining the connections between the “system of estrangement” and the “money system” marks his commitment to systematically examining what can be extracted from the critique of political economy [EW, p.323].

The *Manuscripts* give a sense of the progressive role of industry that Marx goes on to develop in his later writings. As indicated above, Marx attempts to theorise the relationship between capital and labour, to conceptualise their movement using the Hegelian forms of opposition and mediation. Whilst this “hostile reciprocal opposition” is developed only very schematically in the *Manuscripts*, these passages anticipate themes that will be developed in writings such as the *Poverty of Philosophy*, and then re-affirmed by Marx in the light of his later research in *Capital* [EW, p.341].

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<sup>72</sup> Marx is conscious of the historical formation of the opposition between capital and labour (Marx *Early Writings*, p.337). He also identifies the fundamental nature of the economic relationship of exploiter and exploited (Marx *Early Writings*, p.319). In the *Manuscripts*, Marx does not however identify the human essence as the ensemble of social relations, as he was to do in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, as this would presuppose a set of concepts that he has not yet developed.

### iii) Rising above Political Economy = Communism?

In the *Manuscripts*, Marx poses two different, but perhaps commensurable, projects: that of rising above political economy and that of communism understood as the positive transcendence of private property. I will ask whether these two projects can be understood as being equivalent to each other. In the former, there is a movement to develop an immanent critique based on political economy's premises, language and its laws. The continuity of this method with Marx's later writings, such as *Capital*, might be presumed from its subtitle: *A Critique of Political Economy*.

Although political economy tends to legitimise the class rule of the bourgeoisie, Marx recognises that it has "formulated the laws of estranged labour" [EW, p.332]. In the *Manuscripts*, Marx is critical of political economy, but accepts much of its content. He directs his criticism primarily at its philosophical pre-suppositions: for reducing man to the individual, stripped of all determinateness, and classified as a capitalist or a worker [EW, p.369]. However Marx also recognises that it is only through engaging with the achievements of political economy that a scientific study of the division of labour can be mounted. It is necessary to discover therefore how the project of rising above political economy is related to communism, the latter project in this equation.

For Marx, estranged labour, as human activity within alienation, cannot be transcended merely in thought alone. The practical and concrete supersession of estranged labour requires the raising to consciousness of the social nature of labour. This social nature is expressed economically as the division of labour. Although raising the social nature of labour to consciousness is not an act of supersession in itself, it is a positive advance to have attained this consciousness, and a necessary part of the overall process of supersession [EW, p.365].

Marx's critique of crude communism follows the form of a Hegelian dialectical process. It can be seen, argues Marx, "how the history of *industry* and the *objective* existence of industry as it has developed is the *open* book of the essential powers of man" [EW, p.355]. Through this open book it becomes possible to conceive of a materialist conception of the history of production. Thus Marx

claims that, “*Industry* is the *real* historical relationship of nature, and hence of natural science, to man” [EW, p.355]. In contending that man's essential powers have an “exoteric revelation”, I would argue that Marx is driving beyond the limits of his Feuerbachian influences to embark upon a new and distinctive project [EW, p.355].

Marx states that, “The consideration of the *division of labour* and *exchange* is of the highest interest, because they are the *perceptibly alienated* expressions of human *activity* and *essential powers* as *species-activity* and *species-powers*” [EW, p.374]. Marx has posed the unresolved problem of examining these ‘perceptibly alienated expressions’. Whilst remaining conscious of the limitations of the conception of species-being that he inherits in the *Manuscripts*, I would argue that this can be considered an anticipation of Marx’s later investigation of the social relations of production.

Thus Marx develops an, albeit somewhat abstract, understanding of communism in the *Manuscripts*, as the positive transcendence of private property. Communism, as the act of its own creation and of its thinking consciousness, is a step beyond Feuerbach’s unity of man and nature inasmuch as it engages with Marx’s new conception of estranged labour and presents a strategy for its positive transcendence. It declares that the “*genuine* resolution” of the conflict between man and nature cannot take place in thought alone [EW, p.348]. Communism, Marx declares famously, is “the solution to the riddle of history and knows itself to be the solution” [EW, p.348].

Although in the early stages of his engagement with political economy, I would argue that this investigation of the *Manuscripts* demonstrates that Marx was moving towards a new project. This project sought to synthesise communism as a real movement with a critique of political economy. The task of communism is to practically abolish the present-day system by organising the forces that are emerging within it. In this historical movement to supersede private property, Marx makes the proposal for “*real* communist activity” [EW, p.365]. Whilst his suggestion simply that “history will give rise to such activity”, is clearly insufficient, it is nevertheless true that Marx has made a “real

advance” in having gained “at the outset an awareness of the limits as well as the goal of this historical movement” and being “in a position to see beyond it” [EW, p.365].

#### 4) Conclusion: The Initiation of a New Project

Marx opens the *Manuscripts* with a *Preface* in which he excoriates the “critical theologians”, such as Bruno Bauer, who rebel against Hegelian philosophy in a negative and “cowardly” manner and systematically fail to go “to the root of the matter” [EW, p.282].<sup>73</sup> It is my contention that the *Manuscripts* represent Marx’s first systematic exploration of a path leading beyond this “negative dissolution of philosophy, i.e. its process of decay” [EW, p.282].<sup>74</sup>

Whilst the *Manuscripts* themselves have no conclusion, in this chapter I have tried to consider the development of Marx’s project internal to them. I structured my approach to the problem by addressing the question of how many conceptions of subjectivity can be found in the *Manuscripts*. In order to investigate this I proposed and analysed two conceptions: the subjectivity of private property and the subjectivity of labour.

Although I concluded that there were indeed two distinct conceptions of subjectivity within the *Manuscripts*, I also examined the synthesising aspect of Marx’s project. I argued that his incomplete attempt to reduce these two conceptions to a single unified conception through the theory of estranged labour raises the possibility of private property as a quasi-subject. Assessing the evidence that private property exists as both an authentic and a quasi-subject in the *Manuscripts*, I examined Marx’s attempts to trace the historical appearance of private property as a subject, and to identify a modern form of fetishism associated with private property as a commodity. I have argued that this terrain of investigation pre-figures his later theorisation of the problem of commodity fetishism.

In expressing the problem in the form of a unity of two differentiated conceptions of subjectivity, Marx initiates a project in which the challenge of investigating the full complexity of these two aspects and their interrelationship is posed. The difficulties involved in this project are manifested in

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<sup>73</sup> Marx announces his intention to settle accounts with these critical theologians, a promise that he would later fulfil in *The Holy Family* (Marx *Early Writings*, p.282).

<sup>74</sup> Although it is important to note that Marx also makes important discoveries in other writings at this time, such as his *Excerpts from James Mill’s Elements of Political Economy* (Marx *Early Writings*, p.259).

the tension between Marx's use of a theoretical framework associated with the concept of species-being and the elevation of labour to a central position within his system.

I argue that this tension is a productive one in Marx's investigations, and gives rise to further developments in his critique of political economy. Following Arthur, I have examined the relationship between his critical concepts of 'abstraction' and 'estrangement', in which the notion of suffering plays an important mediating role. I claim that the *Manuscripts* contain the anticipation of several arguments that are developed in Marx's later writings, e.g. the historically progressive aspect of capitalism, and the relationship between capital and labour. Whilst not yet having critically addressed the question of value in the *Manuscripts*, Marx's identification of "one-sided, abstract labour" with the proletariat, the degradation of work and the reduction of the worker to a machine are insights that are later integrated into the, albeit very different, analytical space of writings such as *Capital* [EW, p.288].

The duality of the structure my argument has also raised questions about the ambiguous relationship between subjects and theories in the *Manuscripts*. I investigated the dynamic nature of political economy and its relationship to the human and non-human aspects of the subjectivity of private property, or its status as "modern industry as self" [EW, p.341]. I have argued that Marx recognises the necessity of the revolutionary movement finding its empirical and theoretical basis in the "movement of *private property*", the economy [EW, p.348]. At this stage in his development however, Marx has not formulated a positive critique of much of the content of political economy.

Whilst Marx refers to the class struggle in the *Manuscripts*, notably in the opening passages, he tends to conceive the conflict theoretically as a clash between two abstractions, capital and labour. This raises the question of what framework is required for the elaboration of concrete class subjects, such as the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. The latter concept is noticeably absent in the



*Manuscripts*.<sup>75</sup> In the *Manuscripts*, Marx identifies the political economist as the “scientific exposition and existence” of empirical businessmen [EW, p.360]. This identification of theorist and practitioner opens a discussion about the role of the intellectual that I will examine further in a later chapter on the work of Antonio Gramsci.

The *Manuscripts* are also the site of Marx’s first substantive reflections on his conception of communism. Marx structures his exposition of communism as a Hegelian critique of crude communism that rises through successive levels. I argue that Marx proposes synthesising the conception of rising above political economy with the project of self-emancipation that is contained in his conception of communism. I have argued that there is a crucial link between the continuing development of his critique of political economy, analysing the economy in its “real determinateness” [EW, p.369], and his desire for the concrete elaboration of a “real communist activity” [EW, p.365].

It is in this sense that I argue for the significance of Marx’s announcement that the history of industry is the “open book” of man’s essential powers [EW, p.354]. Despite the unchanged form of Marx’s conceptual framework of species-being, I have argued that the task of studying of the “perceptibly alienated expressions” of human activity places him at the threshold of a new content: conceptualising the necessity of analysing the social relations of production [EW, p.374].

The problem of two subjectivities thus initiates a theme that extends from Marx’s *Manuscripts* through to his later writings, involving the closely related notions of alienation and commodity fetishism. The problem is expressed in the *Manuscripts* through the conceptual framework of alienated labour. Here Marx attempts to transform the movements of private property into the relationship of alienated labour with human development. I have argued that Marx’s initial investigations of political economy lead him into the dilemma of regarding the subjectivity of private property as a superposition of quasi-subjectivity and authentic subjectivity. This begins to test the

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<sup>75</sup> Although it is true that Marx, in quoting from Schulz, refers occasionally to the “class of capitalists” or the “masters of labour” (Marx *Early Writings*, p.304).

limits of the conceptual apparatus of alienated labour in the *Manuscripts* and presses in the direction of a new project.

This problem is reformulated and developed in a more determinate form by Marx in *Capital*. On the one hand, by elaborating a coherent labour theory of value, Marx is able to advance a critique of political economy that does not uncritically accept its concepts, such as the iron law of wages. On the other hand, this critique does not reject them solely on the basis of an overarching philosophical principle, the alienation of human nature, alone. This advance is expressed in Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845), where he conceives of human essence as "the ensemble of the social relations" [EW, p.423]. Marx's later writings in *Capital* undertake a root-and-branch investigation of the concepts of political economy, their immanent critique.

Nevertheless, in the next chapter I will seek to demonstrate that the issue of the authentic or quasi-subjectivity of private property as capital is a theme which continues to underlie his later writings. As we will see, the framework of fetishism leads some to suggest that Marx treats capital as the subject of *Capital*. Against this however, others continue to assert that the standpoint of labour, critically understood, continues to be the vantage point from which Marx's critique in *Capital* is mounted.

I have sought to demonstrate in this chapter that the pre-condition of this later work was the formulation of a problem in which Marx recognised that it was necessary for the subjectivity of private property and the subjectivity of labour to be given full expression. This produced an internal tension in his theory of alienated labour, as it attempted to straddle the apparently authentic subjectivity of private property and to reveal its basis in the subjectivity of labour. In *Capital*, as I will demonstrate, Marx addresses this question by exploring the mysterious phenomenon that he calls the fetishism of the commodity.

# The Problem of Subjectivity in Marx's *Capital*

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## 1) Introduction

### a) *Capital* and the Theory of Revolution

In *Capital*, Marx notes that the “learned dispute” between industrial capitalists and wealth landowners falls silent “in the face of the July Revolution”.<sup>1</sup> He describes how the urban proletariat sound the “tocsin of revolution at Lyons”, and how the rural proletariat begin to set fire to “farmyards and hayricks in England” [C, I, p.743].<sup>2</sup> For Marx, the revolutions of 1848 meant that the claims of the proletariat were “no longer to be ignored” [C, I, p.98]. However the presence of revolution in *Capital* does not necessarily imply that there is an explicitly developed *theory* of revolution in *Capital*.

Although Marx considers the “peculiar advantages” of the “French revolutionary method” in his chapter on *The Working Day*, the absence of the character of the working class revolutionary is noticeable in the text [C, I, p.414]. As I will show, the heroic figures of the class struggle depicted in *Capital* are more often the factory inspectors, who appear as a ‘knowing subject’, attempting to effect social change. At the same time however, Marx envisages the passing of the factory laws as the first staging post in the intervention of the working class movement, and the “preliminary condition” of its further emancipation [C, I, p.415].

Thus Marx is very much committed to a concrete analysis of the effects of working class struggle on the functioning of capitalism. In this chapter, I will attempt to investigate whether *Capital* allows an understanding of the means by which the proletariat – as victims of capital integrated into its monstrous machinery – might take control of this organism and overthrow it. Karl Korsch argues that “the revolutionary will is latent, yet present, in every sentence of Marx’s work”.<sup>3</sup> Yet, at the same time, it could be argued that the defeat of the revolutions of 1848 left a lasting imprint on the

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<sup>1</sup> Marx, K *Capital* Vol. I (London, Penguin, 1990 [1976]), p.743 – Henceforth referenced in the text as [C, I, p.743], i.e. [*Capital*, Vol. I, p.743].

<sup>2</sup> The spread of socialist ideas, he suggests, gives rise to the “hour of vulgar economics” (Marx *Capital*, I, p.744).

<sup>3</sup> Korsch, K *Marxism and Philosophy* (New York; London: Monthly Review, 1970), p.60

development of Marx's theory. It could therefore be asked whether there are problems relating to the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism that cannot be discussed fully on the terrain of a critique of political economy.

## **b) Class Struggle and Subjectivity**

In this chapter, I will investigate the possible tension between Marx's aim to study the laws of development of the capitalist system of production and the notion that "revolutions are not made by laws" but are the result of a process of class struggle [C, I, p.915]. I will begin by asking questions about Marx's methodology in *Capital* and the relationship it presents between individuals, classes and social structures. In particular this will lead me to interrogate Marx's conception of personification, and to examine whether Louis Althusser's interpretation of this concept excludes important dimensions, such as the moment of lived experience.

By constructing a typology of subjectivity in *Capital*, I will argue that it contains the elements of a sophisticated understanding of the agency of different types of actors within capitalist society. My discussion of Marx's chapter on the working day examines his understanding of the relationship between class struggle and the functioning of capitalism, and highlights the interaction between the working class movement and the factory inspectors in creating the "first conscious and methodical reaction of society" against the outrages of the capitalist production process [C, I, p.610]. This will lead me to explore the connections between knowledge, the 'knowing subject', and the process of class struggle. Finally, I will evaluate the argument that capital is the subject of *Capital* developed by Moishe Postone in his work *Time, Labour and Social Domination*.<sup>4</sup> Against Postone's critique and abandonment of the standpoint of labour, I will defend a position that retains this standpoint, but adopts it critically. I will argue that it is possible to read *Capital* as both a theory of determinate forms of social mediation and as a class-based analysis.

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<sup>4</sup> Postone, M *Time, Labour and Social Domination* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993)

### c) Alienation and the Fetishism of Commodities

Marx's *Capital* deploys a conception of commodity fetishism, which addresses the theme of subjectivity in relation to capital and the commodity-form. In the previous chapter, I argued that this conception is pre-figured in and emerges from the internal tensions of his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. The *Manuscripts* appear to be suspended by a dilemma in which private property is seen as both a quasi-subject and an authentic subject.

In *Capital*, Marx has made a crucial advance in addressing this problem by developing a coherent conception of the labour theory of value, and in particular of the dual nature of labour contained in commodities. Marx considers the movement of capital as that in which value is the subject, the "independently acting agent" [C, I, p.255 fn.\*]. In those products of labour that take on a commodity-form, this value arises as the socially objective form of the equality of labour. The "mysterious character" of the commodity-form consists in the fact that "the social characteristics of men's own labour" is reflected by the commodity as its "socio-natural properties" [C, I, p.164-5].

Marx's formulation of the fetishism of the commodity and its secret is central to his resolution of the apparently intractable dilemma that we find in the *Manuscripts*. Marx confronts the fact that the "semblance of objectivity possessed by the social characteristics of labour" is not simply an illusion, but has a social reality [C, I, p.163]. Although the intellectual discovery of the mechanism of commodity fetishism may raise the question of overcoming it, this discovery alone is not sufficient to overcome its effects. In fact, Marx argues that the more "predominant" the commodity-form becomes in production, the more difficult it becomes to penetrate its fetish character [C, I, p.176].

Whilst an understanding of commodity fetishism represents an advance beyond the conceptual framework of alienation in the *Manuscripts*, a conception of alienation continues to be present throughout *Capital*. Thus, Marx argues in Volume I that "the worker himself constantly produces objective wealth, in the form of capital, an alien power that dominates and exploits him" [C, I,

p.716].<sup>5</sup> Some thinkers, such as István Mészáros, hold that an understanding of alienation lays down the “foundation of the Marxian system”.<sup>6</sup> Others such as Allen Wood contend that in *Capital* alienation no longer plays an explanatory function, but merely a “descriptive or diagnostic one”.<sup>7</sup>

It is certainly true that Marx addresses different types of questions in his earlier writings. In the *Manuscripts*, he contends that the forms of alienation in the particular spheres of life (religion, law, morality, etc.) are particular modes of its general form in production.<sup>8</sup> In *Capital*, Marx’s discussion of the fetishism of commodities is quite closely delimited to its functioning as an economic mechanism. Of course, this does not exclude one from arguing that its effects are manifested more generally in different spheres of social life (law, ethics, politics, etc.). It would be necessary however, to give an account of this. In the next chapter we will see how Georg Lukács develops the logic of commodity fetishism into all spheres of capitalist society with his theory of reification.

It is possible to argue that Marx would have developed a more significant role for the theme of alienation in his 6-volume plan for *Capital*, which included a proposed book on wage-labour that was never written. Michael Lebowitz suggests that the subjective side of labour in the capital relation is not fully explored in the published volumes of *Capital*.<sup>9</sup> For Lebowitz, *Capital* contains a critical silence that “permits the appearance that, for the scientist, the only subject (if there is one at all) is capital”.<sup>10</sup>

On this basis, Lebowitz argues that a full theory of wage-labour pre-supposes a dynamic understanding of the development of human needs. In this chapter I will investigate Lebowitz’s arguments alongside my own assertion that, in *Capital*, the subjectivity of the proletariat is given a

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<sup>5</sup> Or elsewhere, “Just as man is governed, in religion, by the products of his own brain, so, in capitalist production, he is governed by the products of his own hand” (Marx *Capital* Vol. I, p.772).

<sup>6</sup> Mészáros, I *Marx’s Theory of Alienation* (Delhi: Aakar, 2006), p.93

<sup>7</sup> Wood, A *Karl Marx*, 2nd Edition (New York; London: Routledge, 2004), p.44

<sup>8</sup> Marx, K *Early Writings* (London: Penguin, 1992 [1975]), p.349

<sup>9</sup> Lebowitz, M *Beyond Capital* (London: Macmillan, 2003 [1992])

<sup>10</sup> Lebowitz *Beyond Capital*, p.25

more determinate form through his investigation of the concrete forms of working class self-activity in his chapter on *The Working Day*.

At the same time, Marx attempts to mediate between the abstraction of capital and the more determinate level of classes and individual persons. Thus, Marx denotes the capitalist as the conscious bearer of the movement of capital [C, I, p.254]. In this chapter, I will also examine how we might interpret this process of personification. We will see that the concrete elaboration of Marx's notion of class becomes possible only once the overall process of capitalist production is developed, in which questions are raised about the competition between capitals, and about other collective actors such as the state.



## 2) Real Human Actors, Social Roles and Social Structures

This section will analyse Marx's project and method in *Capital*, making the claim that an adequate account of his work shows it to transcend the well-worn opposition between structure and agency. Marx's *Capital* is a work that investigates the dynamics of the structural forms of the capitalist mode of production in meticulous detail. His presentation proceeds from the simple commodity to determine an increasingly rich body of concepts that "tend towards the concrete as they are articulated in the totality".<sup>11</sup> The structural aspect of Marx's analysis, I would argue, is inseparable from his theory of classes, within which it is possible to determine certain social roles, such as the capitalist and the worker. At the same time, for Marx, definite human beings are both the premise and the result of his investigations.

The voices of real human actors appear in *Capital*. They are drawn from all segments of the capitalist class and their representatives, from landowners, parliamentarians, and factory inspectors, and even from the workers who appear in parliamentary reports; the *Blue Books* from which Marx often quotes. They consist of complaints by capitalists about a threat to their profits, or the interventions of the factory inspectors over transgressions of the factory laws by mill owners, or indeed statements by workers about the conditions in which they are forced to live:

*J. Murray, 12 years of age says: "I turn jigger and run moulds. I come at 6. Sometimes I come at 4. I worked all night last night, till six o'clock this morning. I have not been to bed since the night before last [...] I get 3 shillings and sixpence. I do not get any more for working at night." [C, I, p.354]*

In constructing his analysis of the capitalist mode of production, Marx presents evidence in the form of the words and the actions of the human actors who populate it (or, it might be said, of which it is constituted). Marx sees it as necessary to relate both the details of these actors' deeds and present indications of their consciousness through their words. For Marx, the reflexive nature of human

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<sup>11</sup> Bensäid, *D Marx for our Times* (London: Verso, 2002), p.97

activity is its distinctive feature. He argues that the first element of the human labour process is “purposeful activity” [C, I, p.284]. This presents its own problematic in terms of interpreting the intentions of actors and analysing their actual effects. An added level of analysis is required in order to contrast the reality of social existence and human consciousness of it.

Political economy can be seen as an expression of the consciousness of the bourgeoisie. *Capital* is explicitly a critique of political economy, and it therefore has a very clear immanent aspect. In defining his own position, Marx is very concerned with both reconstructing the historical achievements and transcending the limits of classical political economy. He uses the statements of its greater (and lesser) proponents to illustrate the internal logic of their points of view. Although Marx understood that there were certain ideas appropriate to the standpoint of the bourgeoisie, he ascribes a real significance to the differences between vulgar and classical political economy.

For Marx, the vulgar economist “does nothing more than translate the peculiar notions of the competition-enslaved capitalist into an ostensibly more theoretical and generalized language”.<sup>12</sup> He essentially trades only in the phenomena and the surface appearances of capitalism. The classical political economists, such as Smith and Ricardo (from whom Marx quotes extensively), had the advantage of theorising from general principles, by which they sought to understand value and the ‘laws of motion’ of society. However, in the last instance, even the classical political economists proved incapable of adequately explaining the phenomena they observed, such as the tendency of the rate of profit to fall and the origin of crises.

Whether Marx aimed at and achieved a move beyond political economy in *Capital* has been a matter of some debate. E.P. Thompson derided political economy for lacking the essential terms for comprehending societies and histories. He located Marx's problems in his move from political

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<sup>12</sup> Marx, K *Capital* Vol. III (London: Penguin, 1991 [1981]), p.338 – Henceforth referenced in the text as [C, III, p.338]

economy to a theory of capitalism, “that is, the whole society, conceived of as an ‘organic system’”.<sup>13</sup> For Thompson, this “whole society comprises many activities and relations (of power, of consciousness, sexual, cultural, normative) which are not the concern of Political Economy, which have been *defined out of* Political Economy, and for which it has no terms.”<sup>14</sup>

It seems that, for Thompson, *Capital* contains an inherent tension between its structural aspect and the instances of ‘history’ “inscribed within it.”<sup>15</sup> I will inquire whether this opposition is really a point of irreconcilability, or is in fact a false dichotomy, and investigate the extent to which Marx is successful in transcending this apparent contradiction. In his book, *Marxism and Ideology*, Jorge Larrain suggests that the polarisation of the problem along this opposition does not do justice to or exhaust its richness.<sup>16</sup> However, it is certainly one of the fault-lines along which debate was waged amongst the different strands of Western Marxism in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, with Thompson and Louis Althusser at its poles.

## a) Marx’s Project and Methodology

Defining Marx’s project in *Capital* can be approached only summarily in this study, if it is to focus on the central theme of subjectivity. However, it could be argued that, in *Capital*, Marx attempts to transcend the political, economic and sociological ‘facts’ that he has gleaned (many from the parliamentary *Blue Books*) to achieve a knowledge of the overall historical tendencies that shape society under capitalism and to create a theory capable of explaining the experiences of those who live within it. On the one hand, Leszek Kolakowski has suggested that *Capital* is the “culmination of a series of works in which Marx applied his basic theory of de-humanization to the phenomena of economic production and exchange”.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, Althusser’s critique of “theoretical humanism” accuses this type of interpretation of projecting the “shadow” of the mature Marx onto

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Lebowitz *Beyond Capital*, p.24 – (Thompson, E.P. *The Poverty of Theory* (London: Merlin, 1995), p.84)

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Lebowitz *Beyond Capital*, p.24 – (Thompson *The Poverty of Theory*, p.84)

<sup>15</sup> Thompson *The Poverty of Theory*, p.77

<sup>16</sup> Larrain, J *Marxism and Ideology* (Aldershot: Gregg Revivals, 1991), p.2

<sup>17</sup> Kolakowski, L *Main Currents of Marxism* Vol. I (Oxford: OUP, 1978), p.263

the young Marx, and of “constructing a pseudo-theory of the history of philosophy in the ‘future anterior’”.<sup>18</sup> For Althusser, such an “analytico-teleological method” is “constantly judging”, but “cannot make the slightest judgement of any totality unlike itself”.<sup>19</sup>

Althusser thus questions notions of agency that are based on a conception of a human essence as the origin of a process in which this essence is exteriorised and lost. Althusser’s critique of ‘theoretical humanism’ is one that Kolakowski and others need to address. However, I will discuss later whether his proposed ‘theoretical anti-humanism’ is an adequate tool to address the dimension of lived experience in the development of the Marxist project.

Defining the methodology pursued by Marx in *Capital* is a matter of quite some contention. Famously, Georg Lukács claimed that, in Marxism, “orthodoxy refers exclusively to method”.<sup>20</sup> As Colin Barker points out, Marx’s method “has a political significance”.<sup>21</sup> Marx states in the *Preface to the First Edition of Capital* that his tool of investigation in the analysis of economic forms is not the “microscope” or “chemical reagents”, but the power of abstraction [C, I, p.90]. For Marx, a scientific method is necessary because the inner connections of the capitalist mode of production are not immediately visible in its outward appearance. Thus Marx attempts to delve beneath capitalism’s objective appearance to “reveal the economic laws of motion of modern society”, and from this conceptual apparatus to reconstruct the complex appearances that confront its inhabitants [C, I, p.92].

Marx thus distinguishes his method of presentation from the form of his inquiry:

*The latter has to appropriate the material in detail, to analyse its different forms of development and to track down their inner connection. Only after this work has been done can the real movement be appropriately presented. If this is done successfully, if the life of*

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<sup>18</sup> Althusser, L *For Marx* (London: Verso, 1996), p.54

<sup>19</sup> Althusser *For Marx*, p.60

<sup>20</sup> Lukács, G *History and Class Consciousness* (London: Merlin, 1971), p.1

<sup>21</sup> Barker, C “*Capital and Revolutionary Practice*” *Historical Materialism* Vol. 14:2 (2006), p.59

*the subject-matter is now reflected back in the ideas, then it may appear as if we have before us an a priori construction.* [C, I, p.102]

Marx is explicit in stating that his method is dialectical, but that “in its foundations, [it is] not only different from the Hegelian [dialectic], but exactly opposite to it” [C, I, p.102]. Despite indicating an intention to write a summary of this method, Marx unfortunately never gave a succinct statement of the specificity of the ‘inversion’ that the Hegelian dialectic undergoes in his hands. One of the strengths of *Capital*, but also one of the difficulties of interpreting it, is that, for the most part, we are left to infer Marx's method implicitly from the text. This goes some way towards explaining the profusion and diversity of interpretations that have followed in its wake.<sup>22</sup>

Much debate on the understanding of Marx's method has revolved around the development of Marx's project from his earliest economic writings, much influenced by Ricardo and Smith, to the *Manuscripts of 1857/8*, the 'first draft' of *Capital*, known as the *Grundrisse*, to the final form of *Capital* as we have it in its published editions. One pole of this debate centres on whether the marked influence of Hegel's thought in the *Grundrisse*, in particular his *Logic*, continues to be present in Marx's later drafts and indeed in the final published edition(s) of *Capital*. Thus Roberto Fineschi argues that “Marx's concept of ‘capital’ is linked to Hegel's concept of ‘concept’, or with that of ‘spirit’”.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, Enrique Dussel tries to show that it is from a certain Hegelian ‘philosophical paradigm’ that “the ‘rational nucleus’ of Hegel is inverted (but used nonetheless in its entirety) ... [and] from which Marx began to develop the economic concept of capital”.<sup>24</sup>

Kolakowski argues that, from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844 through successive ‘critiques’ up to *Capital*, Marx is developing more and more elaborate versions of a single

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<sup>22</sup> As Marx himself recognised in his *Postface to the Second Edition* (*Marx Capital*, I, p.99).

<sup>23</sup> Fineschi, R “*The four levels of abstraction of Marx's concept of ‘capital’*” (Paper, 2007), p.2 – Source: [http://www.marx-gesellschaft.de/Texte/1005\\_Fineschi\\_Four%20Levels\\_Abstraction.pdf](http://www.marx-gesellschaft.de/Texte/1005_Fineschi_Four%20Levels_Abstraction.pdf) [accessed 18 Mar 2013]

<sup>24</sup> Dussel, E “*The Four Drafts of Capital: Toward a New Interpretation of the Dialectical Thought of Marx*” *Rethinking Marxism* Vol. 13, Number 1 (Spring 2001), p.13

project.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, Althusser famously argues that there is an “unequivocal ‘*epistemological break*’” between the ‘pre-scientific’ philosophical concerns of the young Marx, prior to 1845, and his mature ‘scientific’ work.<sup>26</sup> Althusser’s argument thus posits a period of transition, in which Marx’s mature ‘philosophy’ had been formed, but was not yet manifested in his works in a “positive and consummated form”.<sup>27</sup> However, the theory of an ‘*epistemological break*’ encounters a problem of periodization in the fact that Marx’s *Grundrisse* was written after this transitional period. More recent *Capital* scholarship, such as Dussel’s, attempts to make use of texts such as the *Grundrisse* to establish the development of Marx’s relationship to Hegel.

We can investigate the reasons why this relationship is such a point of contention between differing interpretations of Marx’s *Capital*. We might note that those thinkers who highlight the influence of Hegel often argue for a conception of subjectivity in *Capital* that allows for and emphasises the self-emancipatory potential of the working class. This is perhaps not true in all cases, as we shall see later. Others, such as Althusser, see the development of the ‘scientific’ principles of Marxism as essential for understanding the predicament of the working class under capitalism. In response, it could be suggested that there is a necessary tension between an activist conception of Marxism, the development of a theory of praxis, and the development of Marxism as a ‘science’.

In his famous study, *The Making of Marx’s Capital*, Roman Rosdolsky argues that there is a methodological continuity between the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, in particular in Marx’s conception of ‘capital in general’. For Michael Heinrich, this concept is not simply a presentational device. He argues that distinguishing between ‘capital in general’ and ‘competition between many capitals’ constitutes a “methodological approach reflecting a particular view of the structure of bourgeois society”.<sup>28</sup> According to Fineschi, Rosdolsky’s argument presents ‘capital in general’ as a kind of “methodological ladder”; useful for establishing a conceptual framework to demonstrate “the

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<sup>25</sup> Kolakowski *Main Currents*, I, p.263

<sup>26</sup> Althusser *For Marx*, p.33

<sup>27</sup> Althusser *For Marx*, p.34

<sup>28</sup> Heinrich, M “*Capital in General and the structure of Marx’s Capital*” *Capital & Class* 38 (Summer 1989), p.64

central role of industrial capital”, but unnecessary once “the real exposition developed to the more concrete levels of competition and credit”.<sup>29</sup>

Heinrich argues that Marx's breakthrough in understanding “that the laws of the inner nature of capital are merely realised in the actual movement of individual capitals”, meant that the distinction between ‘capital in general’ and ‘many capitals’ was no longer sufficient.<sup>30</sup> The development of *Capital* through its various drafts then became an attempt to find the appropriate categories and structure to conceptualise this realisation. We might ask whether this implies that the influence of Hegel's dialectical thought in the *Grundrisse* was diminished in *Capital* itself. On the contrary, Fineschi argues that, if Marx had initially attempted to “apply Hegel’s scheme to a given matter to put it [in] order”, he found later that the “theory of capital could be worked out only following its own inner logic”.<sup>31</sup> For this reason, Fineschi argues that the final structure of *Capital* is “more dialectic[al] and consistent than the original one”.<sup>32</sup>

We cannot here make a comprehensive investigation of this apparently new dialectical method developed in *Capital*. One understanding of this dialectic stems from Lukács's claim that the ‘category of totality’ is the “essence of the method which Marx appropriated from Hegel”.<sup>33</sup> Dussel attempts to refine this formulation by suggesting that Marx was a Hegelian in the “use of the ontological dialectic of ‘Totality’”, but, that he “infused in that ‘Totality’ a ‘novelty’ that always comes to capital ‘from outside’ from the creative transcendentality of ‘living labor’”.<sup>34</sup> We should therefore be sensitive to the implications of relative emphases on categories such as ‘totality’ and ‘exteriority’, as disputes over conceptions of methodology and their differences are also proxies, or the basis, for debates at a more concrete level.

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<sup>29</sup> Fineschi “*The four levels of abstraction*”, p.2

<sup>30</sup> Heinrich “*Capital in General*”, p.65

<sup>31</sup> Fineschi “*The four levels of abstraction*”, p.23

<sup>32</sup> Fineschi “*The four levels of abstraction*”, p.23

<sup>33</sup> Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.27

<sup>34</sup> Dussel “*The Four Drafts of Capital*”, p.22

## b) Individuals, Classes and Structures

Although individuals may present themselves in an atomised way under capitalism, for Marx, it is not sufficient to investigate them in this manner. Whilst human actors make history, they are the products of that history as well. Individuals can only be understood if that knowledge is also connected to an understanding of society as a whole. For Marx, society is not a 'solid crystal', but an "organism capable of change, and constantly engaged in the process of change" [C, I, p.93]. In this conception, we might see human actors as part of a connected, organic system, and, by virtue of their relations, simultaneously acquiring capacities and being constrained.

At the same time, the activities of these human actors create social structures with dynamic properties. Paul Blackledge quotes Alasdair MacIntyre's argument that "while [Karl] Popper 'is right to stress that there is no history and no society which is not the history or society of concrete individuals', it is equally true that 'there are no individuals who exist apart from their history or apart from their society'".<sup>35</sup> Blackledge prefers MacIntyre's insistence that the "characterisation of individuals and classes has to go together. Essentially these are not two separate tasks".<sup>36</sup> Thus we are asking whether, in *Capital*, Marx has constructed an analysis capable of mediating between the level of class analysis and that of the individual.

It can be argued that the analytical structure of *Capital* is its most important aspect. Rather than being concerned with conscious human activities, we might then look behind these for their unstated presuppositions. Steven Smith contends that the school of structuralism is defined by its "concern with unconscious structures", which "silently [condition] intentional human thinking".<sup>37</sup> For Althusser, this leads to a conception of history as 'a process without a subject', or, put in another way, to the idea that the "true 'subjects' of history are no longer individual human actors who form themselves into classes, but the *social relations* of production which determine the places and

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<sup>35</sup> Blackledge, P *Reflections on the Marxist theory of History* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2006), p.186

<sup>36</sup> Blackledge *Reflections*, p.186

<sup>37</sup> Smith, S *Reading Althusser* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984), p.10



functions that they occupy”.<sup>38</sup> For Althusser, ‘social relations’ are the raw materials of a scientific Marxist political practice tasked with transforming them into new social relations.<sup>39</sup> Althusser defines as Hegelian, and therefore idealist, any method that conceives of a “development of itself within itself”.<sup>40</sup> Yet this would seem to negate the possibility of the self-emancipation of the working class. Trapped by ideology as a ‘lived relation’, the proletariat’s only salvation would seem to lie in an external intervention by practitioners of a Marxist ‘theoretical practice’.

Althusser’s methodology of ‘symptomatic reading’ derives its understanding of *Capital* on the basis of what is contained in the text. Therefore, we should inquire whether there are in fact lacunae in *Capital* for those who would place an emphasis on the role of conscious human choice, value and action in history. Michael Lebowitz argues that *Capital* “does not explore the side of the capital/wage-labour relation which involves the creation of new social needs for workers”.<sup>41</sup> He claims that Marx’s failure to “set out the side of wage-labour in a logical and analytical manner”, as he does for capital, means that there is “a certain one-sidedness to the entire project”.<sup>42</sup> Lebowitz thus contends that *Capital* is missing a ‘Book on Wage-Labour’ that was once part of Marx’s plan for the project as a whole.<sup>43</sup>

In *Capital*, in order to investigate productivity in relation to the value of labour-power, Marx makes the assumption that, for capital, the level of workers’ means of subsistence is a given factor, or *datum*, at a particular place and moment in time [C, I, p.275]. At this level of abstraction, the worker is not considered as a human being, but only as a ‘factor of production’. Lebowitz argues that this leads to a shortcoming, because “the reproduction of capital depends on the production of labour-power, through a process of production distinct from that of the former, though, of course,

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<sup>38</sup> Smith *Reading Althusser*, p.22

<sup>39</sup> Althusser *For Marx*, p.167

<sup>40</sup> Althusser *For Marx*, p.60

<sup>41</sup> Lebowitz, M *Beyond Capital* (London: Macmillan, 2003 [1992]), p.51

<sup>42</sup> Lebowitz quoted in Ghigliani, P “*The Dark Side of Marx’s Capital: A Symposium on Michael Lebowitz’s Beyond ‘Capital’ - Editorial Introduction*” *Historical Materialism* Vol. 14:2 (2006), p.50

<sup>43</sup> Marx initially envisaged a six-book plan for *Capital*, including volumes on wage-labour, the state, international trade, the world market and crises. (See Mandel, E “*Introduction to Volume I*” in *Marx Capital*, I, pp.27-28)

subordinated to it".<sup>44</sup> Barker points to Lenin's famous claim in his *Philosophical Notebooks* that it is only possible to understand *Capital* if one has read and understood the entirety of Hegel's *Logic*, and he suggests: "Lebowitz goes further: we cannot understand *Capital* unless we make the effort to complete it!"<sup>45</sup>

Thus Lebowitz argues that, in *Capital*, Marx does not develop the workers as "subjects acting for themselves against capital".<sup>46</sup> Taken to its logical conclusion, this could imply that the only subjective imperative in *Capital* comes from the valorization process itself.<sup>47</sup> In other words, we must investigate whether we can "reconcile the notion of capital as an alienated form of social mediation with the notion of class struggle".<sup>48</sup> According to Lebowitz, these problems originate in the unfinished nature of *Capital*, although Pablo Ghigliani contends that "they cannot be reduced to it".<sup>49</sup>

For Barker, Lebowitz establishes "that wage-labour needs to be incorporated in a direct and active sense into the whole argument of Marx's *Capital*, and that filling this gap is a vital antidote to all mechanical and deterministic understandings of Marxism and its political project."<sup>50</sup> However, Lebowitz's interpretation of *Capital* is one dominated, says Barker, by the 'vertical' relations between wage-labour and capital, and overlooks the 'horizontal' relations between commodity producers and capitals.<sup>51</sup> He argues that both capitalism's dynamism and its tendency towards crisis are inexplicable if we understand capital as a monolithic block. Lebowitz, argues Barker, understates the importance of competition in capitalism. We shall examine this issue in more detail later.

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<sup>44</sup> Ghigliani "The Dark Side of Marx's Capital", p.51

<sup>45</sup> Barker "Capital and Revolutionary Practice", pp.55-56

<sup>46</sup> Ghigliani "The Dark Side of Marx's Capital", p.51

<sup>47</sup> I will investigate just such a conception later in this chapter, in the work of Moishe Postone.

<sup>48</sup> Ghigliani "The Dark Side of Marx's Capital", p.49

<sup>49</sup> Ghigliani "The Dark Side of Marx's Capital", p.51

<sup>50</sup> Barker "Capital and Revolutionary Practice", p.71

<sup>51</sup> Barker "Capital and Revolutionary Practice", p.78

### c) Personifications, Typologies and Social Roles

In Marxist theory, there has often been a false dichotomy presented between the historical and the structural; between the conception of subjects simply as either 'free agents' or as *Träger* – bearers or supports for the relations of production. Marx states clearly in his *Preface* to the first edition of *Capital* that "individuals are dealt with here only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, the bearers [*Träger*] of particular class-relations and interests" [C, I, p.92]. Althusser regards this as proof of his 'anti-humanistic' interpretation of *Capital*. Marx uses the formulation of human actors as 'personifications' of economic categories to abstract from their individual perspectives, although, I would argue, not necessarily to negate the capacity of human actors to influence the course of history.

The categories of the 'person' and the process of 'personification' are used throughout *Capital*, and are very important for Marx. They have particular associations with Hegel's notion of the 'legal personality', derived from Roman law, as the formal bearer of legal rights and obligations. Marx suggests that the full existence of individuals may consist in more than that which is "dealt with here", raising the question of whether a full conception of personification necessarily goes beyond the legal moment [C, I, p.92]. We might ask whether a full process of personification is a richer determination of the bearer of social relations as the living incarnation of those relations, i.e. including the dimension of lived experience.

I would argue that, by embarking on this process of abstraction, Marx is implicitly involved in the creation of a typology of subjectivity. Although it could be argued that Marx does not explicitly theorise the problem of subjectivity in *Capital*, his fundamental use of certain social roles, such as the capitalist and the worker, raises important questions for anyone attempting such a task. What is more, the processes by which all actors within bourgeois society objectively appear as legal 'persons' with certain equal rights obscures this deeper typology based on class within which, I would argue, lies the potential for the emergence of a self-conscious revolutionary subject.

Marx poses the social roles of capitalist and worker neither as trans-historical ideal types, nor as generic concepts embracing all the common characteristics of a group of actors. In his book *Making History*, Alex Callinicos argues that social relations should be understood as being both a constraint and a capacity.<sup>52</sup> Callinicos points to Marx's formulation of the problem of structure and agency in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, where Marx states that “men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past”.<sup>53</sup> This seems to invoke more heavily the negative and constraining aspect of ‘circumstances’, of the structure as something “essentially negative”.<sup>54</sup>

On the other hand, in *Capital*, Marx understands that ‘circumstances’ create both the potentiality of what *is* possible for human actors as well as what is not. In particular, we could cite how Marx's analysis of the ‘collective worker’ begins to show that, since the capital relation structurally tends to produce a working class driven into increasingly socialised forms of organisation in the labour process, it increasingly creates the potentiality for collective struggle [C, I, p.468, p.544]. Similarly, as we shall see later, the structuring of competition internal to the bourgeois class inhibits such solidarity among capitalist society's rulers. Yet there is still a need to explain the reasons for the undermining of decisive attempts at world-historic collective action by the working class, and the continuing capacity of the bourgeoisie to maintain their class rule.

In his paper, “*Re-inventing the subject: Marx and Ethics*”, Caleb Basnett argues that “capital *needs* a subject”, and “continually and actively forges them to suit its requirements”.<sup>55</sup> In the development of the process of production through the stages of co-operation, manufacture and large-scale industry, we see a corresponding development in the physiognomy of the worker. At first, in the

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<sup>52</sup> Callinicos, *A Making History* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), p.9, p.84

<sup>53</sup> Marx, K *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1984), p.10

<sup>54</sup> Callinicos *Making History*, p.9 (also quoted in *Blackledge Reflections*, p.187)

<sup>55</sup> Basnett, C “*Re-inventing the Subject: Marx and Ethics*”, Sixth Annual Marx and Philosophy Conference (Institute of Education, 2009), p.2 – Source: <http://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/assets/files/society/word-docs/basnett2009.doc> [accessed 18 Mar 2013]

period of co-operation, the worker is simply a person deprived of all property except for his or her labour-power. Later, the worker becomes increasingly fragmented by the development of manufacture, specialisation and the division of labour. At the culmination of this process, claims Basnett, “[l]arge-scale industry demands that its subject treat its body not simply as property, but as an *investment*, one that demands planning, diligence, and the alignment of one's own will with the will of the capitalist in order to produce an ever-greater surplus”.<sup>56</sup>

In *Capital*, Marx attempts to develop a scientific methodology with which to investigate the ensemble of social relations that are both determined by and constitutive of the bearers of these relations. Understanding the relationship between social relations, the process of personification and concrete individuals requires, for Marx, an answer to the question: “What makes a class?” [C, III, p.1025]. Unfortunately for us, the manuscript of *Capital* ends precipitously before Marx advances a reply.

Daniel Bensaïd argues that the “notion of class [is] reducible neither to an attribute to which the individual units comprising it are the bearers, nor to the sum of these units”.<sup>57</sup> For him, it is a relational totality, and not a mere aggregate. Thus, atomised individuals only possess properties on the strength of being part of a totality. They do not possess these properties in isolation. The pure worker or indeed capitalist cannot exist as concrete persons without the full determination of their existence within the ensemble of social relations. It would be nonsense to try and imagine the individual worker or capitalist in isolation, although Marx notes the characteristic attempts of the political economists to imagine such a figure in the shape of Robinson Crusoe [C, I, p.169]. For Marx, social relations are in essence between classes and not individuals, and yet must in some sense be realised at the level of each individual. Whether such an analysis is feasible without some reduction of individuals to a collective typology, and whether this leads Marx to an adequate treatment of subjectivity as a whole remain unresolved questions.

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<sup>56</sup> Basnett “*Re-inventing the Subject*”, p.11

<sup>57</sup> Bensaïd *Marx for our Times*, p.100

This approach to subjectivity in Marxist thought might therefore entail asking whether adherence to a perspective or consciousness is appropriate to certain social roles, and therefore whether there is an opposition between ethical individualism and social determinism in Marx's thought. While Marx's conception attributes to individuals the capacity to 'subjectively raise' themselves, there is a tendency under 'normal conditions' for these roles to dominate. For Marx:

*My standpoint, from which the development of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he remains, socially speaking, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them. [C, I, p.92]*

Later, we will discuss the influence that 'knowledge' might have in this conflict and the possibility that a knowing subject could transform social roles, or change the basis of the circumstances that condition them. In other words, we must consider the connection between understanding and action.

It seems that by categorizing different types of social roles, e.g. capitalist and worker, Marx has implicitly embarked to some degree on theorising a typology of subjectivity. In a society where the capitalist mode of production prevails, all human actors appear at the most immediate level as individual market actors; as buyers or sellers of commodities. But, for Marx, there is a more fundamental relation in the capitalist mode of production – between the bourgeoisie and proletariat – that determines the specific and unique properties of the system. Furthermore, real capitalists and real workers exist, and their abstract categorization allows Marx to illuminate the significance of the objective appearance of autonomy acquired by the driving forces that motivate these individual actors, and to expose the particular historical roles these types play in society, as socially determined by their position in the productive process.

## d) Class Subjects and Mythical Subjects

Collective subjects can take many forms. A collectivity can range from simply a shared identity, to an organisation, to a class-subject.<sup>58</sup> Although there is a tendency to conceive of collective subjects as an aggregate of individuals, a class subject, as Bensaïd argues above, must be something qualitatively beyond this. In *Capital*, Marx's critique does not simply extend a conception of liberal individualism to the collective.<sup>59</sup> Having said this, Marx's moral language in *Capital* ('capital's monstrous outrages', its 'werewolf-like hunger' [C, I, p.353]) and the importance that he attaches at times to the actions of individuals (e.g. certain factory inspectors) as well as class subjects cut against any reading that would remove the active role of consciousness from his analysis.

Although Marx's fundamental concern in *Capital* is on the *consequences* of actions (certainly for the capitalist good or bad intentions are often irrelevant),<sup>60</sup> *intentions* still have some importance. Only human actors are subject to moral judgement, and only individuals can be morally evaluated, and only then by considering their intentions. However, as we have already seen, for Marx, human activity can only be fully explained within the framework of a class-based theory. For class is not only a collection of individuals but a social 'entity' – according to Leszek Kolakowski, it is a "body that behaves in such a way that reactions of human elements which compose it are governed by the class as a whole and not vice-versa".<sup>61</sup>

Bensaïd asks whether posing class as a "higher reality" than the individuals that comprise it succumbs to the "fetishistic illusions that transform society, history or class into so many mythical subjects".<sup>62</sup> Let us take Marx's investigation of the social role of the capitalist. Here we have the

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<sup>58</sup> Callinicos *Making History*, pp.135-137

<sup>59</sup> This project has been attempted elsewhere, however, e.g. see comments on the Italian intellectual Piero Gobetti in Gramsci, *A Selections from the Prison Notebooks* ed. and trans. Hoare, Q and Nowell-Smith, G (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), p.73 fn.42

<sup>60</sup> Marx, K *Capital* Vol. II (Penguin, 1992 [1978]), p.487 – Henceforth referenced in the text as [C, II, p.487], i.e. [*Capital*, Vol. II, p.487]

<sup>61</sup> Kolakowski, L *Marxism and Beyond* (London: Paladin, 1971) – see Realism vs. Utopianism

<sup>62</sup> Bensaïd *Marx for our Times*, p.100

insight that, despite being a human actor, the capitalist is constrained and indeed appears as a 'personified category' [C, I, p.265] motivated by a process, whose real subject is value.<sup>63</sup>

*In truth, however, value is here the subject (i.e. the independently acting agent) of a process in which, while constantly assuming the form in turn of money and commodities, it changes its own magnitude, throws off surplus-value from itself considered as original value, and thus valorizes itself independently. [C, I, p.255]*

We might ask whether this implies that the subjective experience of the capitalist is merely a construction subordinated to the objective necessity of the logic of capital unfolding itself. Equally, we might ask what implications such a conception of value-as-subject would have with regards to the agency of the proletariat.

Samuel Knafo contrasts two polar conceptions of subjects and structures. From a purely economic perspective, an abstract logic is played out in history. And from a historicist perspective, subjectivity projects itself, creating objective forms. In the former, the role of structures consists in 'producing certain effects', whereas, in the latter, structures are "seen as mediating forms in social relations (which make agency appear in specific ways)".<sup>64</sup> Knafo reframes this polarity between subject and object. He argues that in Marx, as in Hegel, there is a dialectical structure of necessity. According to Knafo, social relations are not "the 'infrastructure' reflected in consciousness, but rather constitute the mediating relations through which consciousness emerges".<sup>65</sup>

There exists, in Knafo's opinion, a twin danger, either of adopting a deterministic view of capitalism, or of conceiving agency as an act of voluntarism, as an escape from historical structures or as external to them. Subjectivity would then be defined as something that 'escapes the grasp of

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<sup>63</sup> It has been suggested that the logical form taken by value in this argument is in some way analogous to the development of categories in Hegel's Logic – see Arthur, *C Dialectics of Labour: Marx and his relation to Hegel* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986)

<sup>64</sup> Knafo, S "The fetishizing subject in Marx's Capital" *Capital & Class* 76 (Spring 2002), p.157

<sup>65</sup> Knafo "The fetishizing subject", p.157



theory'. For Knafo, Marx's analysis of the law of value in *Capital* cannot be reconciled with his "historicist pre-occupations if the issue of the subject is not directly addressed".<sup>66</sup>

Knafo claims that the romantic notion of the subject is close to Marx's notion of labour, which "represents an open, creative and subjective force".<sup>67</sup> From Knafo's perspective, in *Capital*, commodities are the basic objects that mediate capitalist social relations. Thus, he argues that "the commodity represents the category that grounds the way in which people rationalize their experience in capitalism".<sup>68</sup> Since, he says, meaning is invested by the way in which we value commodities, the origin of necessity under capitalism lies in the process of valuation. Value is thus an expression of our subjectivity – not subjectivity itself. Conceived in this way, Marx's theory of commodity fetishism in *Capital* allows him to reintroduce the class struggle as a determinant of valuation.

*Capital*, argues Knafo, should therefore be seen as an attempt to uncover the process of the objectification of subjectivity, not the logic of the motion of objects. He claims that, "*Capital* is fundamentally about the nature of agency in capitalism, the specific form that subjectivity takes in capitalism, which in turn conditions the nature of social interaction, and thus class struggle".<sup>69</sup> Ultimately, any evaluation of Knafo's arguments would require a deeper investigation into the relationship between Hegel and Marx outside the remit of this study. Nevertheless, Knafo's arguments convincingly suggest that the problem of subjectivity is central to reconciling Marx's elaboration of the labour theory of value to his historical analysis. A premise of the Hegelian dialectic, which Knafo claims is maintained in Marx, is that "[o]ne cannot understand objects without problematizing the subject that relates to them".<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Knafo "The fetishizing subject", p.145

<sup>67</sup> Knafo "The fetishizing subject", pp.146-147

<sup>68</sup> Knafo "The fetishizing subject", p.158

<sup>69</sup> Knafo "The fetishizing subject", p.147

<sup>70</sup> Knafo "The fetishizing subject", p.152

### 3) A Typology of Subjectivity in *Capital*

#### a) The Individual and the Collective: Individuals in the Market Place

In elaborating the conception of an ideal capitalist marketplace, Marx constructs the 'equal' terrain on which all 'free' individuals operate in capitalist society. This is the arena in which all human actors are characterised as market actors; as buyers and sellers of commodities. Basnett calls this character 'the subject of circulation' or "the legal 'person' of bourgeois society".<sup>71</sup> The commodity mediates the relations between these individuals. In *Capital*, human actors first appear as "guardians, who are the possessors of commodities" [C, I, p.178]. They are buyers and sellers of commodities who enter into relations via this exchange since commodities "cannot themselves go to market and perform exchanges in their own right" [C, I, p.178].

Marx introduces these 'guardians' of commodities in the second chapter of *Capital*, where he states the common sense position: "Commodities are things, and therefore lack the power to resist man" [C, I, p.178]. In the first chapter of *Capital*, Marx has already begun to lay out a conception of why the opposite appears to be case under capitalism; his notion of the fetishism of commodities. Marx tries to explain how mankind finds itself enslaved by the commodities that it has created. The development of an understanding of Marx's conception of commodity fetishism is one of the central terrains on which the interpretation of the question of subjectivity in *Capital* is carried out.

For commodities to enter into relations between each other, Marx reasons, their guardians must likewise enter into a relation. Necessary for this relation is a common respect for the private property of the other, which enables the parties to enter into a contract, formal or otherwise. It is, Marx says, "a relation between two wills that mirrors the economic relation" [C, I, p.178]. Already it can be seen that the most elementary form of the process of exchange of commodities implies certain presuppositions about the form of relations between the social actors in that society.

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<sup>71</sup> Basnett "Re-inventing the Subject", p.1

Proceeding further with his investigation, Marx argues that “the characters who appear on the economic stage are merely personifications of economic relations [...] it is as the bearers of these economic relations that they come into contact with each other” [C, I, p.179]. For Basnett, what Marx is considering here are the subjects that are required by capital: “bodies performing certain operations”.<sup>72</sup> Basnett suggests that, for Marx, as for the political economists, the “detailed account of the ‘inner life’ of a subject is here bracketed from consideration”.<sup>73</sup> It might seem that presenting the characters that inhabit capitalist society in this way in fact produces passive carriers of “the cunning of reason” [C, I, p.285 fn.].

It could be asked, therefore, whether human actors are bound to play out a role economically determined for them by their position in the ensemble of capitalist social relations. Certainly, it does seem that Marx is suggesting that the situation appears this way on an individual basis:

*Men are henceforth related to each other in their social process of production in a purely atomistic way. Their own relations of production therefore assume a material shape which is independent of their control and their conscious individual action. [C, I, p.187]*

This leaves open the question of whether there are other forms of conscious action qualitatively different to and beyond that of the individual. Nevertheless, at this point in the presentation of his argument in *Capital*, Marx has not yet set out the abstract categories in which groups of actors may take part in other forms of action.

Marx constructs a framework in which the bourgeois ideals of “Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham” – the “innate rights of man” – exist between the buyer and seller of commodities in the realm of circulation [C, I, p.280]. These ideals can be revealed as having their basis in the relations of exploitation in production between the capitalist and worker [C, I, p.280]. The process of transforming money into capital must necessarily be mediated by circulation through the purchase

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<sup>72</sup> Basnett “*Re-inventing the Subject*”, p.3

<sup>73</sup> Basnett “*Re-inventing the Subject*”, p.3 fn.3

of labour-power that takes place on the market, but this in itself is only one moment in the total process of valorization, which has its fundamental determination within the sphere of production. Thus, Marx argues that the “capital relation arises only in the production process because it exists implicitly in the act of circulation, in the basically different economic conditions in which buyer and seller confront one another, in their class relation” [C, II, p.115].<sup>74</sup>

The capitalist mode of production therefore presupposes the class relationship between capitalist and worker. There exists a fundamental antagonism in the relation between capital and labour. However, capitalism systematically mystifies this relation. Marx understands this process of commodity fetishism not simply as a distorting veil, but in the sense that relations between people actually take the form of relations between things. Thus, we can ask whether fetishism is responsible for reducing the actors in this process to bearers of the logic of capital. In one sense, this hypothesis can be confirmed, because commodity fetishism explains the capacity of the logic of the capitalist system to shape the way in which the world is perceived.

With the expansion of capitalist relations to all parts of human life, the creation of an objective appearance increasingly appears to foreclose any alternatives to capitalism. On the other hand, it could be argued that the distinction Marx introduces between essence and appearance, and the possibility of penetrating this appearance, reasserts the capacity of human agency at a world-historical level. From this perspective, an account can be sought in *Capital* of how critical consciousness might be able to overcome this systematic mystification. This might lead some to conclude that social change could result merely from a change in consciousness; a process of critical reflection taking place in the heads of individuals.

In contrast, I would argue that Marx conceives a practical-political process as necessary both to penetrate the veil created by commodity fetishism and to effect social change. In transforming wider reality, such a process would effect an overthrow of its own conditions of existence. In the *German*

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<sup>74</sup> The relationship between production, circulation and the class relation will be a key point of contention in our examination of Moishe Postone’s interpretation of *Capital* later in this chapter.

*Ideology* and other writings, Marx explicitly formulates a notion of the practical revolutionary transformation that he envisages.<sup>75</sup> It must be determined whether this understanding is also dealt with explicitly in *Capital*, and what can be inferred from this.

## b) Class, Competition and Private Property

For Marx, although a commodity's value is the basis of a rational understanding of money, its simple circulation and the social intertwining of its metamorphoses, the framework for “money’s transition into its function as means of circulation and for the altered form it assumes as a result [...] is immaterial as far as the transaction between individual buyers and sellers is considered” [C, III, p.295]:

*When we consider supply and demand, on the other hand, the supply is equal to the sum of commodities provided by all the sellers or producers of a particular kind of commodity, and the demand is equal to the sum of all buyers or consumers (individual or productive) of that same kind of commodity. These totals, moreover, act on one another as unities, as aggregate forces. Here the individual has an effect only as part of a social power, as an atom in the mass, and it is in this form that competition brings into play the **social** character of production and consumption. [C, III, p.295]*

For Heinrich, Marx's qualitative breakthrough from his earlier market-oriented analyses of the 1840s was the conception “that the laws of the inner nature of capital are merely realised in the actual movement of individual capitals”.<sup>76</sup> For the political economists, competition was an assumption on which to study the laws of capital, whereas Marx now saw competition as a form of the appearance of these laws. He thereby posed a challenge to the foundational notion of bourgeois moral and political theory that the pursuit of individual private interests would produce the ‘general interest’.

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<sup>75</sup> Marx and Engels argue that the “practical movement” of a revolution is necessary “not only because the *ruling* class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class *overthrowing* it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew” (Marx, K and Engels, F *The German Ideology* (Amherst: Prometheus, 1998), p.60).

<sup>76</sup> Heinrich “*Capital in General*”, p.65

For Marx, private interests are already social, and the bourgeois general interest is already present in the act of this pursuit as far as it determines them. In the development of such an analysis, Marx attempts to explain the process through which, in competition, everything appears upside down:

*The finished configuration of economic relations, as these are visible on the surface, in their actual existence, and therefore also in the notions with which the bearers and agents of these relations seek to gain an understanding of them, is very different from the configuration of their inner core, which is essential but concealed, and the concept corresponding to it. [C, III, p.311]*

The individual capitalist experiences competition as an external pressure. It is a race to accumulate from which they cannot withdraw. The dynamic of competition acts to produce a “practical freemasonry” amongst the capitalist class for as long as business is good [C, III, p.361]. However, Marx adds the caveat that each is concerned with the “common interest [only] as long as he obtains more with it than he would against it” [C, III, p.295]. Unity amongst capitalists begins to fragment when this condition is not met, and each individual tries to extract what they can.

Whilst associations of capitalists band do together to regulate production in certain periods, Marx says that, “[a]ll ideas of a common, all-embracing and far-sighted control over the production of raw materials [...] give way to the belief that supply and demand will mutually regulate one another” [C, III, p.215]. Conscious control of production is in fact “incompatible, by and large, with the laws of capitalist production, and hence remains forever a pious wish, or is at most confined to exceptional common steps” [C, III, p.215]. The structure of capitalist society produces a mutual conditioning between the authority which prevails within the domain of each capitalist's autocracy and the general anarchy of the social division of labour as a whole.

When discussing the dynamics of competition, it is necessary to distinguish between different levels of exposition in Marx's analysis. Whilst he considers class relations to be constituted within the process of production, the concrete elaboration of his notion of class becomes possible only at the

stage at which he has developed the overall process of capitalist production. Once his presentation reaches the level at which there are notions of the individual agency of capitalists, or other agents, in the competition between capitals, this immediately raises questions about collective actors such as classes and the state. One of the difficulties of assessing claims that capital behaves as a subject in *Capital* is Marx's conception of the process of competition.

Whilst competition amongst capitalists may be a "practical freemasonry" in high times, i.e. when the profit rate is settled, Marx famously observes that it becomes a "struggle of enemy brothers" when there are losses to be made [C, III, p.362]. Individual capitalists are interested in maximising their share of the surplus-value, but also in minimising their losses. They may act in such a way as to undermine the future accumulation of capital for the class as a whole. In conditions of declining profitability and crisis, individual capitalists may indeed be fighting for their very survival as capitalists. Ernest Mandel argues that the relations of inter-capitalist competition are very different to the segmentations within the proletariat. In his *Introduction to Volume III of Capital*, he claims:

*In spite of all the inherent segmentations of the working class – all the constantly recurring phenomena of division along craft, national, sex, generational, etc. lines – there are no inbuilt structural obstacles to the overall class solidarity of workers under capitalism.*<sup>77</sup>

Let us now examine this difference between the classes in the relationship of each to private property. The working class, as a class of wage-earners, can be defined objectively by the fact that it exists in a state of dispossession of the means of production. Since private property is overwhelmingly in the hands of the capitalist class, the working class experiences their relationship to this property as a manifestation of their powerlessness.<sup>78</sup> On the other hand, for the capitalist class it is the embodiment of their social power; "The capitalist himself wields power only inasmuch as he is the personification of capital" [C, I, pp.1053-4].

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<sup>77</sup> Mandel, E "Introduction to Volume III" in Marx *Capital*, III, p.76

<sup>78</sup> Although thinkers such as Moishe Postone, whose work I will examine later, would denote definitions that employ terms from the sphere of distribution as characteristic of a problematic form of 'traditional' Marxism.

The ideal for the capitalist-as-individual is the role of the entrepreneur. The entrepreneur seeks to derive a super-profit above and beyond his fellow capitalists through technical innovation. Thus Marx is able to explain capital's drive to continually revolutionise the technical basis of production. The gains are, however, more or less short-lived for the entrepreneur, as the other capitalists seek to close the gap; often at a reduced cost of investment. Mandel claims that private property and competition are built into "the very nature of the capitalist class", whereas competition between wage-earners is "imposed upon them from outside, not structurally inherent in the very nature of the class".<sup>79</sup> On the contrary, he argues, "wage-earners normally and instinctively strive towards collective cooperation and solidarity".<sup>80</sup>

Under capitalist relations of production, the benefits of a co-operative work process accruing from the creativeness, invention and skill of the workforce appear as properties of capital. Marx argues that this is because the collective work process itself appears as an instantiation of capital:

*Though the workshop is to a degree a product of the workers' combination, its entire intelligence and will seem to be incorporated in the capitalist or his understrappers, and the workers find themselves confronted by the functions of the capital that lives in the capitalist.*

[C, I, p.1054]

However, Marx adds that, as the social productivity of the labour process develops, the private ownership of the means of production increasingly acts as a fetter on this creativity and squanders it. Mandel, in his *Introduction to Volume III of Capital*, says that the laws of capitalist accumulation "operate independently from and in spite of, conscious decisions by individual capitalist firms", and they "can be said to be the objective and unforeseen *effects* of conscious decisions by these firms."<sup>81</sup>

At the level of the system as a whole, the social division of labour in the capitalist mode of production is anarchic and unplanned. In Volume III of *Capital*, Marx analyses the structural

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<sup>79</sup> Mandel "Introduction to Volume III", p.77

<sup>80</sup> Mandel "Introduction to Volume III", p.77

<sup>81</sup> Mandel "Introduction to Volume III", p.36



tendency of the rate of profit to fall. A competitive process of accumulation means that neither individual capitalists nor the capitalist class are truly in control of the development of the process as a whole. Accumulation drives the development of the social productivity of labour and leads overall to a tendency of the general rate of profit to decline, albeit conditioned by important 'counteracting influences' [C, III, p.339]. The rate of profit is constituted by the relationship between the surplus-value and the total capital advanced. Surplus-value is created in the capitalist production process. In Marx's analysis, this process is characterised by class relations and the process of exploitation of wage-labour that lies at its heart.

Given that the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall involves competition between capitalists, we could ask whether it is problematic to understand this tendency in terms of a class analysis. I would argue that this objection requires that we overlook the structuring of class into the process of competition. For Marx, the processes of demand and supply "imply the transformation of value into market value", and, "on further analysis, imply the existence of various different classes and segments of classes which distribute the total social revenue among themselves and consume it as such" [C, III, p.296]. Thus, he argues that, "it is also necessary to understand the overall configuration of the capitalist production process if one is to comprehend the demand and supply generated among the producers as such" [C, III, p.296].

### **c) The Capitalist: Bearer of Capital, Agent of Competition, Consumer of Luxuries?**

Marx introduces the capitalist as a human actor who, through the combination of the roles of buyer and seller, becomes "the conscious bearer of this movement" of capital [C, I, p.254]. The subjective purpose of the capitalist is thus the process of valorisation; the "objective content of the circulation we have been discussing" [C, I, p.254]. To the extent that someone behaves in such a way as to be motivated by the "appropriation of ever more wealth in the abstract", that person functions as a capitalist; "as capital personified and endowed with consciousness and a will" [C, I, p.254]. Unlike the

miser, who hoards money, the capitalist must constantly seek to place money into the process of circulation in order to augment its value. Whereas, in the former hoarding is an eccentric individual behaviour, for the latter accumulation is driven by a social mechanism beyond the individual's control [C, I, p.254].<sup>82</sup>

In *Capital*, Marx is mainly concerned with the capitalist as the personification of capital. Whilst he gives a brief account of the capitalist as a consumer in Volume II, he does not assume that the desire to accumulate is the capitalist's sole motivation. This sets his thought apart from political economy, for which the capitalist is as much a machine for transforming surplus-value into surplus-capital as the worker is for producing surplus-value [C, II, pp.479-80]. For Marx's capitalist, "[t]wo souls, alas, do dwell within his breast", and there develops in him a "Faustian conflict between the passion for accumulation and the desire for enjoyment" [C, I, p.741]. Although the capitalist's expenditure on luxury does grow with accumulation, this division must be maintained by an act of will. If a capitalist wishes to prosper, pleasure-taking must be subordinated to accumulation [C, I, p.741].

From Marx's statement that the capitalist has no historical value except as capital personified, we might infer that, at the historical level, while the capitalist as an individual who acquires and enjoys use-values is of little importance, it is the acquisition and augmentation of exchange-values marks the capitalist's historical 'purpose' [C, I, p.739]. For Marx, the real historical importance of capitalists is their effect on the development of society's productive forces; such that they might "form the real basis of a higher form of society, a society in which the full and free development of every individual forms the ruling principle" [C, I, p.739].

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<sup>82</sup> Or, as Marx argues; "[the] practical agents of capitalist production and their ideological word-spinners" are "incapable of thinking of the means of production separately from the antagonistic social mask they wear at present" (Marx *Capital*, I, p.757).

## **d) Workers as Wage-labourers and Human Beings: Human Needs and the Value of Labour-power**

Since the advent of capitalism, the potential for labour as an 'open, creative force' has historically become increasingly confined within the form of wage-labour. However, at the same time, the ever more socialised form of the labour-process means that workers increasingly become part of a 'collective worker' with a combined labour potential. For Marx, it is both a historical and conceptual pre-condition of capitalist production that a large number of workers work together in the same field of labour to produce a certain type of commodity under the command of the same capitalist. Historically, a quantitative difference in the numbers of workers working together begins to manifest itself as a qualitative one, and it becomes possible to discern the conception of a collective working day amongst individual labourers.

When numerous workers work together "side by side in accordance with a plan", Marx calls this form of labour "co-operation". It not only increases the "productive power of the individual", but also creates "a new productive power, which is intrinsically a collective one" [C, I, p.443]. In both simple and complex common labour processes, when the worker co-operates with others in a planned way, "he strips off the fetters of his individuality, and develops the capabilities of his species" [C, I, p.447]. Under capitalism, workers are brought together only under the "despotic" command of the capitalist. In its current capitalist form the "interconnection" between their labours "confronts them, in the realm of ideas, as a plan drawn up by the capitalist, and, in practice, as his authority, as the powerful will of a being outside them, who subjects their activity to his purpose" [C, I, p.450].

For Marx, the value of the labour-power commodity is determined, like that of all others, "by the labour-time necessary for its production" [C, I, p.274], but distinctively its determination "contains a historical and moral element" [C, I, p.275]. Marx demonstrates that the means of subsistence of the individual labourer can only be understood by reference to the processes required to make possible

the reproduction of the whole class of wage-labourers. This includes not just simple physical reproduction, but also education and training. In the process of circulation, these social processes are resolved into a definite quantity of means of subsistence. Thus, Marx states that this value is, for a given country at a given time, a 'known *datum*' [C, I, p.275]. The effects of the class struggle on the functioning of capitalism, although discussed explicitly by Marx in the chapter on *The Working Day*, appear here, in Marx's terms, '*post festum*'<sup>83</sup> as a determinant of this *datum*.

Lebowitz argues that the worker cannot be fully described as simply a wage-labourer; "it is because workers are not *merely* wage-labourers but are human beings that there is a tendency to drive beyond wage-labour".<sup>84</sup> He argues that it is not sufficient to consider the contradiction between capital and labour; we must also consider the contradiction between wage-labour and the human being. Quoting from Marx's *Grundrisse*, Lebowitz says that "the worker 'strives not to remain something he has become, but is in the absolute movement of his becoming'".<sup>85</sup> The worker, claims Lebowitz, is driven by the contradiction between his 'human nature' and his conditions of existence under capitalism.<sup>86</sup> Through the class struggle, workers play a role in consciously reshaping the ruling class accepts their needs to be. This process in turn further develops the basis on which their needs are produced.

In her book, *On Human Needs*, Kate Soper considers the means by which human needs are both defined and created. Whilst rejecting essentialist theories of 'human nature', she tries to demonstrate that a theory of human needs underwrites "every actual or possible form of social organisation".<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, Soper argues that political economy and liberal theories of man "operate complicitly to effect a closure upon the question of needs".<sup>88</sup> Needs, she says, "are pre-

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<sup>83</sup> i.e. after the event

<sup>84</sup> Lebowitz *Beyond Capital*, p.207 [p.153]

<sup>85</sup> Lebowitz *Beyond Capital*, p.207 [p.153]

<sup>86</sup> Lebowitz's notion of 'human nature' here suggests Althusser's understanding of 'theoretical humanism'.

<sup>87</sup> Soper, K *On Human Needs – Open and Closed Theories in a Marxist Perspective* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester, 1981), p.2

<sup>88</sup> Soper *On Human Needs*, p.73

given to the consumer as an essentially natural rather than socially acquired possession”.<sup>89</sup> On this reading, liberal theory provides a moral basis for the positivistic account of needs found in political economy.

Soper argues that Marx’s critique of political economy challenges the de-politicisation and neutralisation of the question of needs by advocating an alternative system; one based on the expansion of need without limit and distribution in accordance with need.<sup>90</sup> In his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx registers that a “higher phase of communist society” would give rise to labour not simply as a means of life but as “life’s prime want”.<sup>91</sup> In the *Grundrisse*, Marx recognises the constant expansion and creation of new needs characteristic of capitalist society, but, regarding the “system of needs” within his project, he asks: “at what point is this to be dealt with?”<sup>92</sup> Soper contends that Marx’s recognition of the shifting benchmark of social standards implies an unresolved problem about the issue of absolute or ‘true’ needs.<sup>93</sup> Marx’s silence on this issue in *Capital*, she suggests, leaves unanswered questions for the project to supersede capitalism with a socialist-communist society.

For Marx in *Capital*, mankind is “distinguished from all other animals by the limitless and flexible nature of his needs” [C, I, pp.1068-9]. Under capitalism, workers are encouraged to carry out their acts of consumption as individuals, and, under normal conditions, to reproduce their labour-power as individual consumers. However, in their acts of resistance against the capitalist at the point of production, workers necessarily tend to organise themselves collectively due to their combination as a workforce; as a ‘collective worker’. In the forms that this resistance gives rise to, workers also begin to organise collectively to meet their needs at the point of consumption. I would suggest that

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<sup>89</sup> Soper *On Human Needs*, p.73

<sup>90</sup> Soper *On Human Needs*, p.20

<sup>91</sup> Marx, K *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976), p.17

<sup>92</sup> Marx, K *Grundrisse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p.528

<sup>93</sup> It should be noted however that Marx does not himself employ the concept of ‘true’ need, rather in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* he refers to money as the “real need created by the modern economic system” (Marx, K *Early Writings* (London: Penguin, 1992 [1975]), p.358), and in the *Grundrisse* refers to “necessary needs” as “those of the individual himself reduced to a natural subject” (Marx, *Grundrisse*, p.528).

such resistance would also require the potential to transform the process of production itself. We should inquire, however, as to why these examples of resistance which challenge the very foundations of the capitalist system – in other words, the formation of a revolutionary subjectivity – do not appear to be an explicit focal point of Marx’s argument in *Capital*.

The agency of the workers, when seen as individual market actors, is limited to selling their own labour-power as a commodity. However, as a collective actor they have significantly greater bargaining power and capacity to make demands. Further still, the working class ultimately has the power to overthrow the autocratic rule of the capitalist through the expropriation of his private property and transformation of the mode of production. As Callinicos points out, “The most important instance of structural capacity is that possessed by the world working class to replace capitalism with communism”.<sup>94</sup>

For Barker, the path to turning this capacity into an actuality is suggestive of a possible lacuna in *Capital*. He argues that the “conception of collective self-production”, one in which the “exploited class of capitalist society, make themselves into the founders of a new, more directly need-based system of social production”, is the final element that we must assume was intended for Marx’s “‘Missing Book on Wage-Labour’”.<sup>95</sup> Barker argues that the resolution of the ‘final’ contradiction of capitalism between the “worker as wage-labourer and the producer as human being, with rich and multiple needs” can ultimately be found only in “what Marx termed ‘revolutionary practice’, and that requires a struggle to transform the totality.”<sup>96</sup>

## **e) The Collective Worker and the Role of Trade Unions**

Whilst we have seen that mankind is distinctive in the limitless nature of its needs, Marx also argues that it is “able to restrict his needs to the same unbelievable degree and to reduce the conditions of his life to the absolute minimum” [C, I, p.1068]. We have also seen that the value of labour-power

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<sup>94</sup> Callinicos *Making History*, p.238

<sup>95</sup> Barker “*Capital and Revolutionary Practice*”, p.76

<sup>96</sup> Barker “*Capital and Revolutionary Practice*”, p.76

can be determined in a given state of society, while the analysis of the variations in the “level of the necessaries of life”, as Marx argues, belongs to “the theory of wages” [C, I, p.1069]. In *Capital*, Marx analyses the foundation of the trade unions and their conscious role in attempting to “prevent the price of labour-power from falling below its value” [C, I, p.1069]. Whilst, trade unions can appreciate that market prices fluctuate with the movement of supply and demand, as organisations, they seek to resist the misuse of this phenomenon by capitalists as a pretence on which to keep a disproportionate share of revenues for themselves.

Furthermore, in the negotiation of contracts between capitalists and workers, the organisation of trade unions effects a shift in the balance of forces. Marx quotes T.J. Dunning, who claims that there is a great difference between “the level produced by the fair operation of exchange that exists when buyer and seller *negotiate on equal terms*” and the “level of wages which the seller, the labourer, must put up with when the capitalist negotiates with each man *singly*” [C, I, p.1069].<sup>97</sup> Thus, Dunning argues that the logical basis of the trade unions is for workers to “*combine* in order to achieve *equality* of a sort with the capitalist in their *contract concerning the sale of their labour*” [C, I, p.1070].<sup>98</sup>

From this analysis, we can deduce a dual aspect in the logical basis of the trade unions. On the one hand, trade unions spontaneously fight on the terrain of the wage-form. On the other, they begin to challenge the underlying class inequality in the negotiation of the contract between capitalist and labourer. This dual structure presents the potential for the proletariat to act as a class in order to challenge and expose this class relation. However, Marx’s account of the class struggle in *The Working Day* demonstrates that this process is mediated by many factors and is certainly not automatic. Marx exhibits his keen historical understanding of these mediations in his analysis of the history of anti-union legislation in Britain, and the ban on the combination of workers during the French Revolution [C, I, p.903].

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<sup>97</sup> Marx is here quoting Dunning, T.J. *Trade Unions and Strikes: Their Philosophy and Intention* (London, 1860), pp.6-7

<sup>98</sup> Dunning *Trade Unions and Strikes*, pp.6-7

The continuing hold of reformist ideas over the working class is testament to the deep and enduring power of capitalist ideology. But, as Mandel points out, the “greatest theoretical weakness of reformism”, is to fail to understand that, whether “wages are high or low [...] they cannot upset the basic class relations and class inequality on which the capitalist mode of production is founded”.<sup>99</sup> Elsewhere Marx makes a similar point in *Wages, Price and Profit*: “Instead of the *conservative* motto: “A fair day's wage for a fair day's work!” they ought to inscribe on their banner the *revolutionary* watchword: “Abolition of the wages system!”<sup>100</sup>

Lebowitz argues that the conception of class struggle should not be reduced simply to the role of the trade unions bargaining with capital over the sale of labour-power by the worker. He claims that this narrow conception, concerned only with “the need for legislation to govern the labour market and sphere of production”, removes the wider political demands that arise from the struggle of the working class to lead full human lives as socially-developed beings.<sup>101</sup> These wider political demands are certainly not the focus of Marx's work in *Capital*, but, as we will see in the next section, Marx's investigation of the development of working class movements in different countries does demonstrate an understanding of internationalism and oppression that presents opportunities for synthesis with his investigation of exploitation and the functioning of the capitalist system.

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<sup>99</sup> Mandel “Introduction to Volume III”, p.70

<sup>100</sup> Marx, K and Engels, F *Collected Works*, Vol. 20 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), p.149

<sup>101</sup> Lebowitz *Beyond Capital*, p.184 [p.146]



## 4) Class Struggle, the Knowing Subject and the Factory Inspectors

### a) Is the Class Struggle an Automatic Process for Marx? Or is a Knowing Subject Required?

In Marx's chapter on *The Working Day*, the 'voice of the worker' arises for the first time in *Capital* [C, I, p.342]. The workers make an apparently spontaneous claim, within the terms of political economy, as a commodity demanding its proper value. Marx quotes historical evidence from the manifesto of striking London building workers (1859-60). He also describes the working-class movement as having "grown instinctively out of the relations of production themselves" [C, I, p.415]. This implies a certain automatism to the process of class struggle.

The individual workers who appear in the chapter on *The Working Day* are almost all victims, whose nightmarish conditions of existence are presented by Marx in great detail. If anything, the active protagonists might seem to be the factory inspectors, like Leonard Horner, who speak truth to power in their reports. But Marx also talks of the workers' resistance when faced with these conditions; their petitions, their 'threatening meetings', and their political organisations, such as the Chartists [C, I, p.405].

Class solidarity gives the proletariat strength as a class which runs counter to their powerlessness as individuals. Marx demonstrates the powerlessness of individual workers to resist the pressures exerted on them by capitalist relations to act according to 'Bentham'; i.e. in their own immediately apparent personal interests; even to the extent of devastating their own families by sending out their children to work in wretched conditions. Marx argues that "the isolated worker [...] succumbs without resistance once capitalist production has reached a certain stage of maturity" [C, I, p.412].

Marx demonstrates how the collective action of workers can reshape this 'voluntary' contract in a juridical fashion. He thus argues that the workers must "put their heads together and, as a class, compel the passing of a law" that would be "an all-powerful social barrier by which they can be

prevented from selling themselves and their families into slavery and death by voluntary contract with capital" [C, I, p.416]. The class demands articulated by the proletariat thus begin to challenge the norms of political economy; "In place of the pompous catalogue of the 'inalienable rights of man' there steps the modest Magna Carta of the legally limited working day" [C, I, p.416]. Of course this reform is only a partial victory, but Marx seems to indicate that new principles are being born that begin to challenge the ideology of capitalist social relations.

We will now briefly mention the features that Marx identifies in the development of working class movements in different countries. Whilst Marx recognises the implicit internationalism of the working class movement, he is at the same time keenly attuned to its different national manifestations. Thus he expresses a certain appreciation for the French 'revolutionary method' over the piecemeal way in which the victories of the English workers were achieved (and often reversed).

Secondly, Marx recognizes the weakening of class solidarity caused by divisions of race; "[I]abour in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin" [C, I, p.414]. Thirdly, Marx argues that the process of achieving immediate demands should be a necessary staging post on the path to full emancipation for the working class. Marx enunciates this in the statement he drafted for the London Council of the International Working Men's Association; "[w]e declare that the limitation of the working day is a preliminary condition without which all further attempts at improvement and emancipation must prove abortive" [C, I, p.415].

## **b) How does a 'Knowing Subject' influence Society? Factory Inspectors and Class Struggle**

There is a certain group of actors who appear in *Capital* that merit study because they do not easily fit into the category of capitalist or worker; the factory inspectors. Although they are drawn by and large from a privileged section of society, Marx often pours praise on their actions. He singles out the actions of inspector Leonard Horner in particular, saying; "His services to the English working class will never be forgotten" [C, I, p.334 fn.10]. The factory inspectors acted as guardians of the

factory laws, which functioned to “curb capital's drive towards a limitless draining away of labour-power by forcibly limiting the working day on the authority of the state, but a state ruled by capitalist and landlord” [C, I, p.348]. On the authority of the Home Secretary, the factory inspectors published reports every six months revealing the “voracious appetites of the capitalists for surplus labour” [C, I, p.349]. Horner himself, according to Marx, carried out a “life-long contest, not only with embittered manufacturers, but also with the Cabinet” [C, I, p.334 fn.10].

We can make several observations about this. Firstly, the inspectors were not themselves workers and it is not self-evident that they should act in solidarity with workers. We might speculate that it was their first-hand knowledge of the living conditions of the workers that motivated their actions. They were perhaps better aware than most of “capital's monstrous outrages” and its “were-wolf like hunger” [C, I, p.353]. Secondly, the inspectors were not all alike in their behaviour. In *Capital*, Marx demonstrates that their position as employees of the government meant that pressure was applied on them in two directions. Sometimes the pressure of industrialists’ lobbying was passed down by the Home Secretary to force them to refrain from making prosecutions. At other times, as in the case of Leonard Horner, the factory inspectors rebelled and rerouted the pressure upwards, warning the government against showing undue lenience to the industrialists.

In order to achieve their aims, the inspectors were capable of doing several things. They could put pressure directly on industrialists to comply with the factory laws by collecting evidence from workers and bringing cases of misconduct before magistrates. (During later struggles over the Factory Acts, they were also called upon to de-bunk the counter-petitions extorted out of workers by the industrialists). Secondly, they were able to help mobilise public anger by bringing to public attention the conditions in the factories and the workers’ neighbourhoods and homes. Here we find an interaction between the actions of the inspectors and the working class movement itself; the “voice of workers” raised with its “threatening meetings” and petitions to Parliament.

In the decade following the introduction of the Factory Acts, says Marx, the reports of the factory inspectors “teem with complaints about the impossibility of enforcing it” [C, I, p.392]. He quotes examples where manufacturers in effect sat in judgement on themselves as the magistrates enforcing the laws. Marx describes both the political demands for suffrage made by the working class through the Chartist movement and their economic counterpart in the Ten Hours Bill. Manufacturers denounced the factory inspectors as being a type of “revolutionary commissioner reminiscent of the Convention” and decried their “mania for improving the world” [C, I, p.395]. Eventually, Marx says, the individual manufacturer was forced to rein in his “lust for gain” by the “spokesmen and leaders of the capitalist class” to preserve their class interests as a whole.

Marx presents the process giving rise to the factory laws in three different modes. Firstly, he says that the factory laws were “dictated by the same necessity as forced the manuring of English fields with guano” [C, I, p.348]. He suggests that the necessity of the factory laws “developed gradually out of circumstances as natural laws of the modern mode of production” [C, I, p.394]. Yet whilst he sees a law-like element to the creation of these acts, he also argues that their “formulation, official recognition and proclamation by the state were the result of a long class struggle” [C, I, p.394]. This second mode introduces the aspect of struggle, suggesting that human beings acting as class subjects have agency in this process. Marx also notes that, “the working class's power of attack grew with the number of its allies in those social layers not directly interested in the question” [C, I, p.409]. Thus, Marx expresses the working class's ability to build alliances to achieve its immediate aims.

Finally, in the third mode, Marx describes the factory legislation as, “that first conscious and methodical reaction of society against the spontaneously developed form of its production process” [C, I, p.610]. Marx thus suggests that conscious human intervention can alter the ‘spontaneous’ development of the production process. Yet the subject of that intervention, ‘society’, echoes his

use of the term 'public anger' earlier in this section.<sup>102</sup> Therefore, we might ask to what extent the 'spontaneous development' of the production process sets the parameters of that human intervention. The importance of identifying these different modes in Marx's understanding of agency and structure is to establish whether they are in tension with each moment, or perhaps different moments, in his presentation of the process of historical development.

If the intention of the factory legislation was simply to protect the "working class both in mind and body" [C, I, p.635], then it also produced consequences unintended by the factory inspectors and others. Marx determines that its effect was to accelerate "the concentration of capital and the exclusive predominance of the factory system" [C, I, p.635]. This result is highly significant, because the destruction of previous forms that obscure the direct domination of capital has the potential consequence of generalizing the class struggle between capital and labour. The actions of the factory inspectors can be seen as beginning to change the conditions that form the basis of the class struggle to the extent that they help uncover the antagonisms in the relations of capital's domination.

### c) Knowledge and Class

If we agree with Daniel Bensaïd's proposition that "knowledge is not a simple collection of facts", then we should attempt to advance an alternative conception.<sup>103</sup> According to G M Tamás, knowledge is "a social institution, possible only in certain situations of high complexity, sometimes called 'civilization', which would allow the betterment of that knowledge".<sup>104</sup> For Althusser, knowledge is the product of a 'theoretical practice',<sup>105</sup> and conversely every ideology is a 'non-knowledge'.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> A detailed study is needed to clarify what conception of 'society' and its constitution can be deduced from Marx's usage in *Capital*.

<sup>103</sup> Bensaïd *Marx for our Times*, p.102

<sup>104</sup> Tamás, G M "Telling the truth about class" *Socialist Register* Vol. 42 (2006), p.231

<sup>105</sup> Althusser *For Marx*, p.252

<sup>106</sup> Smith *Reading Althusser*, p.27

It can be argued that understanding knowledge as production emphasises a certain autonomous character of theory. Thus, Smith claims that this understanding of knowledge is “not verified either empirically by reference to ‘fact’ or ‘brute data’ or pragmatically as an expression of certain social needs or interests”.<sup>107</sup> Rather, he argues that it is said to contain “its own canons and protocols of validation that are strictly ‘internal’ to itself alone”.<sup>108</sup> This conception is intended to undercut what Althusser might see as a twin deviation in theories of knowledge; of empiricism and historicism. It could then be argued that science is continually tested and put under tension by the changing basis of reality.

Tamás considers the relationship between class and knowledge. He asks whether there are differences between “acting and knowing subjects” that might suggest “irreconcilable discrepancies between people's positions” that make a “unified and rational knowledge” impossible.<sup>109</sup> As a consequence of this, he identifies two distinct “visions of the social subject in need of liberation”, inherited from Rousseau and Marx.<sup>110</sup> He claims that many who have intended to follow in the footsteps of Marx, such as E. P. Thompson, have in fact been Rousseau-ian socialists. Tamás therefore posits a contrast between the position of the revolutionary subject for the Rousseau-ians, by whom it is “extolled” for its inherent excellence, and for Marx, for whom it is its current state of “wretchedness, its total alienation, that makes it see that it has ‘nothing to lose but its chains’”.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Smith *Reading Althusser*, p.108

<sup>108</sup> Smith *Reading Althusser*, p.108

<sup>109</sup> Tamás “*Telling the truth about class*”, p.228

<sup>110</sup> Tamás “*Telling the truth about class*”, p.228

<sup>111</sup> Tamás “*Telling the truth about class*”, p.229

## 5) What is Missing in *Capital*?

### a) The Proletariat as Subject?

Marx has been accused of treating workers within the labour process as objects dominated by and subordinate to the will of capital. For David Harvey, “The charge that Marx treats the worker as an ‘object’ is in one sense true”.<sup>112</sup> This is because, for Marx, a ‘direct subjective experience’ of the world alone is not sufficient to understand it. Put another way, in *Capital*, Marx develops an understanding of what it is that workers are being “forced to cope *with* and defend *against*” – to construct by scientific investigation “a materialist theory of the capitalist mode of production”.<sup>113</sup> In this context we may want to heed Terry Eagleton’s advice that it is important “to see that, in the critique of ideology, only those interventions will work which make sense to the mystified subject itself”.<sup>114</sup> Eagleton argues that critique is a form of discourse that “seeks to inhabit the experience of the subject from the inside” and in this way is able to elicit the “‘valid’ features of that experience which point beyond the subject’s present condition”.<sup>115</sup>

Whilst, in *Capital*, Marx seeks to explain the processes that give rise to the consciousness of the capitalists and the “illusion created by competition” in their minds [C, III, p.992], evidence from both *Capital* and his enduring commitment to revolutionary politics demonstrates that he regarded the working class as the subject of revolutionary social change. Indeed, in a letter to his French publisher, he famously points out that the accessibility of *Capital* to the working class is the “consideration which to me outweighs everything else” [C, I, p.104]. The aim of raising working class consciousness and its fulfilment are, however, two different things.<sup>116</sup> The problem of political consciousness remains a fundamental issue for contemporary Marxist theory. It has generated theoretical interventions from many of those who have followed Marx; from Lukács, to Gramsci, to

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<sup>112</sup> Harvey, D *Limits to Capital* (London: Verso, 1999), p.113

<sup>113</sup> Harvey *Limits to Capital*, p.113

<sup>114</sup> Eagleton, T *Ideology* (London: Verso, 1991), p. xiv

<sup>115</sup> Eagleton *Ideology*, p. xiv

<sup>116</sup> As Marx recognised in the arduous work required to fully comprehend his method of analysis. (Marx *Capital*, I, p.104)

the Frankfurt School. Like Harvey, we might therefore surmise that “the duality of the worker as an ‘object for capital’ and a ‘living creative subject’ has never been adequately resolved in Marxist theory”.<sup>117</sup>

That Marx's *Capital* is in some sense an uncompleted work is a widely accepted notion. How his plans for the project developed and how their final form and content took shape continue to be a matter of much debate and research (notably in the MEGA project). As Lebowitz argues, I believe rightly, an ‘accommodation’ or explaining away of the possible deficiencies or lacunae of *Capital* should be resisted. Lebowitz makes useful attempts to reconstitute those aspects that he deems missing. In particular, he pursues an exploration of the variable nature of human needs and what he argues is “a critical silence” in *Capital* that “permits the appearance that, for the scientist, the only subject (if there is one at all) is capital”.<sup>118</sup> The implied jettisoning of the proletariat as the agent of revolutionary social change consequent on this argument makes it a key point of contention. We will now investigate one of the most developed accounts of this conception of capital-as-subject in Moishe Postone’s work *Time, Labour and Social Domination*.<sup>119</sup>

## **b) Moishe Postone and Capital-as-Subject**

Moishe Postone seeks to carry out a “fundamental reinterpretation of Marx’s mature critical theory” [TLSD, p.3]. He proposes to undertake this by questioning the central assumptions of the analysis of what he terms, “traditional Marxist theories” [TLSD, p.3]. His claim is that, by developing new understandings of concepts relating to the essential character and development of modern society, a renewed critical theory can overcome the antinomies between structure and action, and between meaning and material life.

Postone is motivated by what he sees as the deficiencies of “traditional Marxism” and its failure to advance an adequate critique of “actually existing socialism” [TLSD, p.3]. He tries to isolate the core

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<sup>117</sup> Harvey *Limits to Capital*, p.114

<sup>118</sup> Lebowitz *Beyond Capital*, p.25

<sup>119</sup> Postone, M *Time, Labour and Social Domination* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993) – Henceforth referenced in the text as [TLSD, p.page], i.e. [*Time, Labour and Social Domination*], p. page.



of the capitalist system conceptually, as an impersonal form of social domination generated by labour itself and not by the mechanisms of the market or private property [TLSD, p.3]. From this conception, Postone deduces that proletarian labour and the industrial process of production are simply expressions of domination and not means of human emancipation, thus calling into question the “political and social role traditionally accorded the proletariat in the possible historical overcoming of capitalism” [TLSD, p.7].

Postone distinguishes two modes of critical analysis; the first is a critique of capitalism from the standpoint of labour, and the second is a critique of labour in capitalism [TLSD, p.5]. The first mode, based on a transhistorical understanding of labour, is characteristic of ‘traditional Marxism’, whereas the second corresponds to Postone’s own attempts to initiate a critical theory adequate to modern society. We will now carry out a critical analysis of issues in Postone’s *Time, Labour and Social Domination* relevant to our investigation of subjectivity in Marx’s *Capital*.

The strength of Postone’s project lies in his sustained engagement with *Capital*, and his attempt to reconcile his interpretation with detailed readings of Marx’s *Grundrisse*. Postone rejects the “pessimistic turn” of Frankfurt school critical theory [TLSD, p.85]. His detailed analysis of the question and category of subjectivity in *Capital* is an important contribution to clarifying our understanding of value, labour, social mediation, alienation and fetishism. His attempt to examine the ‘essential core’ of Marx’s understanding of capitalist society, and, with the benefit of subsequently available texts and historiography, to re-engage with *Capital* is also welcome, however problematic its results.

As Postone acknowledges, his interpretation of *Capital* is indebted to the type of reading initiated by Georg Lukács in his work *History and Class Consciousness* [TLSD, pp.72-74]. Postone affirms Lukács’s historical analysis of the process of reification associated with the commodity form. However, I would argue that, by dismissing the proletariat as a potential revolutionary subject and adopting capital as the subject of *Capital*, Postone actually inverts and zombies Lukács’s conception. Postone

preserves the theoretical strength of reification – its theorisation of a historically specific, abstract, impersonal form of social domination peculiar to capitalism – but removes the potential for proletarian self-emancipation which is the animating impulse of Lukács’s Marxism. While Postone’s work shares the polarised quality present in *History and Class Consciousness*, in Lukács a result of vertiginous class struggle, his claims to escape the pessimism of Frankfurt school theory would appear to be predicated on a utopian impulse.

Our exposition earlier in this chapter has demonstrated the intimate relation Marx saw between the capital relation and the class relation (e.g. [C, II, p.115]). This relationship poses significant problems for Postone’s interpretation of *Capital*. He argues correctly that capitalism’s fundamental contradictions “should not be identified immediately” with “concrete social relations [...] such as those of class struggle” [TLSD, p.34]. However, this should not imply that class struggle has no mediated relation to this fundamental contradiction. Postone maintains a marked silence on the effects of working class struggle on the functioning of capitalism in Marx’s chapter on *The Working Day*. I would argue that Postone’s antipathy towards ‘traditional’ Marxism tends to obscure a serious examination of the potential connection between an immanent critique, which he advocates, and a class-based analysis.

Postone’s re-interpretation of Marx’s theory as a “critical and self-reflexive analysis” [TLSD, p.84] of life in capitalism is predicated on a critique of the proletariat as a potential revolutionary subject; “as a social agent that both constitutes history and realises itself in socialism” [TLSD, p.37]. Whilst we might agree with Postone that there is “no linear continuum” between the “demands and conceptions of the working class”, and the “needs, demands, and conceptions that point beyond capitalism”, this does not logically imply that there is no connection whatsoever [TLSD, p.37].

The idea of the disappearance of the proletariat as a potential revolutionary subject in Postone’s work is connected to his conception of modern society as “post-liberal capitalism”, defined in contrast to its nineteenth-century forms [TLSD, p.84-87]. Postone argues that Marx attempts to

move beyond conceiving capitalist society “in terms of the opposition between the state and civil society” [TLSD, p.57]. He suggests that Marx’s analysis of the “directionally dynamic character” of capitalism requires another dimension of society; the sphere of production [TLSD, p.57]. It is through an analysis of the “specificity of labour in capitalism”, he claims, that Marx attempts to explain the “*historical dynamic* of capitalist society” [TLSD, p.57].

Drawing on Marx’s explicit formulations that “self-valorizing value” is the “automatic subject” [C, I, p.255], and that capital “presents itself as a self-moving substance” [C, I, p.256], Postone advances a particular interpretation of this “self-moving substance which is Subject” [TLSD, p.75]. He contends that Marx is able to analyse the nature of capitalist social relations in terms of the attributes that Hegel associated with *Geist*, or the absolute subject [TLSD, p.75]. For Postone, capital is transformed into a self-reflexive relation. The opposition between capital and labour becomes an opposition between alienated labour and the possibility of emancipated labour. Postone appears to ascribe to the inner logic of the categories of capital a degree of control over historical development that is greatly overemphasised. In this respect, we must distinguish between the setting out of an abstract development of the core “category of capital” and the historical development of capitalism or capitalist society [TLSD, p.76].

A degree of ambiguity is introduced into Postone’s argument by his frequent use of the prefix ‘quasi’ in his formulations. This is often employed to refer to the ‘quasi-independence’ of the structures of social relations that dominate human beings under capitalism [TLSD, p.126].<sup>120</sup> This would suggest that Postone is attempting to straddle the conception of capital as a subject in the strong Hegelian sense and the apparent subjectivity of capital as a form of fetishism. The appearance of this polarity

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<sup>120</sup> Postone also refers to ‘quasi-natural’ laws, and ‘quasi-objective’ social mediations, etc. (Postone TLSD, p.239, p.171).

is perhaps a legacy of the Lukácsian framework, but it raises the question of whether capital can be simultaneously regarded as both a subject and a fetish.<sup>121</sup>

Although Postone opposes ‘traditional’ Marxism on the basis of its “transhistorical conception of labour”, his own apparently historically specific critique of labour would appear unable to escape the problem of transhistorical abstractions. Postone’s argument relies on notions such as ‘use-value’ and ‘material wealth’ which appear to transgress the boundaries of capitalism. Furthermore, if *Capital* is to be considered an internal critique of capitalism, are we not here making a transhistorical claim? If Postone is to successfully deny the methodological validity of transhistorical categories, then it would appear to be necessary to address issues within his own framework.

Postone argues that the standpoint of *Capital* is immanent to its object of investigation, although he does not indicate where in capitalist society this standpoint is located [*TLSD*, p.21]. Postone’s ambiguity on the standpoint of this auto-critique may spring from the high level of abstraction in his analysis, but we might also suggest that his abandonment of the standpoint of labour leaves him ill-equipped to advance any solutions to this persistent problem. Postone thus adopts a level of detachment characteristic of critical theory; the root cause of reification, he believes, lies with industrial labour. His rejection of the standpoint of labour gives us cause to examine the nature of his own critique.

Postone’s rejection of ‘traditional’ Marxism is central to his argument, although he never explores or sufficiently explains the origins of this phenomenon. His definition refers not to any “specific historical tendency”, but denotes all forms of Marxism that have at their core a “transhistorical conception of labour” [*TLSD*, p.7]. Postone criticises the “productivist paradigm” that “affirms proletarian labour, industrial production, and unfettered industrial ‘growth’” [*TLSD*, p.17].

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<sup>121</sup> This is arguably related to issues raised in our study of the one or two subjectivities in Marx’s *Manuscripts* (*Marx Early Writings*).

I would argue that Postone's critique of 'traditional' Marxism omits the resources to address many of the problems that he seeks to identify with this category. The conspicuous absence of revolutionaries such as Engels, Luxemburg, Lenin, Trotsky, and Gramsci from his analysis suggests that the representatives of Postone's 'traditional' Marxism are those appropriate to his purposes. In light of this fact, it is not so surprising that the resultant picture fails to address the issues of 'actually existing socialism' and the "failure of revolution in the West" [TLSD, p.85].

Despite the weakness of Postone's constructed target, he helpfully brings the reflexive aspects<sup>122</sup> of Marxism under scrutiny with the text of *Capital*. Postone is correct to draw our attention to one of two features that Marx identified in a letter to Engels after completing Volume I as fundamental to understanding *Capital*: the 'two-fold character' of labour [TLSD, p.55].<sup>123</sup> However, Postone tends to underplay the second side of this observation in which Marx gives equal significance to his treatment of surplus-value abstracted from its particular forms. Whilst Postone's book is very useful in attempting to establish the essential difference between the treatment of labour by Marx and by political economy, Postone tends to emphasise Marx's account of David Ricardo from his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and underplay Marx's more detailed, but no less critical, engagement with Ricardo in *Capital*. I would argue that the significance of Postone's neglect of the category of surplus-value and exploitation is connected to his failure to engage with the concrete interrelationship of the class struggle and the functioning of capitalism.

Although Postone's detailed argumentation highlights many key aspects of the core categories in Marx's analysis, the antagonism that he constructs between his approach to the categories of *Capital* and a class-based analysis is unnecessary. I would suggest therefore that an adequate reading of *Capital* must overcome this artificial opposition between the critique of labour and the standpoint of labour in order to formulate both a theory of the determinate forms of social

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<sup>122</sup> i.e. in the sense Lukács implies when he argues that the Marxist method must be "constantly applied to itself" (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.xliii).

<sup>123</sup> "Letter from Marx to Engels 24 August 1867" in Marx, K and Engels, F *Collected Works*, Vol. 42, p. 407

mediation and a theory in which class, exploitation, private property and the market are central features.

Following Chris Arthur, we might suggest that it is possible to characterise Marx's position in *Capital* as the "critically adopted standpoint of labour".<sup>124</sup> We have the evidence of Marx's own explanation in his *Postface to the Second Edition of Capital*, that his critique of political economy aims to represent "the class whose historical task is the overthrow of the capitalist mode of production and the final abolition of all classes – the proletariat" [C, I, p.98]. Such a perspective helps to explain that Marx's concern for the "meagre concession rung from capital" in the form of the Factory Acts is in fact a prelude to his desire for the "conquest of political power by the working class" [C, I, p.619]. It is to the "revolt of the working class" that Marx looks for the death "knell of capitalist private property" and the potential expropriation of the expropriators [C, I, p.929].

That Marx saw the emergence of the working class as a class subject as of fundamental significance is further evidenced by his *Letter to Bolte* of 23 November 1871.<sup>125</sup> Here, Marx distinguishes between an economic movement, such as the struggle within a particular factory for a shortening of the working day, and a political movement; the attempt to pass a general law limiting the working day. Marx argues that a political movement grows out of the separate economic movements of the proletariat as "a movement of the *class*, with the object of achieving its interests in a general form, in a form possessing a general social force of compulsion."<sup>126</sup> While Postone is correct to draw our attention to the critique of labour in *Capital*, I would argue that, in Marx's conception, the proletariat is capable of forming a subject both inside capitalism and against it. The difficulty for the

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<sup>124</sup> Arthur, C "Subject and Counter-Subject" *Historical Materialism* Vol. 12:3 (2004), p.101

<sup>125</sup> Marx, K and Engels, F *Marx and Engels Correspondence* (New York: International Publishers, 1968), *Letter to Bolte* (23 Nov. 1871) – Source: [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/letters/71\\_11\\_23.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/letters/71_11_23.htm) [accessed 18 Mar 2013]

<sup>126</sup> Marx, K *Marx and Engels Correspondence*, *Letter to Bolte* (23 Nov. 1871)

working class is that, in generalising from its experience of class struggle over the working day, it must, in the words of Lebowitz, “negate its negation”.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Lebowitz *Beyond Capital*, p.124

## 6) Conclusion

It is fair to state that Marx's ambitious aim in *Capital* for an exposition of the capitalist economy in its totality is missing critical elements. This is most obvious in the absence of a comprehensive theory of the state, international trade, and the world market.<sup>128</sup> Lebowitz has some justification in arguing that a fuller exploration of the worker as a subject is required. Yet we could argue that it is not possible to produce a comprehensive analysis of capitalist society at the economic level without also producing an explicit theory of political consciousness and subjectivity. The possible construction of such a theory is a controversial topic, but elements that we might suggest include theories of language, of knowledge, of consciousness, of ideology, and, crucially, of the philosophy of praxis.

In this chapter I have attempted to demonstrate the complexity of Marx's notion of the person as a living incarnation of social relations; a complexity that is not exhausted by a reading that omits the dimension of lived experience. In formulating the relationship between class struggle and the functioning of the laws of capitalism I have raised the issue of the working class movement and other actors, such as the factory inspectors, who compelled the passing of legislation of behalf of 'society'. Marx's aside that the power of the state is "the concentrated and organized force of society" [C, I, p.915], suggests questions that will be addressed later in this thesis.

Against Moishe Postone's critique of the standpoint of labour, I argued that an adequate reading of *Capital* must retain and critically adopt this standpoint. Whilst there may be no 'royal road' to revolution elaborated in *Capital*, Marx conceives of his method, the dialectic, as "in its very essence critical and revolutionary" [C, I, p.104, p.103]. I have argued that the core of Marx's project is predicated on the notion of proletarian self-emancipation. It is exactly this notion that is at stake

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<sup>128</sup> As noted above, these were to feature as separate books in Marx's original plan for his project – see Mandel *"Introduction to Volume I"*, pp.25-32. The unfinished nature of Marx's work is also evidenced in a number of comments within the text itself (e.g. Marx *Capital*, III, p.205, p.298, p.426).



when we consider whether to reject Postone's proposed antithesis between the overcoming of capital and the self-assertion of the working class [TLSD, p.371].

These issues, it seems to me, are particular aspects of a broader tension within Marx's methodology. On the one hand, Marx says that the "particular course taken by our analysis forces this tearing apart of the object under investigation" [C, I, p.443], and he argues that this fragmentation corresponds to "the spirit of capitalist production" [C, I, p.443]. On the other hand, Marx condemns any type of "abstract materialism" that excludes the historical process. We have investigated the ways in which a critique might both reproduce the concrete appearances of capitalist society and use abstraction to formulate a rigorous analysis of its internal functioning. This project is perhaps by necessity, until completed through practice, an open-ended one. In other words, a revolutionary critique of capitalist society cannot be formulated in theory alone.

Harvey argues that a full comprehension of the concepts in Marx's theoretical apparatus is only possible in a relational and open-ended way.<sup>129</sup> I have argued above that these concepts reveal a progressively richer content as Marx's investigation unfolds. I would further argue that his 'investigations' should not be seen as a passive process, but, like the *Theses on Feuerbach*, as proceeding with the purpose of changing the world. *Capital* can be conceived as both the theoretical expression of a turning point in history and as a project in need of completion. I would argue that Marx bequeaths to us both crucial insights and a methodology, the development of which indicate the potential for an adequate Marxist theory of subjectivity.

To summarise; I have conceded Lebowitz' suggestion that Marx does not offer us a complete theory of the working class as a subject in *Capital*. Yet, against Postone's reading of *Capital*, I have argued that Marx does conceive the proletariat as having the potential to be the revolutionary subject in capitalist society. To examine the development of Marx's thought at the hands of other 'great investigators', we now turn to the work of Georg Lukács and Antonio Gramsci.

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<sup>129</sup> Harvey *Limits to Capital*, p.2

# Georg Lukács and the Polarisation of Subjectivity

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## 1) Introduction

In a short period from 1919 to the mid-1920s Georg Lukács produced a series of works in the revolutionary Marxist tradition: *Tactics and Ethics*, *History and Class Consciousness*, and *Lenin: A Study in the Unity of his Thought*.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter I re-construct the key concepts of *History and Class Consciousness* (HCC) in order to illuminate Lukács's distinctive approach to the problem of subjectivity. I will analyse the particular questions which Lukács's conceptual framework allows us to ask, and subsequently those questions which it precludes. This will allow me to reflect on the relationship between Lukács's conception and those of Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci.

### a) The Importance of *History and Class Consciousness*

In *HCC*, Lukács creatively reinvents Marx's method, the materialist dialectic. His conception of subjectivity is distinctive as the origin of a trend of thought known as 'Western Marxism'.<sup>2</sup> Lukács's synthesis of a particular historical moment and his influence on subsequent Marxist thought makes *HCC* a prime candidate for close study. Michael Löwy argues that the central essay of the book, *Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat*, despite its high level of abstraction, is concerned with Lukács's central theme, the "proletarian revolution against capitalist reification".<sup>3</sup>

The polarised quality that I argue characterises Lukács's *HCC* can be understood within the context of the wave of mass revolutionary upheavals in which he was a participant [*HCC*, p.xli].<sup>4</sup> I will argue that *HCC* remains one of the most prolonged attempts to give a theoretical and philosophical basis to the notion of the self-emancipation of the proletariat. By examining his theory of reification and the special prominence he gives to the working class in society, I hope to grasp the potential difficulties that he faces.

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<sup>1</sup> The recently published defence of *History and Class Consciousness*, *Tailism and the Dialectic* might also be included in this list (Lukács, G *Tailism and the Dialectic* trans. Leslie, E (London: Verso, 2000)).

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty popularised the moniker "Western" Marxism for this trend in the mid-1950s with his essay of the same name (in Merleau-Ponty, M *Adventures of the Dialectic* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 1973), p.30).

<sup>3</sup> Löwy, M *Georg Lukács – From Romanticism to Bolshevism* (London: Verso, 1979), p.171

<sup>4</sup> Lukács, G *History and Class Consciousness* (London: Merlin, 1971), p.xli – Henceforth referenced in the text as [*HCC*, p.page], i.e. [*History and Class Consciousness*, p.page].

## **b) The Problem of Subjectivity and Lukács's Path to Marxism**

Lukács's theory of reification is influenced by his engagement with the neo-Kantian ideas of the sociologist Max Weber and the Heidelberg school, of which Lukács was formerly a member. In Lukács's own account of his intellectual development, from his 1967 *Preface*, he "hovered between the acquisition of Marxism and political activism on the one hand, and the constant intensification of [his] purely idealistic ethical preoccupations on the other" [HCC, p.x]. This twin development is reflected in his exposition of the problem of subjectivity.

Lukács's Marxism was stimulated by the works of Rosa Luxemburg and his opposition to opportunism, those who he called "vulgar Marxists" [HCC, p.9]. In reaction to this tendency, Löwy argues that Lukács's active engagement in politics up to 1919 was characterised by a type of ultra-leftism. During the course of writing the essays in *HCC*, Löwy argues that Lukács's Marxism develops into a position that he calls "revolutionary realism".<sup>5</sup> This position is an attempt to move beyond both 'leftist' utopianism and 'right' opportunism.

## **c) Alienation, Commodity Fetishism and Reification**

Lukács's conception of subjectivity, centred on his theory of reification, is both an extension of Marx's conception of commodity fetishism in *Capital* and a return to themes associated with the theory of alienation developed by Marx in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. Lukács extends the theory of commodity fetishism by explaining its effects in all spheres of human life: not simply in the economy, but also in the juridical sphere, in politics, and in the structure of consciousness in capitalist society.

Lukács poses questions similar to those arising from our discussion of subjectivity in Marx's *Capital*: How is a world governed by the apparently law-like rules of the economy also the site of revolutionary class struggles? Lukács's theory of reification explains the creation of "non-human objective laws of society" [HCC, p.87], a 'second nature' that seems to exile human subjectivity,

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<sup>5</sup> Löwy *From Romanticism to Bolshevism*, p.171

against which he counter-poses the potential role of working class consciousness in shaping history. Lukács, like Antonio Gramsci, is concerned to explain how theory can become an effective force that grips the masses. However, Lukács is distinctive in seeking to isolate the specificity of how dialectical theory is able to motivate genuinely revolutionary activity. The key to this he believes is to comprehend the universality of the commodity as a category, its “undistorted essence” [HCC, p.86].

The conception of subjectivity that emerges is characterised by strong polarisation. Lukács’s understanding of reification paints an image of individuals trapped within the immediacy of social appearances. In thrall to an alienated social world in which even the mental faculties of individual workers are set against their total personality, it might appear that only a messianic feat is capable of overcoming the fragmentation of human subjectivity.

Lukács attempts to recast themes associated with Max Weber within a Marxist framework, such as his notion of an ‘iron cage’ of rationalisation encompassing modern society. For Lukács, the formalism of capitalist rationalisation is self-limiting. This is an expression of the potential for crisis latent within the normal functioning of capitalist society. However, for Lukács, the potential for a rupture which overcomes the reified existence of bourgeois society can only be realised by the proletariat emerging as the “identical subject-object” of history [HCC, p.149].

Lukács’s emphasis on the processes of social mediation is taken up by later thinkers in the Frankfurt school. As we have seen, Moishe Postone reads *Capital* as a theory of social mediation, as against a class-based analysis of capitalist society. Like other Frankfurt school thinkers, Postone abandons Lukács’s conception of the proletariat as the ‘identical subject-object’ of history. In this formulation, reification really does appear to be an inescapable ‘iron cage’, or assailable only by Postone’s ambiguous conception of auto-critique. In the absence of a proletariat capable of penetrating reification, the reified world of the commodity-form thus becomes the ideological counter-part to Postone’s notion of capital as the subject of *Capital*. We will therefore examine Lukács’s contention, despite its difficulties, that the proletariat can emerge as the subject of history.

## 2) An Exposition of the Key Aspects of *History and Class Consciousness*

Whilst *History and Class Consciousness* is a series of essays, the book's central essay *Reification and the Standpoint of the Proletariat* develops Lukács's key concepts of reification, the antinomies of bourgeois thought, and the proletariat as the "identical subject-object" of history in greatest depth [HCC, p.149]. I would argue that these concepts, in conjunction with the prominence of the category of totality in Lukács's dialectical method and his conception of class consciousness, reveal the framework of his understanding of subjectivity. For this reason, I will embark on a close study of these key aspects, primarily from this central essay, in order that I may use this as a basis for later analysis and criticism.<sup>6</sup>

### a) Lukács's Theory of Reification

The ideological problems of capitalism cannot be penetrated, Lukács claims, without understanding the fundamental structure of capitalist society. For this reason, Lukács's studies are based on Marx's economic analyses. Lukács's examination of the phenomenon of reification, as with Marx's *Capital*, takes the commodity relation as its starting point. The mysterious nature of the commodity is rooted in the process by which social relations between people take on the character of a thing [HCC, p.83]. Lukács extends Marx's analysis of the fetish character of commodities, the riddle of the commodity-structure, to explain all the phenomena of capitalist society, the totality of social life, in all its aspects. The theory of reification that Lukács constructs on this basis is a complex and multi-faceted conception which plays a pivotal role in his framework and understanding of subjectivity. Thus I will begin by examining his exposition of the phenomenon.

### i) The Phenomenon of Reification and the Fragmentation of the Subject

Lukács explains the historical process by which commodity exchange achieves a qualitative dominance permeating "the total outer and inner life of society" [HCC, p.83]. Relations between

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<sup>6</sup> By utilising this methodology I will attempt to avoid the pitfalls of analysing *HCC* on the basis of Lukács's polemical remarks in the earlier essays (e.g. *What is Orthodox Marxism?*, *The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg*), but as a result I will therefore necessarily postpone any reflections on the political and theoretical coherence of the work as a whole to the later analytical sections of this chapter.

people acquire a “phantom objectivity” that seems “so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature” [HCC, p.83].<sup>7</sup> Within this historical perspective, commodity fetishism stands as a specific problem of the modern capitalist age. This does not deny the “episodic appearance” of commodity exchange in societies prior to capitalism or the existence of associated subjective and objective commodity relations [HCC, p.84]. There is, Lukács argues, however a “qualitative difference between the commodity as one form among many regulating the metabolism of human society and the commodity as the universal structuring principle” [HCC, p.85].<sup>8</sup> Under capitalism, commodity exchange increasingly penetrates all aspects and expressions of life and reshapes them in a reified manner.

Lukács notes the correlation between the commodity’s rise as the dominant social form and the emergence of a mystifying “veil of reification” [HCC, p.86]. Whereas feudal economic relations were once predominantly naked and personal, those under capitalism assume the appearance of, in Marx’s words, “the fantastic form of a relation between things” [HCC, p.86].<sup>9</sup> This process is both a pre-requisite and a product of the commodity as a universal category.<sup>10</sup> Consequently this category has the potential of being comprehended in its “undistorted essence” [HCC, p.86]. The reification produced by capitalism assumes “decisive importance both for the objective evolution of society and for the stance adopted by men towards it” [HCC, p.86]. It is crucial both for the “subjugation of men’s consciousness to the forms in which this reification finds expression” and to their attempts at

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to note the quotation marks in which Lukács places the notion of ‘phantom objectivity’. The question of the ontological status that ‘phantom objectivity’ is accorded has implications for its analysis.

<sup>8</sup> Where the commodity relation is dominant and universal both its nature as a category and its manifestation are different.

<sup>9</sup> Economic mystification in pre-capitalist societies arose primarily in regard to “money and interest-bearing capital”, as Marx points out, since production for use-values was predominant (e.g. feudal society) (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.86).

<sup>10</sup> It would be erroneous to conflate Lukács’s conception of the commodity as a universal category with a conception of a purely capitalist society (his discussion of Luxemburg bears this out (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.182)). Lukács is sensitive to the necessarily incomplete course of capitalist development, but his immediate concern is to elaborate its qualitatively distinctive dynamic tendencies in relation to previous forms of production.



rebellion and liberation from “servitude to the ‘second nature’ so created” [HCC, p.86].<sup>11</sup> Mankind finds this “‘second nature’” already existing in the “non-human objectivity of the natural laws of society” [HCC, p.86-87].

The process by which mankind’s activity becomes “objective and independent” of man and is itself dominated “by virtue of an autonomy alien to man” contains an objective and a subjective aspect [HCC, p.87]. The objective aspect is manifested in the existence of the “world of objects and relations between things”<sup>12</sup> that appear to control society as natural forces [HCC, p.87]. Upon examining these forces, the individual can discern prudent courses of action for personal gain, but is, as an individual, incapable of altering them. The subjective aspect is expressed in abstract human labour, to whose formal equality commodities are not only reduced, but are also produced in accordance with this “real principle” [HCC, p.87].

The “isolated ‘free’ labourer” is both pre-condition and product of modern capitalism [HCC, p.87]. This mode of production, as it develops from “handicrafts via co-operation and manufacture to machine industry”, displays “a continuous trend towards greater rationalisation, the progressive elimination of the qualitative, human and individual attributes of the worker” [HCC, p.88]. It is beyond Lukács’s scope to describe the growth of the “modern process of labour” [HCC, p.87].<sup>13</sup> He seeks to draw out the underlying “*principle at work*”, the “principle of rationalisation” [HCC, p.88].<sup>14</sup>

Rationalisation is the impetus towards a more precise calculation of every outcome of the process of production. It causes a fragmentation of both the object and the subject of production. First, the fragmentation of the object of production is the destruction of the “organic, irrational and

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<sup>11</sup> Lukács’s use of the concept of ‘second nature’ (drawn from Hegel) in quotation marks, as with ‘phantom objectivity’, suggests that he may not be employing the term in a direct sense. Elsewhere, the ‘natural laws’ of capitalist production are treated in the same manner (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, pp.91-92) – likewise see also, ‘ghostly objectivity’ (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.100)

<sup>12</sup> More concretely, “the world of commodities and their movements on the market” (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.87)

<sup>13</sup> Or indeed to discuss the importance of the problem of commodity structure for economics itself (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, pp.83-84), or to give an “analysis of the whole economic structure of capitalism” (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.93)

<sup>14</sup> The influence of Max Weber’s concern with this concept is evident here.

qualitatively determined unity of the product” [HCC, p.88]. Along with this rationalisation, necessarily comes a process of specialisation. The work process’s special operations exhibit a technical autonomy increasingly manifested also as an economic autonomy [HCC, p.89].

Second, the subject of production undergoes a process of fragmentation. Under capitalist relations of production man no longer appears as the “authentic master of the process” of work, “[n]either objectively nor in his relation to his work” [HCC, p.89]. Mankind displays an increasing “lack of will”, and mankind’s activity becomes “more and more *contemplative*” [HCC, p.89]. This fundamentally “transforms the categories of man’s immediate attitude to the world” [HCC, p.89].

The subject of labour is also rationally fragmented. The “reality” of daily life is defined by the “objectification of their labour-power into something opposed to their total personality” [HCC, p.90]. This “personality” becomes a helpless observer, “reduced to an isolated particle and fed into an alien system” [HCC, p.90]. All ties, previously binding individuals to a community, are “mediated to an increasing extent exclusively by the abstract laws of the mechanism which imprisons them” [HCC, p.90].

The principle of rationalisation must, Lukács claims, “embrace every aspect of life” [HCC, p.91]. It turns all consumer articles into “abstract members of a species” identical with their cohort, whilst simultaneously making them into “isolated objects” [HCC, p.91]. This isolation and fragmentation is “only apparent”, since for the first time in history “the whole of society is subjected, or tends to be subjected, to a unified economic process” [HCC, p.92]. Despite being illusory, this process is also, for Lukács, a necessary one.

Lukács argues that the “internal organisation of a factory” contains within it “in concentrated form the whole structure of capitalist society” [HCC, p.90]. For this reason, “the fate of the worker becomes the fate of society as a whole” [HCC, p.91].<sup>15</sup> Lukács gives special prominence to the

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<sup>15</sup> This can be compared with Marx’s comment in *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right. Introduction* that the proletariat forms “a sphere of society...which cannot emancipate itself without

worker's specific situation, "typical of society as whole", that "self-objectification, this transformation of a human function into a commodity reveals in all its starkness the dehumanised and dehumanising function of the commodity relation" [HCC, p.92].

Lukács has elaborated the basic phenomenon of reification, its integral connection with the principle of rationalisation, specialisation and the consequent fragmentation of both subject and object. This phenomenon transforms the whole of capitalist society, and yet the labourer plays a specific role within it. Lukács's concern with the specific position of the worker takes him beyond a general Weberian conception of 'rationalisation'. Lukács continues by analysing bourgeois attempts to comprehend the legal and state forms created in harmony with this structure.

### ii) The Process of Rational Calculation, Bureaucracy and Crisis

Lukács quotes Marx from *The German Ideology* (1846) to show that "[p]rivate property *alienates* not only the individuality of men, but also of things" [HCC, p.92]. The process of "rational objectification" destroys the "authentic substantiality" of use-values under capitalism. The individual object assumes a "new substantiality" as it confronts man directly [HCC, p.92]. It is "distorted in its objectivity by its commodity character" [HCC, p.93]. This process intensifies as "the relations which man establishes with objects as objects of the life process are mediated in the course of his social activity" [HCC, p.93].

Modern capitalism subsumes previously isolated primitive forms of capitalism into its increasingly unified and radical process of the extraction of surplus value. It is these previous forms that represent the paradigmatic form of capital for the reified consciousness. It is not the extraction of surplus value, actually functioning capital, which is immediately presented to this consciousness, but rather a fetishistic form of capital-in-itself.<sup>16</sup> The "potentiation of reification" is expressed most clearly in vulgar political economy, which portrays capital as an independent source of value [HCC,

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emancipating itself from – and thereby emancipating – all the other spheres of society" (in Marx, K *Early Writings* (London: Penguin, 1992 [1975]), p.256).

<sup>16</sup> Or in Marx's words: an "automatic fetish, self-expanding value, money generating money" (quoted in Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.93)

p.93]. With the production and reproduction of capitalism at ever-higher economic levels, the “structure of reification progressively sinks more deeply, more fatefully and more definitively into the consciousness of man” [HCC, p.93].

While some bourgeois thinkers recognise the “humanly destructive consequences” of reification, their accounts remain in thrall to its surface forms and they are incapable of penetrating the basic phenomenon of reification itself [HCC, p.94].<sup>17</sup> The separation of the manifestations of reification from an analysis of their economic bases “is facilitated by the fact that the [capitalist] process of transformation must embrace every manifestation of the life of society if the preconditions for the complete self-realisation of capitalist production are to be fulfilled” [HCC, p.95].

Reification thus influences and shapes in its own image the structural form of every institution in modern capitalist society: the state, its systems of justice and its administration. This distinguishes modern capitalism from “age-old capitalist forms of acquisition” [HCC, p.96]. Lukács associates this closely with Max Weber’s account of the organisation of institutions on the basis of rational calculation. The modern bureaucratic state, impossible in previous “irrationally constituted political systems”, is a vital pre-condition for modern business interests [HCC, p.96]. Only with the advent of “purely systematic categories” in modern society did the emergence of a “universally applicable” judicial system become possible to satisfy business’s concern for “exact calculation” [HCC, p.97].<sup>18</sup>

This judicial system must necessarily give the appearance of a permanent edifice; however the unceasingly dynamic system of capitalist production results in inevitable conflicts, as new forces strain at the constraints of the law. Although this process produces new formulations of law, its essential structure is unchanged. Lukács explains the situation as a matter of perspective seen, from the historian’s view outside the process, in the continuous revolutionising of capitalist society, and

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<sup>17</sup> Thus even “critical” bourgeois thinkers are unable to give a coherent explanation for Marx’s “topsy-turvy world, in which Monsieur Le Capital and Madame La Terre do their ghost-walking as social characters and at the same time as mere things” (quoted in Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.95).

<sup>18</sup> i.e. a judicial system where “the judge is more or less an automatic statute-dispensing machine” whose “behaviour is on the whole predictable” (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.96)

from within the process, in the direct experience of the “immobile face” it presents “towards the individual producer” [HCC, p.97].

This juridical manifestation of the conflict between “traditional and empirical craftsmanship and the scientific and rational factory” demonstrates man’s “*contemplative nature*” under capitalism and the limitation of man’s activity to the passive calculation of causation [HCC, p.97]. This is the “structural analogue”, says Lukács, of the behaviour of the operator of the machine [HCC, p.98].<sup>19</sup> With capitalism, the existence of a unified economic structure generates a “formally” unified structure of consciousness [HCC, p.100]. This is manifested both in the project to formalise laws of isolated aspects of society, and the division and commodification of workers’ mental faculties for work against their total personality.

As the division of labour advances, this phenomenon intensifies and extends itself into all spheres of life, including ethics. Man’s “qualities and abilities” are things to “‘own’ or ‘dispose of’” [HCC, p.100]. Even “subjectivity itself”, “knowledge, temperament and powers of expression” are “reduced to an abstract mechanism functioning autonomously”, separated from the personality of its “‘owner’”, and “from the material and concrete nature of the subject matter in hand” [HCC, p.100].<sup>20</sup> These problems of consciousness appear in proletariat and bourgeoisie alike, although for the latter in a “refined and spiritualised, but, for that very reason, more intensified form” [HCC, p.100].

Whilst the “rationalisation of the world appears to be complete”, having penetrated both “man’s physical and psychic nature”, it is, argues Lukács, limited “by its own formalism” [HCC, p.101]. The aggregate of the partial systems of capitalist society appears to constitute a “unified system of general ‘laws’” [HCC, p.101]. But the authority of these laws is predicated on their disregard for the “concrete aspects” of their “subject matter” [HCC, p.101]. This displays itself in the “incoherence of

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<sup>19</sup> In fact Lukács claims the activity of the entrepreneur and the machine operator display no “qualitative difference in the structure of consciousness”; rather “bureaucracy implies the adjustment of one’s way of life, mode of work and hence of consciousness, to the general socio-economic premises of the capitalist economy” (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.98).

<sup>20</sup> Lukács points to the reified faculties of the journalist and the “prostitution of his experiences and beliefs” as the very apogee of this process (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.100).

the system in fact”, manifested most dramatically in periods of crisis. During a crisis, says Lukács, “the immediate continuity between two partial systems is disrupted and their independence from and adventitious connection with each other is suddenly forced into the consciousness of everyone” [HCC, p.101].

The structure of a crisis is not qualitatively different than the “daily life of bourgeois society”, claims Lukács, but is simply the pinnacle of its intensity [HCC, p.101]. The “sudden dislocation” during a crisis is possible because “the bonds uniting its various elements” are a “chance affair even at their most normal” [HCC, p.101]. Society’s regulation by “‘eternal, iron’ laws which branch off into the different special laws” is “a pretence” [HCC, p.101]. The “true structure of society” appears in the partial laws that can only be formally systematised, while their concrete realities “can only establish fortuitous connections” [HCC p.101]. In the economic sphere, this is seen in the structure of capitalist production, which “rests on the interaction between a necessity subject to strict laws in all isolated phenomena and the relative irrationality of the total process” [HCC, p.102].

With capitalist rationalisation based on “private economic calculation” all aspects of life display an interaction between details “subject to laws and a totality ruled by chance” [HCC, p.102]. The total process may be law-like, but the character of this “law” is to be an “‘unconscious’ product of the activity of the different commodity owners acting independently of one another” [HCC, p.102]. The capitalist division of labour fragments every organic social process and makes these “partial functions autonomous”, so they develop “in accordance with their own special laws independently of the other partial functions of society” [HCC, p.103]. Actors with increasingly tangible claims to status become the “living embodiments of such tendencies” [HCC, p.103].<sup>21</sup>

Lukács traces the consequences of the basic phenomenon of reification into every sphere of the life of society. The structure of society which the process of rationalisation presupposes is “produced and reproduced” by this same process [HCC, p.102]. Lukács examines its tendency towards

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<sup>21</sup> e.g. lawyers, military officials, civil servants, and academics

bureaucratisation, its relation to formalism, and the consequent divergence of form and content. By highlighting the specificity of the worker's situation, Lukács seeks to transform Weber's conception of 'rationalisation' and place it within a Marxist framework. Thus the fragmentation between subject and object, identified in the basic process, is now linked by Lukács to a structural propensity towards crisis, not only in the economic sphere, but in all aspects of society.

### **iii) The Destruction of the Whole, the Problem of Formalism, and the Limits of Philosophy**

The "specialisation of skills" under capitalism increasingly destroys "every image of the whole", but not the aspiration towards it [HCC, p.103]. Lukács investigates the basis of this fragmentation of consciousness in life and the relationship between them. If a hypothetical vantage point could be posited outside of reified consciousness, he suggests, it would become capable of comprehending the "activity of modern science" [HCC, p.104].<sup>22</sup> This external standpoint could register the attempt of a particular science to eliminate the "ontological problems of its own sphere of influence" from the "realm where it has achieved some insight" [HCC, p.104]. This process intensifies, the more scientifically it becomes "a formally closed system of partial laws", such that "*its own concrete underlying reality* lies, methodologically and in principle, *beyond its grasp*" [HCC, p.104].

The problem of formalism is manifested in political economy's exclusion of "use-value" from its "sphere of investigation" [HCC, p.104].<sup>23</sup> The problem can potentially be offset by analytical devices,<sup>24</sup> but this only renders a "derivative" problem without negating the method's formalism or the initial elimination of its underlying concrete material [HCC, p.104]. It is precisely the "formal abstraction of these 'laws'" that "transforms economics into a closed partial system" [HCC, p.105]. Consequently bourgeois economics is incapable of penetrating "its own material substratum", and thereby arriving at an "understanding of society in its totality" [HCC, p.105].

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<sup>22</sup> The fact that Lukács regards science as an activity seems to be closely linked with his understanding of knowledge as "practical critical activity" (Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p.262).

<sup>23</sup> As Marx notes in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* – (quoted in Lukács, as above, p.104)

<sup>24</sup> Such as the "Theory of Marginal Utility", which takes "'subjective' behaviour on the market" as its starting point (Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p.104)

From the attempt to characterise a class's social character "together with its laws and needs" arises a close interaction between that "class and the scientific method" [HCC, p.105]. The "ultimate barrier" to bourgeois economic thought is the problem of crisis [HCC, p.105].<sup>25</sup> Lukács identifies a material transformation underlying this "methodological barrier" to the bourgeois comprehension of crisis [HCC, p.105]. Rationalisation of the economy, its transformation "into an abstract and mathematically oriented system of formal 'laws'", gives rise to this barrier [HCC, p.105]. As a result, in moments of crisis, the qualitative existence of "neglected things-in-themselves, as use-values", ordinarily leading "lives beyond the purview of economics", assume decisive importance [HCC, p.105].

The bourgeoisie's class situation and interests and their methodological approach to economics are, for Lukács, "merely aspects of the same dialectical unity" [HCC, p.105]. Despite attempts by bourgeois theory to understand the history of crises, there is a methodological inevitability to their "failure to comprehend use-value and real consumption", and to explain "the true movement of economic activity *in toto*" [HCC, p.106].<sup>26</sup> These failures cannot be ascribed to individuals, argues Lukács [HCC, p.107]. In *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913), Luxemburg identifies a historical tendency in political economy for the "synoptic view of economic life", first expressed by François Quesnay,<sup>27</sup> to progressively disappear as the "process of conceptualisation" develops more precisely in the hands of Adam Smith and then David Ricardo [HCC, p.107].

An equivalent tendency arises in jurisprudence, although with a "more conscious" reification [HCC, p.107]. Rather than a "rivalry between two principles within the same sphere",<sup>28</sup> there is in law from

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<sup>25</sup> Lukács draws a distinction between "vulgar economics" (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.30) and "classical economics" (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.105), as sub-categories of "bourgeois economics *in toto*" (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.105). He is here addressing the last of these, bourgeois economics as a whole.

<sup>26</sup> Lukács cites the example of the economist Mikhail Tugan-Baranovsky – (Tugan-Baranovsky, M I *Studien zur Theorie und Geschichte der Handelskrisen in England* (Jena: Fischer, 1901))

<sup>27</sup> Lukács refers to Quesnay's Physiocratic system as "great if also often primitive, faulty and inexact" (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.107). Marx describes it as "the first systematic conception of capitalist production" – Marx, K *Capital* Vol. II (London: Penguin, 1992 [1978]), p.436.

<sup>28</sup> i.e. between use-value and exchange value in economics



the outset a direct conflict of form and content, between its qualitative content and its rational grounding [HCC, p.107]. During the bourgeoisie's revolutionary period it was assumed that the formal equality of the law was capable of generating its own content. After its partial victory, the bourgeoisie begins to form a "critical" view of law whose content is "something purely factual" [HCC, p.108].

This extends the possibility of a "real advance in knowledge", but as capitalism develops, the attempt to ground law in reason is systematically abandoned in favour of a "formal calculus" to judge the "legal consequences of particular actions" [HCC, p.108-109]. The origin of laws and their politico-economic content are withdrawn from view. Thus the real basis for the development of law, "a change in the power relations between the classes", is obscured and disappears "into the sciences that study it" [HCC, p.109]. These sciences generate the same problems of "transcending their material substratum" as law and economics [HCC, p.109].

The ideal of a "comprehensive discipline" capable of gaining an "overall knowledge" by transcending the material substratum of special disciplines is hoped for in philosophy [HCC, p.109]. This universal project exposes the limits of bourgeois thought, debarred by its structure from revealing the reification underlying the problem of formalism. The results of the special sciences are given and necessary for philosophy, just as the special sciences find empirical reality as given. Modern bourgeois thought's structure delimits itself from access to the "real essence and substratum", in which the growth and decay of these forms can be understood [HCC, p.110].

The reified world is presented as "the only conceptually accessible, comprehensible world" [HCC, p.110]. Bourgeois philosophy is incapable of penetrating the material substratum at the basis of these fragmented disciplines. A radical philosophy cannot "concentrate on the concrete material totality" without presupposing an awareness of "the genesis and the necessity of this formalism" [HCC, p.109]. Neither would this philosophy be automatically transmitted to the fragmented disciplines, requiring an organic transformation that, unlike the contemplative mode of thought, is

inescapably tied to the transformation of the world in fact. Philosophy's "episodic trends" to challenge the "mechanical existence hostile to life" and the "scientific formalism alien to it" are, argues Lukács, "to one side of the main philosophical tradition" [HCC, p.110].<sup>29</sup>

In summary, Lukács analyses the destruction of every image of the whole in modern forms of bourgeois thought. He searches for this fragmentation's basis in life, and its expression in the spheres of economics and law.<sup>30</sup> Lukács's insight into the revolutionary period of the bourgeoisie demonstrates his sensitivity to the configuration of bourgeois projects oriented towards synthesis. In philosophy, the most universal form of bourgeois thought, we find a sphere in which numerous totalising projects are mounted, but Lukács concludes that "*a radical change in outlook is not feasible on the soil of bourgeois society*" [HCC, p.109-10]. There are however, Lukács would argue, important methodological insights into the problem of subjectivity to be gained from these failed attempts at synthesis by bourgeois thinkers, as I will examine in the following section.

## **b) The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought**

Lukács warns of the inevitable failure of bourgeois thought to overcome reification. Nevertheless he examines the most illuminating attempts of the bourgeoisie to do just that. This serves a dual purpose. Firstly it demonstrates the fundamental incapacity of the bourgeoisie to grasp the "antinomies of bourgeois thought" [HCC, p.110]. Secondly it allows Lukács to trace the development of the dialectical method, in the hands of the bourgeoisie, albeit in a negative and opaque form.

The history of bourgeois philosophy is a trove of attempts by the bourgeoisie to take "the antinomies of its life-basis" and drive them towards their "highest possible intellectual expression" [HCC, p.148].<sup>31</sup> Lukács is concerned in particular with two problems: the problem of totality and the problem of formalism. The former questions the capacity of man to know reality as a whole,

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<sup>29</sup> e.g. the revolt of irrationalist philosophy does nothing to "modify the situation as it is in fact" (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.110).

<sup>30</sup> The phenomenon of reification is manifested in a more conscious form in the sphere of law in which the problem of formalism is present from the start.

<sup>31</sup> e.g. the schisms between subject and object, form and content, freedom and determinism, universal and particular, abstract and concrete, etc.

whereas the latter is concerned with whether content can be deduced from form, or whether content is given to form externally.

Classical philosophy, according to Lukács, poses itself the task of locating a philosophy that would spell the “end of bourgeois society” [HCC, p.148]. Its failure, he argues, is a process that creates “a complete intellectual copy...of bourgeois society” [HCC, p.148]. However the “manner of this deduction”, the dialectical method, points beyond bourgeois society [HCC, p.148]. To understand the negative process by which Lukács’s attempts to isolate an authentic dialectical method and its importance for his own conception of subjectivity, I will examine his reconstruction of bourgeois attempts to overcome the antinomies of their thought.

### **i) Kant and the ‘Copernican Revolution’: the Cognitive Subject**

Lukács seeks to demonstrate that the distinction between modern critical philosophy and previous philosophies has its historical “*basis in existence*” in the reified structure of consciousness [HCC, p.112]. Modern philosophy finds it self-evident that human reason should conceive of formal systems as “constitutive of its own essence” [HCC, p.112]. This results in a conflation of formal rational knowledge with knowledge in general [HCC, p.112]. Immanuel Kant’s radical contribution to bourgeois thought was his formulation of the knowing subject that conceives “rational knowledge as the product of mind” [HCC, p.111]. This project to construct a universal rational system, and attain rational knowledge, gives rise to the problem of irrationality. Kant proposed the concept of the thing-in-itself to theorise this fundamental barrier to human knowledge. Despite the “disparate functions” it is contended to play in Kant’s philosophy, Lukács argues there is a unified explanation for its various effects [HCC, p.114].

The thing-in-itself unites two “two great, seemingly unconnected and even opposed complexes” [HCC, p.115]. The first relates to the content of forms by which we know the world “because we have created it ourselves” [HCC, p.115]. The second is the problematic of the “‘ultimate’ objects of knowledge” needed to transform a partial system into a complete totality [HCC, p.115]. In the

*Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argues that the second group of problems are non-scientific questions “falsely put”, which cannot be solved [HCC, p.115]. Kant therefore distinguishes between “phenomena” and “noumena”, and rejects efforts by “our” reason to comprehend the latter [HCC, p.115].

Despite Kant’s efforts, the thing-in-itself recurs in many forms in bourgeois thought as “mythological expressions to denote the unified subject” or “the unified object of the totality of the objects of knowledge” [HCC, p.115]. These two complexes of problems, the problem of content and the problem of comprehending the totality, are presented as if disconnected. For Kant, pure reason cannot synthesise or define an object, so “its principles cannot be deduced ‘directly from concepts but only indirectly by relating these concepts to something wholly contingent, namely *possible* experience” [HCC, p.116]. Thus, for Lukács, the thing-in-itself’s “distinct delimiting functions” are two aspects of a single problem [HCC, p. 116].

Once the question of producing the system as a whole is “consciously posed, it is seen that such a demand is incapable of fulfilment” [HCC, p.117]. A system based on the principles of rationalism must necessarily be a “co-ordination, or rather a supra- and subordination of the various partial systems of forms” [HCC, p.117]. Relations between these partial systems appear to arise from the logic constructing their constituent forms. Contents that could not be derived from this vision of systematisation present a problem. Lukács contrasts the Spinozist approach, which “dismisses every *donné* as non-existent”, with classical German philosophy which stoically retained the “irrational character of the actual contents” whilst attempting to transcend this philosophical impasse and construct a rational system [HCC, p117].

Impossible as their aspirations proved, the classical philosophers laid “the foundations of the dialectical method” by driving their systems in the “direction of a dynamic relativisation of these antitheses” [HCC, p.118]. They attempted to habilitate the “given” irrational content into their systems, by resolving every “actuality” into a “necessity” [HCC, p.118]. For Lukács, this method

presupposes the irrational in its concept, and by extension the possibility of this resolution. Johann Fichte formulated this gap between the “creation” of content in “the material basis of existence” and the “constructed world” as the dark void between the projection and the thing projected [HCC, p.119].

For Lukács, the recognition of this problem represents the end of “the age in which the bourgeois class naïvely equated its own forms of thought ... with reality and with existence as such” [HCC, p.119]. Conscious of this impasse, bourgeois philosophy increasingly abandons the attempt to understand systems as a totality and consequently penetrate their material basis, in preference of demarcating the limits of specialised partial system with a methodically pure world of rational categories. This contemplative philosophy which investigates the “formal presuppositions” of autonomous special sciences is unable to pose the problematic on which it stands [HCC, p.120].

With the bourgeoisie’s increasing control over the specifics of social existence, its ability to comprehend society as a totality diminishes. Classical German philosophy raises this “double tendency” of bourgeois society to consciousness, but is limited to doing so at the level of philosophy [HCC, p.121]. This, Lukács argues, prevents a concrete analysis of the problems necessary in order to present a concrete solution. However, it allows the “paradoxes” of this “historical stage in mankind’s development” to be seen as a problem in need of solution [HCC, p.121].

## **ii) Fichte and the Primacy of Practical Reason**

Classical philosophy’s attack on the dogmatism of the feudal worldview, claims Lukács, was equally dogmatic in its own premises: “the rational and formalistic mode of cognition” [HCC, p.121]. Confronted by the problem of the thing-in-itself, the classical philosophers turned “inwards” in search of a subject untroubled by a “*hiatus irrationalis*” [HCC, p.122]. This dogmatism blocked the only element capable of transcending the limitations of contemplative thought, “the *practical*” [HCC, p.122]. But, I would argue that tools can be found in these philosophical experiments that are later taken up and transformed by Lukács in the construction of his own theory of subjectivity.

Although Kant recognised the potential of practical solutions to the barriers of contemplative thought, it was Fichte who developed this idea most radically. Fichte's project takes "the subject of knowledge, the ego-principle" as its starting point [HCC, p.122]. It proposes "activity" as the unity of an "identical subject-object", from which the totality of content can be generated and a "positing of the objects" achieved [HCC, pp.122-123]. But the concrete exposition of the subject of this "action", argues Lukács, simply recreates the problems of classical German philosophy "on a philosophically higher plane" [HCC, p.123].

Kant's ethics "becomes purely formal and lacking in content", but must appropriate the contingency of the "world of phenomena" in order to become concrete [HCC, p.124-125]. It negatively attempts to create concrete content, by means of the principle of non-contradiction.<sup>32</sup> But it is impossible, as Hegel notes, to root out the self-contradictions of an immediate form without involving other necessary facts. Thus Kant's attempt to use the realm of practical reason to rehabilitate concepts "destroyed by the transcendental dialectic" returns to the problem of the thing-in-itself by another route [HCC, p.125].<sup>33</sup>

To resolve the problem of the thing-in-itself, suggests Lukács, would require the development of a principle of praxis that can annul the "indifference of form towards content" by relating to the concrete material substratum of action [HCC, p.126]. This praxis, qualitatively distinct from the "theoretical, contemplative and intuitive attitude", allows the resolution of "the antinomies of contemplation" and their connection to praxis within a new framework [HCC, p.126].

Kant shows the "limits of abstract contemplation", and in a "negative and distorted form" the path towards the true structure of praxis by raising "the dialectics of concept in movement as the only alternative to his own theory of the structure of concepts" [HCC, p.127]. Hegel's critique of Kant demonstrates a methodological path beyond purely formal thought that incorporates gradations of

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<sup>32</sup> This is the principle that "every action contravening ethical norms contains a self-contradiction" (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.125).

<sup>33</sup> This argues Lukács, is the same "methodological problem of the thing-in-itself" as found in the "objective and contemplative analysis in the *Critique of Pure Reason*" (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.125).

reality. It is Marx however who bases this conception in “historical reality and concrete praxis”, by developing a method that operates with “concepts of existence graduated according to the various levels of praxis” [HCC, p.127-128].

As the formal attitude is progressively raised to consciousness, the formal set of laws it develops operates with ever less recourse to its passive subject. The attempt by contemplative thought to expunge “every subjective and irrational element and every anthropomorphic tendency” appears to contradict the notion of contemplation concerned with the knowledge “of what ‘we’ have created” [HCC, p.128]. This contradiction, which Marx formulates in the fetish character of commodities,<sup>34</sup> reflects the antagonisms prevailing in modern society. Whilst modern society destroys “‘natural’” and irrational forms of relations, a “second nature” is continually renewed with a similar sense of “inexorable necessity” that pervaded previous epochs [HCC, p.128]. Lukács traces the consequences of this conception for the problem of knowledge.

First, there is a qualitative difference between the irrational limitations confronting man in previous epochs and the limitations of an aggregate of specialised systems. In this rational structure, argues Lukács, the stark contradictions of modern society are expressed: what is understood by “‘control’” becomes increasingly passive [HCC, p.129]. Creating space for the “free” action of the subject transforms that subject further into a “receptive organ” that adopts a vantage point appropriate to its own “best interests” [HCC, p.129-130].

Second, Lukács analyses the “assimilation of all human relations to the level of natural laws so conceived” [HCC, p.130]. The immediate presentation of the ideological forms of modern society makes this outlook appear as a natural consequence of the methodology of the natural sciences. It is in fact, argues Lukács, specifically bourgeois in character. By assuming the laws of nature as an “abstract substrata”, human relations are reduced to objective forms and the modern subject “assumes increasingly the attitude of the pure observer of these” [HCC, p.131].

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<sup>34</sup> Marx, K *Capital* Vol. I (London: Penguin, 1990 [1976]), p.163 - In the analysis section of this chapter I will examine the question of commodity fetishism, estrangement and alienation in Lukács more closely.

Third, Kant and subsequently Fichte's turn to the practical is thwarted by the "empty freedom" of the subject created, which is unable to penetrate its material substratum, and the consequent re-emergence of the problem of irrationality [HCC, p.133]. These attempts merely fix bourgeois antinomies as "unalterable foundations of human existence" [HCC, p.134]. Their methodological advance however is to have "indicated the point where the real synthesis *should* begin", and therefore to have clarified the relationship between contemplation and the practical such that its contradictions are held and extended in thought [HCC, p.134]. It is now possible to explore the turn taken by bourgeois philosophy towards the aesthetic and the creation of a concrete totality in search of a method of real, concrete synthesis.

### iii) Schiller and Aesthetic Totality

Bourgeois materialism is faced with the antinomy that "*man appears as the product of his social milieu*", and yet this "*social milieu*" is produced by man [HCC, p.134]. The "true basis" of this antinomy, says Lukács, is understood more clearly in its naïve formulation, "closer to its social background" [HCC, p.134]. First, he argues that with the development of bourgeois society, social problems "cease to transcend man and appear as the products of human activity" [HCC, p.135]. Second, Lukács claims that the man created from this bourgeois society is the "individual, egoistic bourgeois isolated artificially" [HCC, p.135]. And thirdly, that this results in a "social action" which is stripped of its "character as action" [HCC, p.135]. The intricate "problem-complexes"<sup>35</sup> that arise from this situation are decisive for "the way in which bourgeois man understands himself in his relation to the world" [HCC, p.136].

Lukács studies the historical development of the meaning of the term "'nature'" [HCC, p.136]. In its initial form deriving from "Kepler and Galileo", but expressed at its highest level in Kant, nature is conceived as the "aggregate of systems of the laws" regulating reality, in accord with the "economic structures of capitalist society" [HCC, p.136]. Lukács argues that the "revolutionary struggle of the

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<sup>35</sup> These are the complex manifestations of this antinomy in the history of thought.



bourgeoisie” plays a significant role in making bourgeois society appear “natural” in comparison to “the artifice, the caprice and the disorder of feudalism and absolutism” [HCC, p.136].

A different “*value concept*” of nature develops alongside this meaning [HCC, p.136]. Nature, in contrast to the “artificial structures of human civilisation”, becomes something specifically not created by man [HCC, p.136]. This can be found in Rousseau’s conception of social institutions which “strip man of his human essence” [HCC, p.136]. The result is that “the more culture and civilisation (i.e. capitalism and reification) take possession of him, the less able he is to be a human being” [HCC, p.136]. In this understanding is a “repository of all these inner tendencies opposing the growth of mechanisation, dehumanisation and reification” [HCC, p.136].

Nature as “that not created by man”, claims Lukács, provides the basis of a third meaning, a negation of the original definition [HCC, p.136]. For Friedrich Schiller, there is an “aspect of human inwardness” which has remained natural, or with the desire to return to a natural state [HCC, p.136]. This meaning of nature is that as “authentic humanity”, as an “ideal” and a “tendency” to transcend reification and to reclaim “the true essence of man” [HCC, p.136].

This “attitude” to the impasse of bourgeois thought, suggests Lukács, possesses “a very real and concrete field of activity”, “namely art” [HCC, p.137]. Here, artistic achievement is the struggle to conceive the genesis of a concrete totality, whose form takes its orientation from the content of its material substratum. The historical connection of the principle of art with conceptions of nature made it appear suited to resolve both the antinomies of “contemplative theory and ethical practice” [HCC, p.138]. This principle is not able however, of its own accord, to overcome the antinomies of bourgeois thought.

Artistic achievement offers the possibility of “anchoring” the transcendental postulate in the human consciousness [HCC, p.138]. This principle, in conjunction with the task of locating the “subject of ‘action’”, results in the problem of “intuitive understanding”, whose content is “created” rather than given [HCC, p.138]. Such an understanding might, in the view of Kant, “indicate the point from which

it would be possible to complete and perfect the system" [HCC, p.138]. In those who followed Kant, this became a dogmatic foundation of their systematic philosophy.

Schiller's elevation of his aesthetic principle, that man is "*fully human only when he plays*", to a position of universality, attempts to make the "*socially destroyed*" man "*whole again in thought*" [HCC, p.139]. Whilst this project necessarily fails within the given framework, Lukács argues that its achievement lies in the fact that "the problematic nature of social life for capitalist man becomes fully conscious" [HCC, p.139]. The aesthetic mode gives many "valuable insights into the question of reification", but only at the cost of the aestheticisation of the whole world.

The philosophical "discovery of art", argues Lukács, makes it possible "either to provide yet another domain for the fragmented subject", or to "tackle the problem of 'creation' from the side of the subject" [HCC, p.140]. Philosophy is no longer charged with creating a Spinozan "objective system on the model of geometry" [HCC, p.140]. Its task is to deduce the unity of this disintegrating creation and, in the "final analysis", to "create the subject of the 'creator'" [HCC, p.140].

#### **iv) Hegel and History**

By moving beyond "pure epistemology", philosophy's project is no longer to investigate the "possible conditions" of given forms of thought and action, but an expression of the desire to transcend the reified fragmentation of the subject and its correspondingly rigid and impenetrable objects [HCC, p.140]. The formulation of this aspiration, expressed by Goethe, for words and deeds to overcome the isolation and the fragmentation of humanity necessarily exposes, says Lukács, the "different meanings assumed by the subjective 'we'" [HCC, p.141].

In order to reconstitute the "unity of the subject", claims Lukács, the "intellectual restoration of man" must necessarily take a path through "the realm of fragmentation and disintegration" [HCC, p.141]. Lukács describes the different forms of fragmentation as "necessary phases" on this path [HCC, p.141]. The historical development of these antitheses with the advancement of culture, in the

words of Hegel, leads to the expression of their most general form between “absolute subjectivity and absolute objectivity” [HCC, p.141].

Hegel contention that the most intense totality is “only possible as a new synthesis out of the most absolute separation” focuses these issues on the question of dialectical method [HCC, p.141]. His method calls “objectively and scientifically” for an intuitive understanding to advance beyond the limits of the rationalistic principle of knowledge. This is the only means by which to address the problem of the irrationality of the thing-in-itself, and the problem of genesis, “the creation of the creator of knowledge” [HCC, p.141].

Prior to Hegel, users of the dialectic failed to link the dissolution of rigid concepts concretely to the logic of content, to the problem of irrationality [HCC, p.142]. It was Hegel, who first consciously reworked each problem of logic in the “the qualitative material nature” of its content, in its underlying matter in the “logical and philosophical sense” [HCC, p.142]. Hence he was able, albeit problematically, to establish “a completely new logic of the *concrete concept*, the logic of totality” [HCC, p.142]. Hegel’s dialectical process is not simply the objective relativisation of concepts or the subjective manipulation of “mental possibilities” [HCC, p.142]. It engulfs both subject and object such that the subject is both “producer and product” of the process on which the world imposes itself with “full objectivity” [HCC, p.142].

In Spinoza, the basis of a relationship of identity between the order in the “realm of ideas” and in the “realm of things”, is located in the object, the substance [HCC, p.143]. Every subjectivity disappears before the “rigid purity and unity of this substance” [HCC, p.143]. However with Hegel, “objectivity tends in every respect in the opposite direction” [HCC, p.143]. Hegel identifies the substance, in which the “underlying order” of reality and the “connections between things” can be found, as history [HCC, p.143]. It is only in the process of history, argues Lukács, in the “uninterrupted outpouring” of the qualitatively new that a “paradigmatic order can be found in the realm of things” [HCC, p.144].

The orientation of the historical process towards content and the qualitatively unique in the concrete totality, Lukács claims, reveals the potential for genuine knowledge. It allows the “two main strands” of transcendence, the problem of the irrationality of the thing-in-itself and the problem of the concreteness of the individual content and of totality, to “appear as a unity” [HCC, p.145]. Reality can be seen as a historical process created by us, as our “action”, by overcoming the dogmatism of the formal, rational system [HCC, p.145]. However, to comprehend the unity of subject and object through which this position may be achieved the problem of exhibiting the “we which is the subject of history” re-emerges in a more concrete form [HCC, p.145].

Hegel, most advanced amongst the classical philosophers, proposed the World Spirit as this subject [HCC, p.146]. He tried to explain the nature of history by means of “the ruse of reason” [HCC, p.146]. But in going beyond history to a point where reason discovers itself in the totality of the “absolute spirit”, the identical subject-object is diverted into mythology [HCC, p.147]. For Lukács, since history is the “uniquely possible life-element of the dialectical method”, it is the “living body of the total system”, and not simply an aspect of that totality [HCC, p.147]. History either permeates all parts of Hegel’s system, or is denied the essence ascribed to it in his method.

First, if the relation between reason and history is contingent, an “irrational dependence on the ‘given’” re-emerges, and the problem of the thing-in-itself [HCC, p.147]. Second, Hegel’s contention that “*history has an end*” in his own system of philosophy, seems to contradict his own historical method, and arises from the ambiguous relationship between history and absolute spirit in his system [HCC, p.147]. And thirdly, the supra-historical process of genesis that Hegel has been forced to create, due to the limitations of classical philosophy, is confronted by the “historicity of all categories and their movements” and, given the objective unity of dialectical genesis and history, itself becomes historical at all points [HCC, p.147-148]. Thus if Hegel’s method degenerates and does “violence to history”, then “history will gain its revenge” by fragmenting the method [HCC, p.148].

Marx recognised the contradictions in Hegel's system and criticised the "demiurgic role of the 'spirit' and the 'idea'" [HCC, p.148]. Whilst Lukács claims that this demiurge only appears to make history in Hegel's philosophy, even this appearance is enough to "dissipate wholly the attempt to break out of the limits imposed on formal and rationalistic (bourgeois, reified) thought" [HCC, p.148]. For despite giving the antinomies of its "life-basis" the "highest possible intellectual expression", classical philosophy is unable "to find a philosophy that would mean the end of bourgeois society" [HCC, p.148]. Classical philosophy, according to Lukács, points beyond its own limits to the dialectical method [HCC, p.148]. This method can only be developed by a class that is able "on the basis of its life-experience" to become the "identical subject-object, the subject of action; the 'we' of the genesis", namely the proletariat [HCC, p.149].

### **c) The Consciousness of the Proletariat**

Lukács argues that Hegel's philosophy does not live up to its own aspirations. The limitation of the dialectical method on the plane of classical philosophy, from the bourgeois standpoint, results in a bifurcation of history and genesis. From the standpoint of the proletariat, the dialectical method undergoes a metamorphosis. For Lukács, the proletariat is not only the solution to a philosophical problem, but also the empirical class with the potential life-experience to penetrate reification. I will examine later the consequences of this structural separation for Lukács's argument.<sup>36</sup> In the following section he examines the standpoint of the proletariat, and lays out his conception of the philosophy of praxis: the relation between mediation and immediacy, the notion of universal history and structural forms, myths of the individual and the absolute, the historical development of humanism, and how the proletariat can gain true historical knowledge.

In the *Introduction* to his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx announces the "special position" that he attributes to the "proletariat in society and in history" [HCC, p.149].<sup>37</sup> It is from this

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<sup>36</sup> i.e. the structural separation of Lukács's analysis of reification, critique of the antinomies of bourgeois thought and the exposition of the proletarian standpoint

<sup>37</sup> Marx *Early Writings*, p.256

standpoint, says Lukács, that the proletariat can “function as the identical subject-object of the social and historical processes of evolution” [HCC, p.149]. According to Lukács, proletarian self-understanding coincides with the objective understanding of the nature of society. Through its “conscious intervention” to achieve its own class aims, the proletariat realises the objective aims of society, which otherwise remain “abstract possibilities and objective frontiers” [HCC, p.149].

But, Lukács asks whether adopting this standpoint causes any change since the forms of existence in which the proletariat appears are “repositories of reification” in its “acutest and direst form”, and result in “the most extreme dehumanisation” [HCC, p.149]. Lukács argues, following Marx, that all classes “represent the same human self-alienation” in capitalist society, although the process is different for each [HCC, p.149].<sup>38</sup> The bourgeoisie are confirmed in their “self-alienation” and it gives a “semblance of human existence” to their reified lives [HCC, p.149]. On the other hand, the proletariat experiences its own powerlessness in the process of “alienation” and the “reality of an inhuman existence” [HCC, p.149].

### **i) Universal History, Mediation and Structural Forms**

Although there is a “grain of truth” in the insight that bourgeoisie and proletariat access the same immediate “objective reality of social existence”, for Lukács, this immediate existence only becomes an “authentically objective reality” through a process of social mediation that is fundamentally different for each class [HCC, p.150]. The “*specific categories of mediation*” that raise immediacy to the “level of consciousness” are different due to the position of each class in the “‘same’ economic process” [HCC, p.150]. The consequence of the view that holds mediation to be a merely subjective evaluation of reality is a standpoint in which “objective reality has the character of a thing-in-itself” [HCC, p.150].

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<sup>38</sup> Lukács quotes from Marx in *The Holy Family* (Marx, K *The Holy Family* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1956)) – The importance of the different conceptual apparatuses deployed by Marx in *The Holy Family* and Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* should be noted.

This view, expressed by the Neo-Kantian philosopher Heinrich Rickert, uses the concept of “cultural values” to isolate the subjectivity of the historian in order to create “a mode of historical narrative that is valid for all” [HCC, p.151]. Cultural values become the benchmark of objectivity, but their class-nature may not be questioned within the given framework. This process transfers subjectivity to these “cultural values”, which represent a new, impenetrable thing-in-itself [HCC, p.151].

The pursuit of a theory of value in the philosophy of history reveals the problem of the relation between form and content, as well as the question of totality. Rickert contends that a universal history is possible only within a value-based system, whilst objective knowledge of individual historical events is available on a “purely empirical” basis [HCC, p.151]. Lukács argues that attempting to explain the ‘facts’ of history in isolation from a universal history eventually makes even the comprehension of individual historical events impossible [HCC, p.151].

Universal history can be understood neither as a “mechanical aggregate” of events nor as a “transcendental heuristic principle” opposed to these events [HCC, p.152]. The “totality of history”, says Lukács, is a “real historical power” yet to become conscious, and which is inseparable from the historical facts of which it is the “ultimate ground” [HCC, p.152]. From this perspective individual facts maintain their validity only in relation to the totality of history, and yet this power cannot “annul” their “factual existence” [HCC, p.152]. To treat the phenomena of history in isolation is to disfigure their actual content.<sup>39</sup>

According to Lukács, the essence of history lies in changing “*structural forms*”, which are the “focal points” between man and environment [HCC, p.153].<sup>40</sup> These forms can be comprehended only when the “the uniqueness of an epoch” is grounded in and exhibited through them [HCC, p.153].

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<sup>39</sup> Lukács argues that Marx’s *Capital* demonstrates how the bourgeois economists treat the machine as an “isolated unique thing”, distorting its “true objective nature”, and presenting its function within capitalist production as an “eternal essence” (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness* pp.152-153).

<sup>40</sup> These structural forms “at any given moment” determine “the objective nature of both his inner and his outer life” (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.153).

The immediate standpoint cannot grasp these forms and it must be transcended in an increasingly concrete manner in order to comprehend the totality of the historical process.

The formal mode of thought is methodologically limited from progressing permanently beyond the contingent collection of factual material. Its knowledge is haphazardly connected to the underlying historical reality and is unable to transcend its state of immediacy, even if it becomes aware of this fact. In Lukács's Marxism, the immediate is placed in a dialectical relation to the mediations necessary for the exhibition of the object. The forms of mediation, he argues, "can be shown to be *the structural principles and the real tendencies of the objects themselves*" [HCC, p.155].<sup>41</sup>

Thus, intellectual genesis and historical genesis must be "identical in principle" [HCC, p.155]. Their fragmentation in the development of bourgeois thought is produced by an equally fragmented reality whereby content-less formal laws are set against the irrational contingency of given facts. This fragmented form is a prerequisite for the "critical" appreciation of its structure, but alone the latter fails to facilitate a true genesis of the object, "the thinking subject", and inevitably returns to a state of immediacy [HCC, p.155].

Lukács argues that a dialectical relationship between immediacy and mediation is necessary in order to ground bourgeois thought in its basis in socio-historical reality. In *Capital*, Marx demonstrates bourgeois thought's "systematic avoidance of the categories of mediation" in the realm of economics [HCC, p.156]. The antinomies of bourgeois thought demonstrate, in the final analysis, the unmediated character of its relationship with reality.

The permanent division of the "material content of life" from, what Georg Simmel calls, "the non-reifiable remnant" takes on the appearance of an immutable set of laws or values [HCC, p.157]. Bourgeois thought abandons the understanding of the present "as a historical problem" [HCC, p.157]. Even in historical form, it cannot traverse the rift between the subject and object of

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<sup>41</sup> I will compare later the importance of the category of tendency for both Lukács and Antonio Gramsci.



knowledge. This “pernicious chasm” can only be transcended by adopting a truly historical method that comprehends the qualitatively new in the present.

## ii) The Historical Knowledge of the Proletariat: Self-Knowledge and Genesis

For Lukács, the historical knowledge of the proletariat originates in its recognition of its own position within society, of its genesis and necessity. History and genesis are different aspects of the dialectical process, but their unity requires the fulfilment of two conditions. First, the categories of human existence must be determinants of that existence and not simply descriptive. Second, the internal structure of these categories must be seen as an organic part of the historical process, neither a collection of contingent forms nor an isolated and abstract logic.

As Marx notes in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, the logical succession of these categories appears to be an inversion of their historical development [HCC, p.159]. In order to understand the objectivity of this social creation, the question of the economic structure of society must be confronted.<sup>42</sup> A “real, profane history of men” neither accepts empirical reality as given, nor rejects it subjectively. A utopian “‘ought’” presupposes a reality rigidly separate in its objectivity. To escape this contradiction, bourgeois thought assumes the device of an infinite progression, which Hegel critiques as two united but antithetical relative determinants each staking their independence [HCC, p.161].

The dichotomy of ‘ought’ and ‘is’, a new form of the problem of the thing-in-itself, places two qualitatively incommensurable aspects in a quantitative relationship. The “authentic theme of history”, growth and decay, becomes incomprehensible in bourgeois thought [HCC, p.162]. Qualitative change is masked and reduced to a gradual quantitative transition, meaning that history can only be comprehended as a series of catastrophic interruptions.

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<sup>42</sup> The separation of “principle (i.e. category) from history” is characteristic of Proudhon’s “pseudo-Hegelianism and vulgar Kantianism” as demonstrated by Marx in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.160).

In transcending the rationalist reflections of empirical reality there is a danger of abandoning immanent reality altogether [HCC, p.162]. The empirical existence of the objects of reality only appears unmediated through their artificial isolation. The proletariat's transcendence of this unmediated viewpoint does not require a "*tabula rasa*", but takes "bourgeois society together with its intellectual and artistic productions" as its "*point of departure*" for a qualitatively new method capable of comprehensively transforming the whole of society [HCC, p.163].<sup>43</sup>

The methodological function of the categories of mediation is to make the "immanent meanings" of the objects of bourgeois society "objectively effective" and capable of being made conscious by the proletariat [HCC, p.163]. Bourgeois and proletarian methodologies are distinguished, not simply theoretically, but as an expression of their different class existence. The unmediated nature of bourgeois thought reflects the immediate form in which it is presented with the objects of reality. Thus, Lukács claims that knowledge "yielded by the standpoint of the proletariat stands on a higher scientific plane objectively" [HCC, p.163].

The proletarian method makes possible an "adequate historical analysis of capitalism" [HCC, p.164]. However, the 'one-sidedness' of the bourgeois view of history is a necessary part of the development of knowledge about society [HCC, p.164]. The problem of immediacy is an outward barrier for the bourgeoisie, but it confronts the proletariat inwardly. Since the dialectical method reproduces "its own essential aspects", the proletariat is repeatedly confronted by the problem of its "point of departure" [HCC, p.164].<sup>44</sup> The proletariat's potential resolution of the problem does not alter immediate reality for either class, but it is driven beyond immediacy by the "motor of class interests" [HCC, p.164].

The bourgeoisie's "abstract categories of reflection", Lukács argues, "conceal the dialectical structure of the historical process in daily life", but occasionally confront them with "unmediated

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<sup>43</sup> Lukács contrasts this to the tearing down of feudal forms of thought by the nascent bourgeoisie (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.163).

<sup>44</sup> And thus denies any "smooth, linear development of ideas" (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.164).

catastrophes" [HCC, p.164-165]. The bourgeoisie give a "double form" to the subject and object of the historical process [HCC, p.165]. The individual is conceived as a perceiving subject set against a system of objective necessities, whereas the "conscious activity of the individual" lies on the "object-side of the process" [HCC, p.165]. The consciousness of the collective subject, the class, is disrupted, and its activity beyond the consciousness of the "apparent" individual subject [HCC, p.165]. This method's rigidity is broken at moments of crisis, but is quickly replaced by another equally rigid form.

Social reality does not exist in in this "double form" for the proletariat since it is made aware of its existence as the "pure *object* of societal events" [HCC, p.165]. Every worker is confronted with the knowledge that fulfilling their basic needs is merely an aspect in the process of reproducing capital. The process of abstraction in the worker's life separates them from their commodified labour-power. Its sale must be integrated into a rationalised and mechanical process. The capitalist's personality is fragmented and reified, but appears as the subject of an activity which masks this. The worker is "denied the scope for such illusory activity" [HCC, p.166]. The quantitative determinants of the capitalist's calculations appear transformed into the qualitative categories of the worker's life making the penetration of these contemplative "categories of reflection" possible [HCC, p.166].

The quantification of labour-time, claims Lukács, is a "reified and reifying cloak" that obscures the "true essence" of the object [HCC, p.166]. For the worker, labour-time is not only the objective form of the commodity sold, "labour-power", but also the "determining form" of the worker's existence "as subject, as human being" [HCC, p.167]. The worker's social existence forces it "*wholly* on the side of the object"; it divides their commodified labour-power from their personality [HCC, p.167]. If the object is raised above a relation of pure immediacy, the situation may be raised to consciousness through this separation between subjectivity and objectivity. Whereas the organic character of work historically prevented slaves and serfs achieving clarity of their social position, under capitalist

production work becomes “social by assuming the form of its immediate antithesis, the form of abstract universality” [HCC, p.168].

As the product of a “multiplicity of mediations”, a dialectical relationship is created between the social existence of the worker and the forms of their consciousness [HCC, p.168]. The creation of worker’s self-consciousness is the “*self-consciousness of the commodity*”; it modifies the relationship between consciousness and the object [HCC, p.168]. This is distinguished from a “‘thinking’ slave”, who is methodologically unable to become conscious of its own social situation [HCC, p.169]. The worker’s self-knowledge is practical; it forces “*an objective structural change in the object of knowledge*” [HCC, p.169].

Through this self-consciousness, the “qualitative living core” of use-value, the “special objective character of labour as a commodity”, is revealed from beneath the “cloak of the thing” [HCC, p.169]. Consciousness of the “commodity character of labour power” can reveal the fetish character of every commodity [HCC, p.169]. Prior to this consciousness “the special nature of labour” acts as the “unacknowledged driving wheel in the economic process” [HCC, p.169].

The dialectical method aims at, but does not immediately provide, the knowledge of society as a historical totality. It is distinguished from bourgeois thought and the categories of reflection by the fact that the whole can be comprehended within a correct grasp of each part [HCC, p.170]. Lukács holds that Marx’s chapter in *Capital* on the fetish character of commodities contains the whole of historical materialism.<sup>45</sup> The aspect must be seen as “a point of transition to the totality”, in order that each new aspect should not ossify in a new immediacy [HCC, p.170]. For Lukács, the dialectical process is identical with the course of history.<sup>46</sup>

The bourgeoisie and proletariat find the same immediately given situation, but the bourgeoisie, due to its class position, is trapped in this immediacy. The proletariat is forced beyond it “by the specific

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<sup>45</sup> Marx *Capital* Vol. I, p.163

<sup>46</sup> Hegel’s goal of the absolute “as a *result*” remains the project of Marxism with different “objects of knowledge” (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.170).

dialectics of its class situation" [HCC, p.171]. Commodification subsumes and distorts the form of "every aspect of life" [HCC, p.171]. Whilst the bourgeoisie attempts to quantify qualitative developments within its rational calculations, for the proletariat they represent the potential to make the "social character of labour" increasingly conscious and concrete [HCC, p.171].

Whilst the "basic structure of reification" can be seen in all the "social forms of modern capitalism (e.g. bureaucracy)", this structure can only be made "fully conscious in the work-situation of the proletarian" [HCC, p.171-172]. The proletariat experiences the "naked and abstract form of the commodity" in its work, whereas "other forms of work" disguise the commodity form "behind the façade of 'mental labour', of 'responsibility'" [HCC, p.172]. These forms of work are mystified in proportion to the penetration of reification into "the soul of the man" [HCC, p.172].

Resistance against reification becomes increasingly difficult for those whose work commodifies their very deepest faculties. Class-consciousness is obscured by the "status-consciousness" and exaggerated belief in social mobility encouraged amongst intermediate groups [HCC, p.172]. The "most typical manifestation of reification", the "constitutive type of capitalist socialisation", argues Lukács, is "pure abstract negativity in the life of the worker" [HCC, p.172]. But this is also the focal point at which the structure of capitalist society can be subjectively made conscious and penetrated in practice.

### **iii) A Standpoint beyond Immediacy: Proletarian Consciousness, Force and the Deed**

The emergence of proletarian consciousness is not the inevitable result of the development of capitalism. Although the "indispensable" preconditions for this process are the concentration of workers, the mechanisation of work, and the levelling down of living standards, this is only one side of the picture [HCC, p.173]. Whilst it is an unmediated fact that the labourer is a commodity, the potential for labourers to become aware of themselves as commodities does not solve the problem. The "unmediated consciousness" of the commodity is simply "an awareness of abstract isolation", of an "abstract relationship – external to consciousness" [HCC, p.173]. Lukács argues that attributing

“an immediate form of existence to class-consciousness” results, even within a Hegelian framework, in a mythological species-consciousness rendering the relations between this encompassing power and the individual consciousness incomprehensible [HCC, p.173]. This leads to a mechanistic psychology and “finally a demiurge governing historical movement” [HCC, p.173].

Class consciousness “brought about through a common situation and common interests” is not unique to the working class [HCC, p.173-174]. Lukács contends that proletarian class consciousness is distinguished by its transcendence of immediacy, representing “an aspiration towards society in its totality” [HCC, p.174]. The “*logic*” of this consciousness is to elevate itself repeatedly and without pause beyond each new immediacy that arises from the previous transcendence. Marx recognises the “conscious and theoretical character” of the Silesian weavers’ revolt in their opposition to private property and attacks on their hidden enemy, the banker [HCC, p.174]. For Lukács, this aspect of their class consciousness throws “sharply into relief” the differences between the bourgeois and proletarian standpoints [HCC, p.174]. The unmediated character of the bourgeois standpoint is manifested in the “‘natural laws’ of society” [HCC, p.174]. The original representation of these laws, as the “principle of the overthrow of (feudal) reality”, is transformed over time (whilst maintaining the same structure) into the principle for “conserving (bourgeois) reality” [HCC, p.175].

For the proletariat, there is a practical interaction between the “awakening consciousness” and the object of this consciousness [HCC, p.175]. The objects are seen as “aspects of the development of society”, becoming part of the dialectical totality [HCC, p.175]. Since the “innermost kernel” of this movement is praxis, whose point of departure is action, the “immediate objects of action” undergo a “total, structural transformation” [HCC, p.175]. The category of totality ensures that actions limited to particular objects are “directed objectively towards a transformation of totality” [HCC, p.175].

Lukács's "essentially dialectical" conception of history means that the "way reality changes" can be observed in "every decisive moment" [HCC, p.175].<sup>47</sup>

Capitalism's historical specificity resides in its "abolition of all 'natural barriers'" and transformation of relations between human beings into "purely social relations" [HCC, p.176]. The "abstract, rational categories of reflection" are the "objectively immediate expression" of this socialisation [HCC, p.176]. For the bourgeoisie, this socialisation takes an eternal appearance, as all human relations are reified under the categories of its thought.<sup>48</sup> For the proletariat, the "transformation of labour into a commodity" results in the de-humanisation of its immediate existence and the destruction of every "organic" element of society [HCC, p.176]. In this "objectification", Lukács says, "in the rationalisation and reification of all social forms", it is possible to see "how society is constructed from the relations of men with each other" [HCC, p.176].<sup>49</sup> The proletariat's unique position at the "focal point" of this socialising process gives it the potential to glimpse these relations [HCC, p.176].

Human relations are mediated by "objective laws of the process of production" [HCC, p.177]. Several things follow from this. First, it is necessary to begin from reified relations and laws as they are immediately manifested in order to discover the human beings at their "core" [HCC, p.177]. Second, the social reality of these forms necessitates the practical abolition of the "*actual forms of social life*" [HCC, p.177]. A critique that fails the test of action will regress towards the reified forms of immediacy. Third, praxis must become conscious of the process "immanent in these forms" and the logic of its transcendence [HCC, p.177].

For Lukács, dialectics is not inserted artificially into history, rather it is "derived from history made conscious as its logical manifestation at this particular point in its development" [HCC, p.177].

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<sup>47</sup> It has therefore sometimes been possible, as with Shakespeare and Aeschylus, to trace the contours of changes in society through art long before it was possible, with the advent of historical materialism, to consciously "grasp their essence...and their place in the whole process" (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.176).

<sup>48</sup> Thus claims Lukács, "such thought trails behind objective developments" (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.176).

<sup>49</sup> Here is an example, as I will discuss later, of Lukács's conflation of the terms objectification and reification.

Fourth, the historical dialectic, as the contradictions of history become consciousness, finds its expression “in practice” in the proletariat [HCC, p.178]. This dialectical necessity requires that proletarian consciousness becomes “deed” [HCC, p.178]. The act of becoming conscious, the self-consciousness of an object, is inextricably intertwined with the objective transformation of the form of that object; it is a practical transition.

The “eruption” of the irrational gap between the bourgeoisie’s specialised rational systems potentially dissolves its eternal “laws” into a dialectical form, but the outcome of this is ultimately decided through class struggle and the “conscious action of men” [HCC, p.178]. The “basic issue” of class struggle, says Lukács, is “the problem of *force*” [HCC, p.178]. The breach of immediacy has different implications for the contending classes. For the bourgeoisie it is “the continuation of its daily reality” [HCC, p.179]. The proletariat’s ability to exert force is dependent on the degree to which it has transcended the immediate standpoint.

For Lukács, the revolutionary feature of the materialist dialectic is the dissolution of the immutability of individual objects into a process found concretely in the simple reproduction of capital. Seen as a continuous process, every capital is transformed into an accumulated capitalised surplus-value. This dissolution does not deny the significance of relations in their fetishised appearance. For bourgeois thought, relations appear as things torn from their basis. The proletariat has the potential to penetrate these appearances and comprehend the commodity relationship, and to emerge as the “*subject of this process*”, the self-consciousness of society [HCC, p.181].

#### **iv) The Problem of Reality: Fact and Tendency**

Lukács ascribes a “*higher reality*” to “*the developing tendencies of history*” than to “*empirical ‘facts’*” [HCC, p.181]. There is an “*antagonistic process*” in capitalist society guided not by consciousness but by an immanent dynamic [HCC, p.181]. This process is immediately manifested in the rule of the past over the present, capital’s domination over labour. The bourgeoisie, he argues, is incapable of seeing beyond this reified reality, without announcing its own dissolution as a class. Only from the



standpoint of the proletariat can these reified forms be dissolved into processes “of which man is the driving force”, and the tendencies inherent in capitalism be made conscious [HCC, p.181].

The ‘laws’ of capitalism are implemented “over the heads” of those who appear as their “active embodiments and agents” [HCC, p.181]. The real class-nature of their calculated interests remains concealed to them. The strength of this “dialectical antagonism controlling the phenomena of capitalist society” is demonstrated by the fact that this process is not a “unique event, a catastrophe” [HCC, p.182]. Rather the reified structure of thought is produced and reproduced in the continuous movement of the relations of capitalist society.

Lukács notes that the “conversion of social-democratic ideas into bourgeois ones” is marked by the abandonment of the dialectical method [HCC, p.182].<sup>50</sup> The reduction of social tendencies to “ethical imperatives” and a reliance on the “facts” represents a failure to understand the real motor of history [HCC, p.182]. Dialectical trends advance not by an infinite series of quantitative changes, but are “expressed in terms of an unbroken *qualitative revolution* in the structure of society” [HCC, p.182]. The bourgeoisie’s increased control over “matters of detail” also increases the potency of tendencies beyond its control [HCC, p.183].

Lukács argues that the “basic thought” underlying Marx’s *Capital* is “the retranslation of economic objects from things back into processes, into the changing relations between men” [HCC, p.183]. The importance for theory of particular economic forms is determined, says Lukács, by their relative centrality to this process of “retranslation” [HCC, p.183]. In this way certain forms of capital assume primacy over other derivative forms.<sup>51</sup> The historical role of derivative forms is limited to a “negative function” of dissolving the “original forms of production”, the ultimate development of which is rather determined by the constitution of the old mode itself [HCC, p.183].

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<sup>50</sup> Here Lukács has in mind the ideas of the “opportunists” in the Second International, as theorised by Eduard Bernstein (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.182).

<sup>51</sup> e.g. industrial capital over merchant or finance capital

At the same time, from a theoretical perspective, the only “empirical laws” that appear to govern these forms are not “the expression of any universal social trend”, but those “enforced by competition” [HCC, p.183]. The true character of the “facts” and “empirical laws” can be exhibited in a “authentic, concrete and scientific” manner, if they are investigated in the context of the prevailing tendencies in society, as dependent on the “concrete totality to which they belong and in which they become ‘real’” [HCC, p.183-184].

Capitalist society simultaneously develops man’s capacity to control nature, whilst creating an intellectual division between “facts” and processes [HCC, p.184]. ‘Facts’ represent the purest form of the ossification characterising capitalist development, more than “empirical laws”, which maintain a semblance of “false subjectivity” [HCC, p.184]. The tendencies of history appear as subjectively-constructed values in relation to ‘facts’, which form the basis of bourgeois thought [HCC, p.184]. The theoretical dominance of this outlook can only be broken if the true nature of the ‘facts’, as aspects artificially torn from the “authentic, higher reality” of a dialectical process, is revealed, [HCC, p.184].<sup>52</sup>

Bourgeois thought is unable to solve the contingent and incomprehensible existence of immediate reality. At its “ultimate extreme” reification “no longer points dialectically to anything beyond itself” [HCC, p.184]. The forms that bourgeois thought takes as fundamental expose only its inability to penetrate its own “social foundations”, and invert the “true categorical structure of capitalism” [HCC, p.184]. Only the proletariat, starting with the immediate relation of capital to labour, is able to completely penetrate its reification and subsequently comprehend forms more remote to the production process in the dialectical totality.

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<sup>52</sup> The “total process”, says Lukács, is “uncontaminated by any trace of reification”, and its “process-like essence” prevails “in all its purity” (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.184). I will return to the notion of “purity” in the analysis.

## v) Man and the Absolute: Marx, Feuerbach and Hegel

With the benefit of the “conceptual and historical foundation” of the “methodological problems of economics”, Lukács claims that “man has become the measure of all (societal) things” [HCC, p.185]. It is now possible, he says, concretely to reconstruct fetishistic objects as processes and objectified relations between men, fetishistic forms from their “primary” human forms [HCC, p.185]. From this standpoint, the dynamic character of social relations and, in particular, the class struggle can be seen. The problem of history is the problem of transient definitions that are exposed as such “*in the unceasing overthrow of forms that shape the life of man*” [HCC, p.186].

History as such a universal discipline is thus concerned with both the problem of methodological form and the problem of the content of our knowledge of the present, because it unites them dialectically. All history, from this perspective, is related in the final analysis to the relations between men. Lukács credits Ludwig Feuerbach for this insight, but criticises him for marginalising history and the dialectic by conceiving of man as a “fixed objectivity” [HCC, p.186]. Feuerbach’s removal of the dogmatism of transcendental forces failed to extend this rigour to man. The danger inherent in humanism is the replacement of a “dogmatic metaphysics” with “an equally dogmatic relativism” [HCC, p.187].

Lukács draws a distinction between the relativisation of truth in this sense, and the exposition of the meaning of “various ‘truths’” as aspects of a concrete historical process [HCC, p.187]. In the former case, the concept of the “absolute” that relativism initially jettisons re-emerges methodologically at the point in the system where its apparent dissolution of fixed reality into movement cannot reach [HCC, p.187]. Without a dialectical understanding provided by the latter, the ossification of the “absolute” re-conquers the territory that relativism falsely removed from it [HCC, p.187]. Although relativism is symptomatic of the developing contradictions in capitalist society, says Lukács, its contradictions can only be transcended through a dialectical understanding of history in which all its forms of existence are comprehended as processes and displayed in their concrete historical shape.

History, for Lukács, is thus a concrete and unique process of struggle in which this dialectical movement is played out. For Hegel, each dialectical advance contains within it the truth of the previous stage. In this sense “truth” takes on a more developed meaning [HCC, p.188]. For Marx, it is the development of the objective forms of man’s entire social existence, “inner” and outer, that constitutes the process of history [HCC, p.188]. In a society based on contending classes, truth can only have a meaning with regard to the perspective of a particular class, and its material circumstances. The proletarian standpoint opens the possibility of a transformation of the reality that gives rise to the notions of the “absolute” and its relativistic counterpart [HCC, p.189].

According to Lukács, Marx developed the logic of Feuerbach’s “materialist anthropology” by arguing that Hegel was mistaken to predicate man on self-consciousness rather than self-consciousness on man [HCC, p.189]. Marx avoids Feuerbach’s severance of man from the real world and sets out to exhibit the concrete totality of real man embedded in the world, not man from an abstract perspective. Man is therefore both the foundation of the dialectical and historical method and subject to its process. In Hegel’s term, the situation of man under capitalism is one in which the “negation of his being becomes concretised ... in the understanding of bourgeois society” [HCC, p.190]. Thus man’s true nature stands contrasted to the contradictory categories of bourgeois thought.

For Marx capitalist structures of thought force men to go through a process of abstraction instead of existing as real, concrete men. In this context, Lukács says, Marx describes capitalism as the last stage of the “pre-history of human society” [HCC, p.190]. Many bourgeois writers have expressed the contradiction that being human under capitalism is not possible, whilst existing man is confronted immediately by this inhumanity. For Marx, the transcendence of these two aspects is rooted in the concrete historical process and the standpoint of real man. This standpoint must be capable of explaining the economic structure of capitalist society along with its political, ideological and cultural forms.

The limitations of humanism lead back to the antinomies of bourgeois thought. The philosophical duality of much Christian ideology makes man's spiritual transcendence a counterpart to an inability to effect change on the objective world. Lukács sees two utopian aspects attached to this outlook. First the capacity of God to control objective reality, and second the sanctification of man's inner self over and against the external world. In all cases reality creates a crisis for this humanism by forcing it to reproduce the class divisions of capitalism in thought and on a more reified level. Through its progressive corruption and accommodation to empirical reality, humanism's utopian aspirations have in many historical instances been harnessed by the ruling class. In the revolutionary religious sects that contributed to the ideology of early capitalism, Lukács identifies the "hiatus irrationalis" of the bourgeois philosophers in a mythological form, preventing the conscious dialectical interaction of theory and practice [HCC, p.192].

"The individual can never become the measure of all things", says Lukács [HCC, p.193]. For the individual, immediate reality consists of immutable objects, to which it can subjectively react but not influence. Through a penetration of reified immediacy, which is only possible on a class basis, the underlying nature of reality as a process can be unveiled. The dialectical understanding required for this process cannot be achieved by the individual, whose ego is cleft into intelligible and empirical factions. The former is a transcendental notion that is by definition unable to interact dialectically with the latter, which is determined by external empirical "laws" [HCC, p.193]. Consequently the bourgeois dilemma between "is" and "ought" is reproduced in this realm and leads to the adoption of a mythology [HCC, p.194]. Mythology performs the function of obfuscating the bourgeoisie's inability to produce mediated relations. It recreates the structure of the problem of immediacy on a more reified plane. Equally argues Lukács, the irrationality of indeterminism gives rise only to its own dogma of intuition [HCC, p.195].

Here Lukács counter-poses the revolutionary perspective to that of reformism, such as that of the Second International. The fragmentation of life under capitalism is manifest in the political formation

of social democracy, which retreats from every hard-won mediation and leaves the proletariat only in its immediate predicament, either in fatalistic submission to the “laws” of bourgeois society or by being drawn into affirming the “state as an ideal” [HCC, p.196]. On this terrain, the bourgeoisie has superior resources in “knowledge, culture and routine” and the proletariat renounces, of “its own free will”, its “decisive weapon”, the “ability to see the social totality as a concrete history totality” [HCC, p.197].

#### vi) Transcendence and the Proletariat

Every member of capitalist society is confronted by an immediate reified reality. To disrupt this reified structure is possible, says Lukács, only by “concretely relating to the concretely manifested contradictions of the total development, by becoming conscious of the immanent meaning of these contradictions for the total development” [HCC, p.197]. The proletariat must raise these immanent tendencies into their own collective consciousness, in order that their praxis can change reality. Through such praxis, Lukács claims, the proletariat can become the “identical subject-object of history” [HCC, p.197]. The failure to accomplish this historically necessary task results in the reproduction of these contradictions in a different and more intense form. At each stage of this unbroken process, the consciousness of the proletariat interacts dialectically with these developing tendencies. The key to the proletariat’s success, he argues, is maintaining an “aspiration towards totality” [HCC, p.198].

To concretise the claim that the proletariat can become the identical subject-object of history requires the formation of the proletariat into a class and the forging of a “practically-won” class consciousness [HCC, p.199]. This process is not a single act, but “the unbroken alternation of ossification, contradiction and movement” [HCC, p.199]. It is the dissolution of the objects of reality into their underlying tendencies and their exposition as part of a deeper reality. Only in this recurrent moment can the dilemma between thought and existence, formulated in Kant’s thing-in-itself, be transcended and reification definitively banished from consciousness. Lukács argues that

there is an ambiguity between Engels's formulation<sup>53</sup> of concepts as the "reflections of real things" and his understanding of the world as "a complex of *processes*" [HCC, p.199-200]. The former, he argues, reproduces the bourgeois duality of thought and existence, which bourgeois philosophy is incapable of resolving. Kant's attempt to remove this duality "by *logic*", results in its reappearance in the duality of the "phenomenon and the thing-in-itself" [HCC, p.200].

Another, non-Kantian, approach to this problem attempts to connect thought with objects in both the world of ideas and the material world<sup>54</sup>. It attempts to establish an "ultimate essence" to reconcile the two qualitatively different types of object [HCC, p.201]. This project relies however on metaphysical justification and the mediation of mythology to explain empirical reality. The attempt to deduce thought from its immediate empirical reality is equally unsatisfactory. Neither is capable of giving a satisfactory analysis of the "*specific problems*" of the ossified opposition of thought and existence [HCC, p.202]. And yet it is only in the domain of reflection that the "criterion of correct thought" can be apprehended [HCC, p.202]. In this situation man can only relate immediately to both his thought and the empirical objects. They must be accepted as a given, and a bridge sought between them, whilst leaving their rigid nature unaltered.

In contrast, Marx's solution is to "transform philosophy into praxis" [HCC, p.202]. Thought is directed towards reality in a practical manner, and in turn receives its validation on demonstrating its efficacy in action. Reality is no longer understood as mere empirical existence, but as a "process of becoming" in which the real character of objects is unveiled and that "provides a concrete solution to all the concrete problems created by the paradoxes of existent objects" [HCC, p.203]. In this sense the schism between philosophical methodology and factual knowledge must be overcome in order to transcend the duality of thought and existence.

For this praxis, the present is a mediation between past and future, in which a process of genesis takes place. The contemplative attitude to past and future leads to each being alien to man. The

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<sup>53</sup> In his *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*

<sup>54</sup> The Platonic theory of ideas is the most extreme example of this.

“concrete truth” of the present is established by comprehending the immanent tendencies of the process of becoming [HCC, p.204]. Thus the question of reflection of thought and existence loses its vitality. Positive reality, in a sense “reflected” in proletarian consciousness, equally could not have come about without being made practical and becoming part of that consciousness [HCC, p.204]. This reality is a product of the total process, a dialectical inevitability in which “abstract possibility” becomes “concrete reality” [HCC, p.204].

Lukács emphasises that only the “*practical class consciousness of the proletariat*” is capable of transforming reality [HCC, p.205]. The same conceptual structure transferred to another contemplative stance would inevitably result in a retreat into mythology and a new immediacy. Only in the “practical character” of proletarian thought can the living contradictions of reality be held and renewed in their development [HCC, p.205]. The formation of proletarian consciousness in itself is a dialectical process. More than just a “self-criticism of bourgeois society”, it aims to understand “which stage of the genuinely practicable is objectively possible and how much of what is possible has been made real” [HCC, p.205].

To grasp the fiction of society’s rigid reification does not “annul the ‘reality’ of this fiction” in practice [HCC, p.205]. Proletarian thought’s “*theory of praxis*” is the first step towards a “*practical theory* that overturns the real world” [HCC, p.205]. Only through this self-transformation can the claim “that the proletariat is the identical subject-object of the history of society” cannot become truly concrete [HCC, p.206]. The elimination of reification is not a “single act”, and neither is there a single path by which sets of phenomena become “dialecticised”, as we can see by the sensitivity of works of art to dialectical changes [HCC, p.206].

The complexly mediated nature of social reality means that the inner antagonisms of certain social phenomena reveal their inner contradiction only when mediated by the contradictions of more primary phenomena. Once these primary elements are comprehended, as dictated by the structure of capitalist relations, a dialectical hierarchy or sequence of categories is revealed. The danger of



rigidity returning to this method, says Lukács, necessitates the distinction of positive and negative dialectics [HCC, p.207].<sup>55</sup> The qualitative distinctions between the social dialectic and the dialectic of nature must be elaborated in concrete fashion. Marx's economic works provide material for an analysis of structures, Lukács argues, but a typology of these dialectical forms is beyond his project.

For Lukács, seizing power and reorganising the economy on socialist lines are only stages in the achievement of the "ultimate objectives" of the proletariat [HCC, p.208]. The "decisive crisis-period" of capitalism is characterised by the simultaneous intensification of reification and the collapse of its fetishistic categories [HCC, p.208]. The "objective economic evolution" of capitalism gives the proletariat the "opportunity and the necessity to change society", but this can only come about through "the-free-action of the proletariat itself" [HCC, p.208-209].

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<sup>55</sup> "By positive dialectics [Hegel] understands the growth of a particular content, the elucidation of a concrete totality" (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.207).

### 3) What questions does Lukács's framework allow us to ask?

In this section, I will argue that the conceptual framework constructed by Lukács in *HCC* foregrounds the question of revolutionary subjectivity in his argument. This is made possible by his attempt to synthesise three aspects: an analysis of capitalist reification, an account of the historical failure of bourgeois thought to resolve its antinomies, and a philosophical justification of the potential for the proletariat to become a class-for-itself. Lukács posits an integral connection between his discussion of method, the category of totality and this project for the construction of a revolutionary subjectivity. He offers these investigations as the beginning of a debate about the vulgarisation of Marx's method that he believes has taken place at the hands of the leading theorists of the Second International.<sup>56</sup> I will examine whether Lukács gives an adequate account of the subject on which this revolutionary subjectivity is based, whether the kind of subjectivity produced is characterised by a certain unity, or a type of purity, and subsequently I will expose some of the problems that Lukács's framework might encounter.

#### a) Method and System

Lukács contends that the "true aim" of *HCC* is "to make the problem of dialectical method the focus of discussion as an urgent living problem" [*HCC*, p. xlvi].<sup>57</sup> He seeks to distil the "essence of Marx's method and to apply it correctly" [*HCC*, p. xlii]. I will argue that in focusing on the issue of method, as opposed to that of the system, Lukács creates a framework within which it is possible to ask a certain set of questions, in particular those centred on the problem of revolutionary subjectivity. In the following section, I will investigate the nature of these questions before asking whether such a framework equally precludes the posing of other types of questions.

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<sup>56</sup> Lukács distinguishes his own theory from those who represent this tradition, such as Eduard Bernstein, or with more qualifications, Karl Kautsky and Georgi Plekhanov.

<sup>57</sup> In his Preface to *HCC* of 1922 – *HCC* is in fact a series of essays written over an extended period of time (1919-22), albeit one in which, according to Michael Löwy, the earlier pieces were "thoroughly reworked in 1922" (Löwy *From Romanticism to Bolshevism*, p.173).

This radical return to method is historically motivated by Lukács's concern to rescue Marxism from the deterministic and opportunistic tendencies that he saw as characteristic of, although perhaps not exclusive to, the Second International strand of 'orthodoxy'.<sup>58</sup> It also represents the product of an extended engagement with Marx's *Capital*, and those he saw as actively developing and applying Marx's method critically and in practice, namely Rosa Luxemburg and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin.

It should be noted from the outset that the counter-position of method and system is in itself potentially problematic. In other words, it is questionable to what extent Marx's method can be extracted from his system, without in the process necessitating the reproduction of the system itself.<sup>59</sup> This issue is posed most controversially at the outset of *HCC*<sup>60</sup> when Lukács asserts polemically that "orthodoxy refers exclusively to method" [*HCC*, p.1]. Certainly it does not seem feasible to defend the overstated claim that all the results of Marx's investigations "*in toto*" could be rejected without drawing into question to some extent the method by which such an analysis was generated [*HCC*, p.1].<sup>61</sup>

However, the intention of this shock treatment seems to be to jolt the reader into a reassessment and recognition of the foundational texts of Marxism as open works – texts which are to be developed or even challenged on certain points, without necessitating the abandonment of orthodoxy towards Marx's method: "the scientific conviction that historical materialism is the road to truth" [*HCC*, p.1]. Lukács may have had in mind the works of Rosa Luxemburg, who challenged Marx on substantive issues in which she thought him in error, but equally sought to develop his method from the standpoint of an adherent.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Particularly in his essay on *Class Consciousness*, Lukács rails against what he calls "vulgar Marxism": a viewpoint which overlooks the "unique function of consciousness in the class struggle of the proletariat" and thereby reduces itself to the standpoint of the bourgeoisie (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.68).

<sup>59</sup> Lukács himself highlights his discussion of the "methodological aspect" and its premises and implications in his *Preface* of 1922 (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p. xli–xlii).

<sup>60</sup> In the essay *What is Orthodox Marxism?*

<sup>61</sup> Emphasis in original unless otherwise stated.

<sup>62</sup> Lukács himself stands in a similar relationship to Luxemburg, and her works played a significant role in the development of his Marxism. In *HCC*, he both praises her (at a time when her legacy was coming under increasing sectarian attack in the communist movement), but also, in a later essay, critiques her analysis of the

Lukács locates the source of Marx's method in his book *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847).<sup>63</sup> He regards it as Marx's first "mature, complete and conclusive work", albeit one in which the solution to a problem is only "sketched in broad outline" [HCC, p.33]. Lukács advances the argument that there is an "essential similarity" of method between all of Marx's works from this point onwards.<sup>64</sup> He argues that Marx's explicitly historical approach in *The Poverty of Philosophy* may not be immediately visible in his "principal theoretical works", *Capital* and *Theories of Surplus Value*, due to the "scope and wealth of the individual problems" treated in these texts [HCC, p.33]. However, he suggests that the "internal structure" of these works points towards the more concrete development of a solution to the same problem [HCC, p.33].

Therefore, whilst it seems that Lukács does not discount the developments that take place in Marx's thought, particularly with reference to the 'internal structuring' of the problem, he affirms the essential unity of Marx's method post-*The Poverty of Philosophy*. There is however an obvious difference between *The Poverty of Philosophy* and *Capital* which pertains to our investigation of the problem of subjectivity. In *The Poverty of Philosophy*, it is possible to find an explicit discussion of the revolutionary subjectivity of the proletariat. Marx discusses, in the section on *Strikes and Combinations of Workers*, the development of the organisation of the proletariat as a class and the conditions for its emancipation.<sup>65</sup> By contrast, in *Capital* it is much more difficult to find such an explicit discussion of revolutionary subjectivity.<sup>66</sup>

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Russian Revolution. Lukács is uncritical generally of Luxemburg in the earlier essay in which he discusses *The Accumulation of Capital*, and does not return to critique her economic work in his later essay. Further investigation of the reasons for this might be worthwhile pursuing.

<sup>63</sup> We cannot directly discern whether Lukács's would have cast a similar or different judgement on Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* as Lukács was unaware of their existence at the time of writing HCC.

<sup>64</sup> It is perhaps in reaction to this claim that Louis Althusser much later formulated his notion of an epistemological break between the young and the mature Marx. Certainly *The Poverty of Philosophy* is an important reference point for the later Marx, who cites it frequently in *Capital*. This would suggest that Marx would accept the notion of a substantive continuity between the two works, whilst at the same time it seems clear that *Capital* is on all levels a work much richer in determinations.

<sup>65</sup> Marx, K *The Poverty of Philosophy* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1956), p.196-197

<sup>66</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter.

It might be countered that in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx's proposal in the finale of total revolution, the emancipation of the oppressed class and the creation of a new society, is all too brief and lacking in content.<sup>67</sup> On the contrary, the substance of the work, Marx's more serious conceptual innovations, rather stems from his engagement with Ricardo and Hegel and, crucially for Lukács, the development of his historical method. The question that Lukács's declaration of methodological unity between Marx's works post-*The Poverty of Philosophy* seems to pose is the following: starting from the basis of Marx's mature economic analyses (i.e. *Capital*), but maintaining Marx's historical method, are we now able to advance a more concrete and substantial theory of revolutionary subjectivity? I would argue that the great strength of Lukács's project, to "obtain a clear insight into the ideological problems of capitalism and its downfall" [*HCC*, p.84], is that it seeks to fit exactly into these criteria.

## **b) Revolutionary Subjectivity**

It seems therefore that there is an intimate connection between Lukács's discussion of Marx's method, his insistence on discovering its essence and true spirit, and the question of the constitution of the proletariat as a revolutionary subject. Although Lukács rejects from the outset the idea that *HCC* presents "even the sketchiest outline of a system of dialectics" [*HCC*, p. xlv-xlvi], he clearly seeks to re-invigorate a debate amongst, in Lenin's words, "the materialist friends of the Hegelian dialectic" [*HCC*, p. xlv]. The dialectic, he contends, is the "life nerve" [*HCC*, p. xliii] of Marx's method. For Lukács, in the spirit of this dialectic, the discovery of the fundamental nature of capitalist society is also integrally connected with the analysis of it as a totality, as I will discuss further in the next section. But first I will investigate the premises and implications of the central role that the question of revolutionary subjectivity assumes in *HCC*.

I have identified the explicit and central discussion of revolutionary subjectivity by Lukács in *HCC*. This is a distinctive feature of *HCC* in comparison to Marx's *Capital*, yet in *HCC* Lukács claims to be

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<sup>67</sup> In this sense *The Poverty of Philosophy* is reminiscent of Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*.

faithfully re-creating the method of *Capital*. To what extent therefore are these two claims in tension? Lukács bases his work on Marx's economic analyses in *Capital*, and proceeds to a discussion of the "problems growing out of the fetish character of commodities" [*HCC*, p.84]. He describes Marx's theory of commodity fetishism as "a *specific* problem of our age, the age of modern capitalism" [*HCC*, p.84]. In doing so, Lukács deploys a particular characterisation of the fetish character of commodities, of the "mysterious" nature of commodities, as the phenomenon of reification [*HCC*, p.86]. Lukács describes the effects of the processes of capitalist rationalisation on the ideological forms of consciousness of human actors in capitalist society, as I have discussed in my earlier exposition of the phenomenon of reification.<sup>68</sup>

The problem of commodity fetishism in *Capital* has its roots in Marx's theory of alienation in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, and it can be contended that there is continuity between these two sets of problems.<sup>69</sup> Therefore I will formulate a comparison between the themes that Lukács raises in *HCC* and Marx's *Manuscripts*, another work that is arguably focused on the question of revolutionary subjectivity. As noted previously, Lukács was necessarily unaware of the *Manuscripts*, which were unpublished at the time of writing the essays of *HCC*. On the other hand, Lukács was familiar with and, in *HCC*, quotes from a number of Marx's other early writings, in particular his "first critique of Hegel" [*HCC*, p.2].<sup>70</sup> Although it would be unwise to equate Lukács's *HCC* and Marx's *Manuscripts* without justification, some parallels can be seen between them. In his *Manuscripts*, Marx attempts to formulate the notion of alienated labour and the possibility of its transcendence. In *HCC*, Lukács is committed to addressing the problem of the working class overcoming capitalist reification.

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<sup>68</sup> I have analysed the relationship between Marx's theory of commodity fetishism and the phenomenon of reification through Lukács's appropriation of concepts from Max Weber such as 'rationalisation', but also 'objective possibility' and 'social types'. I have argued that Lukács seeks to transform Weberian categories by placing them within a framework in which the proletariat occupies a special position in capitalist society.

<sup>69</sup> The pre-figurations of Marx's understanding of fetishism in the *Manuscripts* are explored in the first chapter of this thesis.

<sup>70</sup> e.g. Marx's *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, Correspondence of 1843, The Holy Family*.

In *HCC*, Lukács places an emphasis on revealing the fundamental nature of commodity relations as relations between people. In the *Manuscripts*, Marx attempts to reveal the essence of private property in the relation of estranged labour to itself, founded on the conception of a human essence. Although each is operating with a different set of concepts, there is a common theme of dialectical transcendence that is rooted in each thinker's engagement with Hegel. Although it cannot be assumed that both thinkers have a similar relationship to Hegel, Lukács seems to be moving in a parallel direction to Marx in the *Manuscripts*, albeit from a very different starting point.<sup>71</sup>

Lukács is able to place the self-emancipation of the proletariat at the centre of his analysis because of his discussion of the transcendence of capitalist reification. Lukács argues that Marx's *Capital* contains such a wealth of "individual problems" [*HCC*, p.33] that it overwhelms and obscures the true form of Marx's historical method. In order to examine more explicitly what he sees as its revolutionary essence, Lukács seeks to restate this method. This raises a number of questions. Does this apparent return to the "pristine and unsullied" [*HCC*, p. 33] method of Marx (the same method, Lukács claims, that is present in both *The Poverty of Philosophy* and *Capital*) carry any dangers with it? By identifying the obscuring role of the "individual problems" [*HCC*, p.33] of *Capital*, does Lukács pose too sharp a distinction between form and content? Is it not precisely through Marx's treatment of the individual problems in *Capital* that it is possible to understand his method? Does Lukács's resulting discussion of revolutionary subjectivity therefore lack in some important content?

I would argue that there is a tension within Lukács's conception of totality. Whilst bourgeois thought may be able to formulate "abstract, special laws" [*HCC*, p.28] in particular specialist disciplines, to be "authentically totalising" it is not enough for bourgeois thought to deal with "'all problems' in a substantive manner (which is, of course, an impossibility)", if at the same time it remains

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<sup>71</sup> It is important to address the much-contested relation of Lukács's conception of objectification and the phenomenon of reification to that of Marx's theory of alienation, which I will attempt to do in the following section on the limitations of *HCC*. Lukács addresses the notions of alienation and objectification in his *1967 Introduction* (*Lukács History and Class Consciousness*, p. xxiii). Furthermore I will go on to investigate to what extent Lukács's concept of labour is underdeveloped in *HCC*, and limited to the concept of the 'division of labour'. Interestingly, Lukács argues that the division of labour is "alien to the nature of man" (*Lukács History and Class Consciousness*, p.335).

“contemplative” [HCC, p.221 fn. 61]. The only “authentically totalising” method is the one which is orientated on practice [HCC, p.221 fn. 61]. For Lukács, therefore, Marx’s treatment of the “individual problems” [HCC, p.33] of *Capital* is authentically totalising, not as a complete aggregation of individual problems, but because of the historical method which he employs, which for Lukács implies an orientation on practice.

On the other hand, Lukács warns against the dangers of the “fossilised ‘idealisation’ of the dialectical method” [HCC, p.34]. It seems therefore that there is a necessary connection between an engagement with the “individual problems” [HCC, p.33] of *Capital* and Lukács’s stipulation that the dialectical method must not be divorced from the “living stuff of history” [HCC, p.34]. Furthermore, Lukács would argue that a danger does exist of creating a new vulgar economics “with the plus and minus signs reversed” [HCC, p. 29]. He claims that this is a trap into which a number of Marx’s epigones have fallen. For Lukács, this “dogmatic materialism” signifies a qualitative methodological break from *Capital* [HCC, p.34]. Economic formulae by means of which economic reality is understood, such as those found in *Capital*, are a necessary abstraction. For Lukács, they represent a “clarification” and a “springboard for an assault on the real problem” [HCC, p.31].

The result of Lukács’s foregrounding of the problem of subjectivity is the specific emphasis which HCC gives to the problem of the “spiritual strength” of capitalist society which must be overcome by knowledge [HCC, p.262]. Thus Lukács remarks that the simultaneously strong and weak point of the state is “the way in which it is reflected in the consciousness of the people” [HCC, p.261]. Lukács’s conception of knowledge however is a particular one: “It must be knowledge that has become flesh of one’s flesh and blood of one’s blood; to use Marx’s phrase, it must be ‘practical critical activity’” [HCC, p.262]. The *real problem* that is Lukács’s central concern is the intimate connection, or unity, between the acquisition of self-knowledge by the proletariat and the practical carrying through of a proletarian revolution. Only in this sense, for Lukács, can the proletariat come to be constituted as a class-for-itself.



*HCC* thus attempts to provide both a philosophical justification for proletarian revolution and a discussion of the methodological problems of its organisation, while traversing all the ideological problems of capitalist reification. Lukács seeks to demonstrate that Marx's dialectical method is capable of providing a unified understanding that begins with the analysis of the commodity and ends with the practical questions of revolutionary organisation. The difficulty of adequately fulfilling the necessary mediations between these two poles in this project is already apparent. Lukács, in his 1967 *Introduction*, formulates the problem with the question, "Can a genuinely identical subject-object be created by self-knowledge, however adequate, and however truly based on an adequate knowledge of society" [*HCC*, p. xxiii]? I will investigate later to what extent this polar framework influences Lukács's conception of class-consciousness. Before going on to discuss Lukács's distinctive exposition of class-consciousness, I will first examine more closely the centrality of the notion of totality for his method.

### **c) The Centrality of Totality**

Lukács places an emphasis on the dialectical connection between the category of totality and the discovery of the fundamental nature of capitalist society. Whilst *HCC* may focus on clarifying Marx's method, it is also an attempt to put this method into practice, to generate the content of a Marxist analysis of class consciousness. Lukács makes a link between the self-knowledge of society and the process of proletarian revolution. Totality is, for Lukács, "a problem of category and in particular a problem of revolutionary action" [*HCC*, p.221 fn. 61]. Thus, he claims in the early essay on *The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg* that: "*The primacy of the category of totality is the bearer of the principle of revolution in science*" [*HCC*, p.27].

This explicit link between the category of totality and the revolutionary standpoint allows Lukács to oppose the apparent "scientism" of the opportunist tendency, those who would artificially isolate the "facts" from the whole. Lukács is attempting to demonstrate that revolution is a process and not an "isolated act", and that there are not "revolutionary aspects" of Marx's thought, relics of a

“primitive period of the workers’ movement”, that can be separated off from the rest of his thought [HCC, p.29]. Rather, states Lukács, central to Marxism is “the principle that revolution is the product of a point of view in which the category of totality is dominant” [HCC, p.29].

Lukács’s conception of knowledge as “practical critical activity” [HCC, p.262],<sup>72</sup> in conjunction with his close association of the category of totality and the revolutionary standpoint, seems to give a new perspective on and concrete content to the notion of revolutionary activity.<sup>73</sup> Lukács’s emphasis on the centrality of the category of totality in his understanding of the dialectic does not, he claims, negate the role of abstraction. He contends that “the process of abstraction and hence the isolation of the elements and concepts in the special disciplines and whole areas of study is of the very essence of science” [HCC, p.28].<sup>74</sup> The specificity of historical materialism for the proletariat is that it “permits us to view the present historically and hence scientifically so that we can penetrate beneath the surface and perceive the profounder historical forces which in reality control events” [HCC, p.224]. The centrality of the category of totality raises questions about whether other aspects are pushed to the margins. Later I will discuss what questions Lukács’s framework prevents us from asking, in particular with reference to the notion of totality and economics. First I will examine the way in which Lukács addresses the notion of class consciousness in *HCC*.

#### d) Understanding Class Consciousness

For Lukács, the fact that Marx’s *Capital* breaks off without a satisfactory definition of class is a significant limitation and source of dispute for later Marxists. The question of how to understand class consciousness is one which has a number of different aspects for Lukács.<sup>75</sup> Lukács quotes

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<sup>72</sup> I will later draw comparisons between Lukács and Gramsci’s conceptions of ‘practical critical activity’.

<sup>73</sup> Lukács’s conception of revolutionary activity can be compared with Marx’s notion of “*real* communist activity” in the *Manuscripts* (Marx *Early Writings*, p.365), the content of which, as I argued in the first chapter (section 2.b.ii), is underdeveloped. This pre-figures issues that I will address later in this chapter, as it requires a comparison of Marx and Lukács’s conceptions of activity, labour, and therefore alienated labour.

<sup>74</sup> Despite Lukács’s critique of bourgeois ‘science’, this passage seems to demonstrate his commitment to what he later calls “true science” (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.224): one in which “the process of isolation is a means towards understanding the whole” (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.28).

<sup>75</sup> He categorises these in four different ways: how to understand class consciousness in theory, how to understand the practical function of class consciousness, whether class consciousness is a general

Engels to the effect that “nothing happens without a conscious purpose or an intended aim” [HCC, p.46]. However, the result of the process of history is often very different to the intended aims of its agents. For Lukács the “essence of scientific Marxism consists ... in the realisation that the real motor forces of history are independent of man’s (psychological) consciousness of them” [HCC, p.47].

What Marx does, according to Lukács, by enunciating a “historical critique of economics” is to resolve “the totality of the reified objectivities of social and economic life into *relations between men*” [HCC, p.49]. This reduces the objectivity of “the social institutions so hostile to man” and reveals them as in fact relations between human beings [HCC, p.49]. Lukács defines these social institutions as “capital” and “every form in which the national economy objectifies itself” [HCC, p.49]. His innovation lies in explicitly seeking to ‘resolve’ their reified form in order to reveal the social mediations in relation to capital that this form obscures.<sup>76</sup> This might be interpreted as a form of ultra-subjectivism; however, Lukács argues that there is “a restoration of objectivity to their underlying basis, to the relations between men” [HCC, p.49].

The result of this analysis is Lukács’s much discussed notion of ascribed or imputed consciousness, and the corresponding notion of “false consciousness”.<sup>77</sup> Lukács argues for the need to investigate “false consciousness” not as an “inflexible confrontation of true and false” [HCC, p.50], but rather to investigate it “concretely as an aspect of the historical totality and as a stage in the historical process” [HCC, p.50]. Although Lukács does not deny the empirical validity of the “*material* of genuine historical analysis” [HCC, p.51], he suggests that a transcendence of “pure description” yields the “category of objective possibility” [HCC, p.51].<sup>78</sup> There are difficulties with Lukács’s conception of “false consciousness” that I will investigate later, but first I will comment on the polarised conception of consciousness indicated by his framework.

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“sociological” problem or one that is differentiated by class, and whether there exist gradations of class consciousness (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.46).

<sup>76</sup> The final chapter will show how Gramsci offers a much more concrete analysis than Lukács of these social institutions.

<sup>77</sup> Lukács appears to have taken the notion of ‘false’ consciousness from a letter sent by Engels to Mehring (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.50).

<sup>78</sup> This is another example of Lukács’s appropriation of Weberian concepts as previously discussed.

I will argue that Lukács's conception of class consciousness is characterised by its polarised nature and that this can be partially explained by the momentous nature of the events from which he was theorising: his lived experience of the Russian, Hungarian and German revolutions. This experience gives Lukács an acute insight into the peaks of a process in which the norms of non-revolutionary periods are cast aside. This can be seen particularly sharply in his conception of "the leap", which he defines as "a *turning in the direction of something qualitatively new*" [HCC, p.250]. The leap's "home", Lukács claims, "is the realm of freedom" [HCC, p.250]. In periods in which the prospect of the working class seizing power is imminent, or in a state of transition, Lukács argues that the normal relationship between economy and violence moves into a state of flux. It is under these conditions that violence is "put to the service of man and the flowering of man" [HCC, p.251].

I have focused up to this point on Lukács's explicit discussion of revolutionary subjectivity. But what about other kinds of subjectivity that are not revolutionary? Does the acknowledgement that Lukács speaks much more clearly to periods in which the class struggle has reached the heights of the revolutionary process conversely suggest that he is incapable of discussing the complexities of class consciousness in periods when class struggle is at a lower ebb? Or for that matter, is he capable of theorising forms of class consciousness that persist despite the rising tide of class struggle in revolutionary periods?<sup>79</sup> Is Lukács's framework of analysis capable of addressing these instances? Lukács's initial reaction might be to say that "[h]owever little the final goal of the proletariat is able, even in theory, to influence the initial stages of the process directly, it is a principle, a synthesising factor and so can never be completely absent from any aspect of that process" [HCC, p.313]. At the same time, Lukács recognises that the "overdevelopment of individual consciousness", brought on

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<sup>79</sup> He recognises the persistence of these forms: "[e]ven in the very midst of the death throes of capitalism broad sections of the proletarian masses still feel that the state, the laws and the economy of the bourgeoisie are the only possible environment for them to exist in" (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.262).

by the capitalist process of reification results in a “brutal egoism greedy for fame and possessions” [HCC, p.355].<sup>80</sup>

Lukács’s framework gives a strong theorisation of the relationship between the individual and the class. Lukács does discuss gradations of class consciousness, but does not address the concrete content of the specific influence of different groups and cross-influences within society that make up its complex totality (e.g. religious organisation, the role of education, etc.). Lukács does however address the issue of trade unions and their bureaucracy in a novel way. Developing Lenin’s conception of the labour aristocracy, Lukács points towards the specific weight and influence which this layer of the working class gains within the movement derived from their particular access to bourgeois forms of consciousness. He argues that the “bourgeoisification of the proletariat becomes institutionalised in the Menshevik workers’ parties and in the trade unions they control” [HCC, p.310].<sup>81</sup>

Lukács states clearly in his essay on the problems of organisation that “the class consciousness of the proletariat does not develop uniformly throughout the whole proletariat” [HCC, p.304], and he derives organisational conclusions from this. Although, as Marx and Engels identified, this unevenness can be partially explained by the privileged position that some workers arrive at due to the “entry of capitalism into its imperialist phase” [HCC, p.305], Lukács suggests that additional explanation is required to account for the inertia in the “subjective development of the proletariat” [HCC, p.350]. For Lukács, organisation is the “form of mediation between theory and practice” [HCC, p.299].

Lukács theorises the role of reformism in the “Menshevik parties” [HCC, p.310], but he also argues that the Communist party must become the “conscious approach to this leap and hence the first *conscious* step towards the realm of freedom” [HCC, p.314]. It is not the case, nor has it been

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<sup>80</sup> This intensifies with the development of capitalism and is not overcome at the gates of the revolutionary party.

<sup>81</sup> Lukács’s notion of “bourgeoisification” and its influence on the whole proletariat, not simply the trade union aristocracy, deserves further critique and investigation (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.310).

claimed, says Lukács, that the Communist Party is able “to reform the inner nature of its members by means of a miracle” [*HCC*, p.335]. The consequence of this is that Lukács recognises, somewhat ominously and presciently, the dangers of “ossification, bureaucratisation and corruption” [*HCC*, p.355]. These tendencies persist even within revolutionary organisations, although, unlike Weber, Lukács does not see these as inevitable. It is the critical relationship of the party to the proletariat as a class that provides the possibility of confronting these challenges. I will now examine some of the limitations of the framework of *HCC* and the questions which it precludes us from asking.

## 4) What are the limitations of Lukács's framework? What questions does it preclude?

### a) The Proletariat as the 'Identical Subject-Object of History'

"Materialist dialectic is a revolutionary dialectic", asserts Lukács at the outset of *HCC* [*HCC*, p.2]. I have argued that Lukács defends the idea that the project for the construction of a revolutionary subjectivity can be developed from Marx's method, as found in *Capital*.<sup>82</sup> As I examined in the previous section, there is a strong link, for Lukács, between his exploration of the phenomenon of reification and the framework of concepts through which he questions the nature of revolutionary subjectivity. These concepts include the category of totality, the revolutionary standpoint, and knowledge conceived as "practical critical activity" [*HCC*, p.262]. This theoretical construction is only activated however, by the positing of a subject that is potentially capable of uniting these elements.

In *HCC*, reification is the "immediate reality of every person living in capitalist society" [*HCC*, p.197], however this does not imply that all actors are capable of comprehending this phenomenon. On the contrary, Lukács claims that "[n]o path leads from the individual to the totality" [*HCC*, p.28]. In modern society, only classes are capable of advancing a "total point of view" [*HCC*, p.28]. Although the "basic structure of reification" is to be found in "all the social forms of modern capitalism (e.g. bureaucracy.)", it is only in the "work-situation of the proletarian" that this structure can be made fully conscious [*HCC*, p.171-172].<sup>83</sup> The proletariat is the only class capable of becoming "the identical subject-object of history whose praxis will change reality" [*HCC*, p.197].<sup>84</sup> Lukács borrows

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<sup>82</sup> Or indeed, as Lukács would claim, from its origins in *The Poverty of Philosophy*.

<sup>83</sup> Lukács cites Marx's *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* as the source of this account of the "special position of the proletariat in society and in history" (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.149).

<sup>84</sup> In Lukács's analysis of the phenomenon of reification, in the first section of his chapter "*Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat*", the workers' situation is explored in the abstract, but the notions of class and of the proletariat appear infrequently. The proletariat is discussed extensively only separately in the third section of this chapter, "*The Standpoint of the Proletariat*".

the notion of the “identical subject-object” from German classical philosophy, and in particular from Johann Fichte [*HCC*, p. 123].<sup>85</sup>

Modern critical philosophy arises from the reified structure of consciousness, argues Lukács, and its problems are distinguished from those of previous epochs by their roots in this structure [*HCC*, p.110-111]. Whilst classical philosophy took “the antinomies of its life-basis to the furthest extreme it was capable of in thought”, it bequeathed these antinomies unresolved to “succeeding (bourgeois) generations” [*HCC*, p.148]. At the same time, Lukács indicates that, in one aspect bourgeois philosophy “points beyond bourgeois society” [*HCC*, p.148], in that it gives rise, in an opaque form, to the dialectical method.

Although many modern thinkers elaborate the problem of subjectivity, Lukács has a particular engagement with the ideas of Immanuel Kant. Kant, after Marx and Hegel, is one of the central points of reference in *HCC*. By formulating the problem of the thing-in-itself, Kant was the first to set out clearly the limits of bourgeois knowledge.<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, Lukács suggests that it was Fichte who gave “the most satisfactory formulation” to the problem of the schism between subject and object [*HCC*, p.119].<sup>87</sup> Fichte’s solution was to place the practical, action and activity, “at the centre of his philosophical system” [*HCC*, p.123]. By starting at the point where the subjective and objective meet, Fichte sought to overcome the gap between subject and object. Lukács identifies the weaknesses of Fichte’s solution in his inability to give a concrete account of the subject of this action, and thus he

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<sup>85</sup> Lukács makes a detailed study of the attempts to resolve the schism between subject and object in German classical philosophy in the section of the “Reification” chapter “*The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought*” (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.110).

<sup>86</sup> It could be argued that by setting limits to bourgeois thought, Kant posits in a negative fashion, the only possible remaining route, the dialectical method developed by Hegel and later taken up and transformed by Marx.

<sup>87</sup> Fichte’s philosophy presses “forward to a conception of the subject which can be thought of as the creator of the totality of content” (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.122-123). This marks the end, for Lukács, of “the age in which the bourgeois class naïvely equated its own forms of thought [...] with reality and with existence as such” (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.119).



suggests that Fichte has simply reproduced the problems of German philosophy on a “higher plane” [HCC, p.123].<sup>88</sup>

In appropriating the notion of the “identical subject-object” [HCC, p.149] and applying it to the proletariat Lukács adopts the structure of Fichte’s solution but attempts to synthesise this with Engels’ insight that the working class is the inheritor of German classical philosophy. The question that must be asked is whether the weakness of Fichte’s solution is not simply transposed to Lukács’s own conception of the proletariat as the ‘identical subject-object of history’. Does Lukács similarly fail to give a concrete account of the subject of action, in this case the proletariat?

In *The Standpoint of the Proletariat*, Lukács sets out his case for the proletariat as the potential ‘identical subject-object’. His discussion of the vantage point of the proletariat highlights his approach to the problem of subjectivity. Lukács draws a distinction between objective reality “*in its immediacy*”, and “*authentically objective reality*” that is passed through the “*specific categories of mediation*” appropriate to the different position of each class in the economic process [HCC, p.150]. For Lukács, the authenticity of objective reality cannot be separated from the subject that understands it. Lukács argues that “the belief that the impact of the category of mediation upon the picture of the world is merely ‘subjective’ [...] is as much as to say that objective reality has the character of a thing-in-itself” [HCC, p.150].<sup>89</sup>

Critics such as Gareth Stedman-Jones would argue that this represents an “irruption of the romantic anti-scientific tradition of bourgeois thought into Marxist theory”.<sup>90</sup> In contrast to Marx’s focused engagement with Hegel in the *Manuscripts*, Lukács’s concern with the Kantian tradition is striking. Lukács’s philosophical discussions are formulated with reference to a much wider historical frame, from Descartes through Kant and Fichte to critical thinkers contemporary to Lukács (e.g. Rickert,

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<sup>88</sup> A study of the parallels between the relationships of Kant-Fichte and Hegel-Feuerbach would further illuminate the philosophical inheritances of Lukács and Marx and their relationship to each other.

<sup>89</sup> Here we find Lukács discussing the theme of authenticity and the notion of the thing-in-itself drawn from the Kantian tradition.

<sup>90</sup> Stedman-Jones, G *The Marxism of the Early Lukács: an Evaluation* *New Left Review* 1/70 (Nov-Dec 1971), p.44

Weber, Simmel). Whereas Marx develops a philosophical position in the *Manuscripts* from the starting point of a complex mixture of Feuerbachian and Hegelian perspectives, Lukács sets out in *HCC* from a position steeped in the tragic antinomy of subject and object characteristic of the neo-Kantian tradition. Lukács might argue that this reflects the bourgeoisie's growing awareness of its impotence to solve its own dilemmas in the intervening period between Marx and Lukács.

Lukács would perhaps also argue that what validates his emphasis on the overcoming of the bourgeois antinomies of thought is his distinctively Marxist concern with the development of the class consciousness of the proletariat as a specific socially and historically located orientation on practice. It is in this context that Lukács takes issue with Ernst Bloch's suggestion that historical materialism is "merely economic" [*HCC*, p.193] in its outlook. For Lukács, perhaps also criticising his younger self, economics cannot be seen as a concern with "objective things" to which a discussion of "soul and inwardness" can be counter-posed. Rather historical materialism, in setting about the "restructuring of the real and concrete life of man", must approach economics as the "system of forms objectively defining this real life" [*HCC*, p.193]. In order to investigate this question I will therefore return to the starting point of Lukács's investigation of the phenomenon of reification.

## **b) Subjective and Objective aspects of *The Phenomenon of Reification***

Lukács's investigation of the phenomenon of reification begins with a historical analysis of the rise of the commodity as the universal structuring principle of society.<sup>91</sup> Lukács then conceptually analyses the notion of reification itself. He quotes extensively from the section of Marx's *Capital* entitled *The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret*.<sup>92</sup> He emphasises a theme, similar to Marx's earlier conception of alienated labour, that "because of his situation a man's own activity, his own labour becomes something objective and independent of him, something that controls him by virtue of an autonomy alien to man" [*HCC*, p.87].

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<sup>91</sup> This perhaps is an attempt to emulate the historical method of *The Poverty of Philosophy*.

<sup>92</sup> Marx *Capital* Vol. I, p.163

Lukács's exposition of reification is distinctive in its radical separation of the "objective side" and the "subjective side" of this phenomenon [HCC, p.87]. Lukács thus on the one hand points to the objective aspect, the "world of objects and relations between things" that springs into being, the "forces that generate their own power", which individuals are unable to modify by their activity, whilst on the other hand he also elaborates a subjective aspect in which a "man's activity becomes estranged from himself", is commodified and must "go its own way independently of man" [HCC, p.87].

The specification of subjective and objective aspects of the phenomenon of reification is of vital importance for holding in tension a dual function of reification. Whilst the phenomenon of reification plays one role of exposing how the relations between people take on the "character of a thing" and thus acquire a "phantom objectivity" [HCC, p.83], whose essence is to be revealed in the relations between people, it also plays another. The second function of reification is to show how the "world of objects and relations between things", and the laws governing it, actually does spring "into being" [HCC, p.87]. Both essence and appearance have a social reality in the estranged activity of man on which the system is founded. This activity gives rise to non-human "invisible forces" that generate their own power [HCC, p.87]. This is reminiscent of the problem identified in the first chapter of whether we are able to identify two or one conceptions of subjectivity in Marx's *Manuscripts*. It is also closely tied to the development of the conception of essence and appearance suggested by Marx's theory of commodity fetishism in *Capital*. I will examine these statements more closely.

The objective aspect of the phenomenon of reification corresponds to the "second nature" [HCC, p.86] of the apparent laws that govern capitalism, the appearance that is granted a social reality in both *Capital* and *HCC*. At the same time, the positing of the subjective aspect of reification as man's activity estranged from himself, simultaneously suggests that man's activity is the underlying foundation of this "second nature" [HCC, p.86]. The transcendence of this "second nature" is

therefore dependent on the overcoming of the estrangement of man's activity that Lukács identifies [HCC, p.86]. I would argue that the tension that exists in Marx's *Manuscripts*, examined in the first chapter, between two and one conceptions of subjectivity, seems to be reproduced within Lukács's conception of the dual aspects of the phenomenon of reification.

Whilst operating with very different conceptual frameworks, I would argue that there is an analogy between the forms of argument used in each work. In the first chapter, I argued that there is a tension in Marx's *Manuscripts* between two and one conceptions of subjectivity, which pre-figures the development of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism. Lukács takes the theory of commodity fetishism as his starting point, but reproduces this ambiguous relationship within the theory. Concretely this means that "second nature", a human world that appears deprived of subjectivity, is simultaneously irreducible to and yet founded on human activity. The "forces which generate their own power" in Lukács's analysis are either a pseudo-subject (one subjectivity) or a real subject (two subjectivities) similar to the role played by "modern Industry as self" in Marx's *Manuscripts*.<sup>93</sup>

Lukács's exposition of the phenomenon of reification powerfully extends the contradictions of the problem, but the ticklish problem of the subject capable of transcending this reification remains. Marx's distinction, in the *Manuscripts*, between alienation and objectification was unavailable to Lukács when writing *HCC*. This makes it somewhat teleological to ask whether Lukács would have been able to formulate such a distinction. It can be shown however, that a distinction between alienation and objectification and between essence and appearance is necessary for a defensible conception of a Marxist perspective. Therefore a valid question would be to ask to what extent Lukács's framework precludes these distinctions, or makes it hard for him to formulate them.

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<sup>93</sup> While Marx does not have a developed conception of essence and appearance in the *Manuscripts*, there is a tension (related to the pre-figuration of his theory of commodity fetishism) arising from the persistent irreducibility of the notion of "modern Industry as self" to the relation of alienated labour with itself.

### c) Reification and the Proletariat

In Lukács's essay, *Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat*, the notion of the proletariat is only discussed at length, and arguably mainly in a philosophical sense, in the third section called *The Standpoint of the Proletariat*. The concept is noticeable by its absence from his investigation of reification in the first section of the essay. I would argue that the separation of these two concepts, reification and the proletariat, is significant for Lukács. On the surface, the proletariat might simply appear as the answer to the philosophical problems posed by the antinomies of bourgeois thought. If Lukács's conception of the proletariat were not rooted in his theory of reification, it would close off the possibility of a theory of proletarian transcendence of reification from within capitalist society. An adequate account of this central essay in *HCC* must explain the interconnections between its three sections.

I will begin by questioning whether Lukács in fact only discusses the proletariat in a philosophical sense. On the one hand, Lukács points towards Marx's concrete analysis of the consciousness of the Silesian weavers [*HCC*, p.174]. However there does appear to be a separation between the discussion of the proletariat as a potential revolutionary subject and the forms of reified consciousness experienced by the working class under capitalism. This separation would have to be overcome in order to enunciate an adequate theory of transcendence of reification from within capitalism.

This raises the question posed by Lukács about the possibility of attaining knowledge under capitalism. On the one hand, for Lukács, true knowledge is only possible for the proletariat under capitalism because it is capable of becoming the identical subject/object of history. And yet, in *HCC*, Lukács emphasises that whilst the Kantian limit of the thing-in-itself presents a real horizon to bourgeois thought, it does not prevent the real expansion of knowledge under capitalism. Lukács poses the question later in *HCC*, with reference to class-consciousness, namely: "how far is it *in fact* possible to discern the whole economy of a society from inside it?" [*HCC*, p.52]

It is “the purely abstract negativity in the life of the worker”, which represents “objectively the most typical manifestation of reification” [HCC, p.172]. For this reason, for Lukács, it is “*subjectively* the point at which this structure is raised to consciousness and where it can be breached in practice” [HCC, p.172]. I will return therefore to the question of the proletariat and how Lukács understands the process of labour as giving content to the relationship between man and nature.

#### **d) Labour and the Proletariat**

In *The Phenomenon of Reification*, the first section of his essay on *Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat*, Lukács’s discussion of labour focuses on the notion of the division of labour. As in the earlier essay *The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg*, Lukács’s primary concern is the “division of the process of labour into parts at the cost of the individual humanity of the worker”, and its effect on the “thought, the science and the philosophy of capitalism” [HCC, p.27]. It is characteristic of Lukács that he approaches the question of labour from the context of a discussion of the process of the creation of consciousness.

The capitalist division of labour underlies, for Lukács, the concern in bourgeois thought with objects that arise from the “process of studying phenomena in isolation” [HCC, p.28]. In his attempt to dissolve the fetishistic forms of the commodity system, Lukács diagnoses the estrangement of man’s activity as the “abstraction of the human labour incorporated into commodities” [HCC, p.87]. Lukács repeats this theme in his later chapter on organisational problems, when he argues that the division of labour is “alien to the nature of man, makes men ossify in their activity”, and that “it makes automata of them in their jobs and turns them into the slaves of routine” [HCC, p.335].

It is, Lukács argues, the universality of the commodity form that is responsible for this. The “modern process of labour” has developed, for Lukács, through a complex historical process to the point of being a “category of society influencing decisively the objective form of things and people in the society thus emerging, their relation to nature and the possible relations of men to each other” [HCC, p.88]. In the third section of the *Reification* essay, *The Standpoint of the Proletariat*, Lukács

investigates the dialectic between the “social existence of the worker” and the “forms of his consciousness” [HCC, p.168]. Lukács analyses the possibility of the workers breaking with the “pure immediacy” of their existence in society and becoming conscious of themselves as commodities, and thus beginning to discover their “own relations with capital” [HCC, p.168].

This new element of “adding self-consciousness to the commodity structure” [HCC, p.168], he argues, is different to the “rigid epistemological doubling of subject and object” that takes place in previous epochs, e.g. with slavery [HCC, p.169]. The workers who recognise themselves as commodities have a form of knowledge which is practical, knowledge which “*brings about an objective structural change in the object of knowledge*” [HCC, p.169].

Lukács discusses the “special nature of labour as a commodity” [HCC, p.169], which for as long as the workers are unconscious of themselves as commodities plays the role of an “unacknowledged driving wheel in the economic process”, but upon coming to consciousness “now objectifies itself by means of this consciousness” [HCC, p.169]. It could be asked therefore what the subject is that undertakes this simultaneous objectifying of itself and coming to consciousness? Is the proletariat identical with this self-knowledge of the commodity? Lukács thinks that Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism contains the “self-knowledge of the proletariat”, when conceived as the “knowledge of capitalist society (and of the societies that preceded it)” [HCC, p.170].

Lukács argues that this is contained “implicitly in the dialectical antithesis of quantity and quality as we meet it in the question of labour-time” [HCC, p.169]. The extent to which the theory of commodity fetishism is a universal key for Lukács can be seen by his claim that the recognition of the commodity character of labour power makes it possible to “recognise the fetish character of every commodity” [HCC, p.169]. He argues however that this does not to make the “teeming abundance” of history superfluous [HCC, p.170]. For this reason, it is necessary for the dialectical method to constant renew itself, if it is not to freeze into a “new rigidity and a new immediacy” [HCC, p.170].

The proletariat is unique because it stands at the “focal point” of the capitalist socialising process [HCC, p.176]. Despite capitalism’s tendency to transform “relations between human beings into purely social relations”, bourgeois thought remains “enmeshed in fetishistic categories” [HCC, p.176]. On the one hand, every “human element” is removed from the “immediate existence” of the proletariat, whilst on the other hand, every ‘direct’ link with nature is eliminated so that “socialised man can stand revealed in an objectivity remote from or even opposed to humanity” [HCC, p.176]. It is in this “objectification”, in this “rationalisation and reification of all social forms” that Lukács argues we can “see clearly for the first time how society is constructed from the relations of men with each other” [HCC, p.176].<sup>94</sup>

### **e) Labour beyond Capitalism and the Realm of Freedom**

In the section on *The Standpoint of the Proletariat*, Lukács claims to have sketched out a “Marxist analysis of labour under capitalism” [HCC, p.170].<sup>95</sup> This is distinguished, Lukács would argue, by the antithesis between the “isolated individual” and the “abstract generality within which he finds mediated the relation between his work and society” [HCC, p.170]. The fact that Lukács develops a discussion of labour “under capitalism” [HCC, p.170], suggests that, following Marx in *Capital*, he discusses labour as a process common to more than one epoch of human history, or mode of production. This, it could be argued, leaves open the possibility of a form of labour that points beyond the limits of capitalism.

Lukács’s use of the oft-quoted passage in *Capital* concerning the “realm of freedom” suggests that he operates with an implicit notion of the “realm of necessity” [HCC, p.312-313].<sup>96</sup> In this passage Marx makes clear that both “savage and civilized” man must “wrestle with nature to satisfy his

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<sup>94</sup> Here is an example, as discussed earlier, of Lukács not making a clear distinction between objectification and alienation.

<sup>95</sup> Lukács’s use of Marx’s conceptual apparatus and terminology from *Capital* is extensive in *HCC*. For example, Lukács employs a conception of the metabolic interchange between man and nature. It may be questioned, however to what extent Lukács has taken up both the form of language and the content of Marx’s concepts.

<sup>96</sup> Marx, *K Capital* Vol. III (London: Penguin, 1981), p.959



needs [...] in all forms of society and under all possible modes of production”.<sup>97</sup> In other words, does Lukács, like Marx in this passage, conceive of a trans-historical element of human labour? The question can perhaps also be whether Lukács recognises in labour an element that is simultaneously necessary and also potentially free. It would be a one-sided use of this passage if Lukács was to make repeated use of the notion of the “realm of freedom” without acknowledging the implications that the “realm of necessity” has for the enduring recalcitrance of nature and its role as a ‘continually surprising interlocutor’ with man.<sup>98</sup>

In the chapter of *HCC* entitled *Class Consciousness*, Lukács associates the “‘realm of freedom’” with “the end of the ‘pre-history of mankind’” [*HCC*, p.69]. He argues that it “means precisely that the power of the objectified, reified relations between men begins to revert to *man*” [*HCC*, p.69]. Lukács makes little discussion of Marx’s corresponding term of the “realm of necessity”.<sup>99</sup> Does the “realm of necessity” remain the basis of the “realm of freedom” for Lukács or is it in some way transcended? Lukács’s suggestion that the “moment of transition to the ‘realm of freedom’” is dependent on the “conscious will of the proletariat”, and the corresponding cataclysmic notion of a “final economic crisis of capitalism”, could be interpreted as suggesting that the revolution itself is a transition that leaves behind the realm of necessity altogether [*HCC*, p.70]. This interpretation seems unlikely in the context of Lukács’s overall framework.

Perhaps the issue is that Lukács is not quoting directly from Marx at all, but rather has in mind Engels’ discussion in *Anti-Dühring* of the “transition accomplished by mankind *after* the revolution” [*HCC*, p.312]. Lukács draws particular attention to Engels’ notion of “the leap from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom” [quoted in *HCC*, p.312]. Lukács points out that, for a dialectical materialist, this transition is both a leap and a process. Lukács recognises that the great difficulty

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<sup>97</sup> Marx *Capital* Vol. III, p.959

<sup>98</sup> If Lukács were to partially read Marx in this way, he would be reproducing a one-sidedness with respect to the recalcitrance of nature that I have argued, following Chris Arthur, can be found in Marx’s own *Early Writings* (Arthur, *C Dialectics of Labour* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p.135).

<sup>99</sup> Marx *Capital* Vol. III, p.959

with this conception of the dialectical transition between the realm of necessity and that of freedom “is to determine the *starting-point* of the process” [HCC, p.312].

Lukács argues that separating the “‘realm of freedom’ sharply from the process which is destined to call it into being”, precluding all “dialectical transitions” is to lapse into a “utopian outlook” [HCC, p.313]. In this sense even the first appearance of the proletariat on the stage of history indicates an aspiration towards the realm of freedom, “albeit in an unconscious way” [HCC, p.313]. Lukács lays great emphasis earlier in *HCC* on the notion that “knowledge of the present” and of its necessity, its “genesis and history”, represents the starting point for the proletariat’s historical knowledge [HCC, p.159]. The role of class consciousness looms large for Lukács, as it plays the decisive role in determining the course of the revolution, and therefore whether such a leap is taken. And yet he recognises that the approach of the realm of freedom does not negate the objective necessities of the economic process.

Lukács’s interpretation of Engels’ ‘leap’, as both event and process, seems to preserve the ability to conceive of the continuation of the realm of necessity after the revolution, where necessity is not conceived as something opposed to freedom, but as its basis. Thus, for Lukács, labour appears to have a trans-historical element. It is a process that has certain common features across different epochs of human history. Lukács also appreciates that the “realm of freedom” does not negate the laws of nature altogether, but that it merely necessitates the transcendence of the “second nature” created by man in order for humanity to realise the potential of this sphere. In the epoch of capitalist production however, individual freedom is progressively annihilated by the processes of capitalist reification.

## **f) Transcendence and the ‘Purity’ of the Proletariat**

As a collection of essays written over an extended period of time, *HCC* might be expected to demonstrate a certain development or progression. In reference to the absence of a comparative element in Lukács’s analysis, it could be asked whether a tension exists between the apparent

'purity' of the conception of subjectivity present in the chapters on *Class Consciousness* and *Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat* in comparison with the later essays on the methodology of organisation and tactics.

I have enquired as to whether Lukács's resolution of the antinomies of bourgeois thought through the proletariat as the identical subject-object of history, in his essay on *Reification and the Standpoint of the Proletariat*, can be considered a form of ultra-subjectivity. Is there a connection between the possible resolution of this antinomy with a super-subject, and the 'purity' of the subject thus conceived? Methodological statements such as, "The totality of an object can only be posited if the positing subject is itself a totality" [*HCC*, p.28], seem to frame the analysis in such 'pure' terms. The 'impurity' that we might conceive is necessitated by the problem that the starting point of the transcending subject must emerge from within capitalist society itself.

I will now consider the later essays of *HCC*, concerning his critique of Rosa Luxemburg and his examination of the organisational problems of the revolutionary party. In these essays, Lukács develops the relationship between proletarian and non-proletarian elements in the revolutionary process, and the influence of non-proletarian elements on proletarian class consciousness. Lukács also raises questions, common in the Third International at this time, regarding the notion of hegemony. It could be asked whether the same conception of subjectivity can be found in the chapters on *Class Consciousness* and *Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat*, as is found in these later discussions, or whether another conception of subjectivity is identifiable.

Lukács's critique of Luxemburg in the essay *Critical Observations on Rosa Luxemburg's "Critique of the Russian Revolution"* is explicitly based on her overestimation of the "purely proletarian character" [*HCC*, p.274] of the Russian Revolution. Lukács draws our attention to both the "non-proletarian elements *outside*" the proletariat, as well as the influence of non-proletarian ideologies "*within* the proletariat" [*HCC*, p.275]. Given the absence of any criticism of Luxemburg in the earlier chapter on *The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg*, does this represent an implicit self-critique by Lukács

after reading Lenin's *Left-Wing Communism*, or does his theorisation go even beyond this? At no point does Lukács explicitly claim to have a pure conception of the proletariat, but his later critique of Luxemburg might lead us to infer this in the earlier essays of *HCC*.

The continuing influence of Luxemburg on Lukács is clear despite his criticisms. In fact he argues, in the *Critical Observations* essay, that Luxemburg's *The Accumulation of Capital* contains "the socio-economic theory that suggests what the revolutionary tactics of the Bolsheviks ought to be vis-à-vis the non-proletarian strata of workers" [*HCC*, p.289]. Is there perhaps a link between Lukács's discussion of hegemony and the question of the purity of his conception of subjectivity? Does Lukács's discussion of the hegemony of the bourgeoisie imply that an understanding of the means by which a proletarian hegemony could be constructed? Can such an understanding be located in Lukács discussion of the relationship between workers' movement and the revolutionary party, the problems of leadership and 'spontaneous' action?

By what means does this 'impurity' arrive in Lukács's analysis? It could arguably be established through the conception of knowledge as "practical critical activity" [*HCC*, p.262], which allows for the continual transformation of the basis of the relationship between empirical and imputed class consciousness. Bound up with this mechanism is Lukács's notion, borrowed from Weber, of "objective possibility" [*HCC*, p.51], which seeks to integrate a concrete analysis of class forces into Lukács's framework. But to what extent has this notion been organically integrated into his conception of a Marxist analysis?<sup>100</sup> I have identified a number of limitations of Lukács's analysis in *HCC*, but also some indication of a progression in Lukács's essays in *HCC* that might be developed. I contend that the tensions in Lukács's later essays on revolutionary strategy and organisation begin to modify his understanding, working backwards from a more concrete analysis to a higher level of abstraction. This will be of particular interest in the later discussion of Antonio Gramsci whose

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<sup>100</sup> It could be argued that this attempted synthesis is susceptible to a similar critique that Lukács himself deploys against Rickert's attempt to isolate the subjectivity of the historian with the notion of 'cultural values'.

comparative analysis of class forces, power and institutions demonstrates a Marxist conception capable of generating new political practices.

## 5) Conclusion

### a) Lukács's Conception of Subjectivity and the Philosophy of Praxis

The detailed engagement of this chapter with the arguments of the central *Reification* essay of *HCC* was necessary in order to establish its conceptual framework. It forms the central pivot of Lukács's attempt to synthesise three elements: the fusion of Weber's concept of rationalisation within a Marxist theory of commodity fetishism, the immanent critique of bourgeois philosophy, and the elaboration of a philosophy of praxis as the basis for proletarian revolution. This gives rise to a set of categories that reveal a distinctive conception of subjectivity.

In the analysis, I have argued that Lukács's framework allows direct questions to be asked about the creation of the proletariat as a revolutionary subject. Lukács's focus on the formation of class consciousness and the historical development of the complexities of bourgeois thought could appear as traits of a straightforwardly Hegelian approach.<sup>101</sup> It is however the deployment of a set of distinctions (the categories of social mediation within a class-based analysis) developed from his transposition of the theory of commodity fetishism and the specificities of capitalist society into this investigation that seems to constitute a distinctively Marxist substance in his conception of the historical process.

There are, however, obvious differences between the frameworks deployed by Marx and Lukács. The concept of labour in Lukács's framework seems to play a much less unifying role than the one studied in the first chapter on Marx's *Manuscripts*. The status of the concept of labour in *HCC* is disputed. It is difficult to isolate Lukács's precise usage of the term labour in its various formulations as the division of labour, the problem of labour-time, the special nature of labour as a commodity, and labour-power. The reason for this may be that Lukács is most interested in illuminating the

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<sup>101</sup> Further study would be merited of the apparent parallel between Lukács's tracing of the historical development of conceptions of nature and the potential attitudes to subjectivity that might correspond to these attitudes, roughly speaking: determinism, "free-will" and the transcendence of these (Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.136).

dialectic between the workers' social existence and the forms of their consciousness [HCC, p.168]. His discussion of the work process is structured around this relationship.<sup>102</sup>

Lukács depicts the development of revolutionary consciousness, not as the construction of a passive knowledge, but of knowledge as "practical critical activity" [HCC, p.262]. He tries to show the way in which the proletariat's capacity of grasping the totality results in the "total, structural transformation" of the "immediate objects of action" [HCC, p.175]. What prevents the gap between the empirical consciousness of the proletariat and its imputed consciousness from becoming a 'messianic leap' is that the interaction between consciousness and its objects continually changes the basis of the relationship between empirical and imputed consciousness.

This picture is, however, predicated on the positing of its point of departure, the subject of action, the proletariat as the "identical subject-object" of history [HCC, p.149]. We have discussed the problematic nature of the notion of the proletariat as the 'identical subject-object' of history, the subject of Lukács's philosophy of praxis. In Lukács's framework this subjective aspect of the dialectic of the absolute subject-object requires the objective aspect of the dialectic between mediation and immediacy.<sup>103</sup> A unique aspect of Lukács's theory of subjectivity is his equation of class relations with mediation. The division between class standpoints is mapped in the realm of consciousness onto the capacity or incapacity to penetrate immediate reality, to generate the necessary mediations to construct what Lukács terms "authentic objective reality" [HCC, p.150]. The identification of mediation with class relations means that the bourgeoisie is incapable, in the final analysis,<sup>104</sup> of going beyond the immediate standpoint.

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<sup>102</sup> We might ask however whether Lukács would benefit from the conception of "living labour" which plays a central role for Marx in the development of *Capital*.

<sup>103</sup> Arato, A and Breines, P *The Young Lukács and the Origins of Western Marxism* (New York: Seabury, 1979), p.131

<sup>104</sup> An important point to note is the space left by Lukács for the bourgeoisie to temporarily raise mediations to consciousness, to develop real insights. This has a significance for class consciousness. It is concretely manifested, for example, in the distinction between vulgar and classical political economy.

This raises the question of why the capacity or incapacity to penetrate immediacy need necessarily be tied to class. For Lukács, this seems to point to an intimate connection between mediation and the structure of capitalist society as he attempts to outline in the *Reification* essay. The danger in this conceptualisation is perhaps that mediation is transposed too crudely from this construction. It is apparent that certain bourgeois thinkers have been able in a partial and obfuscated way to provide insights and tools with which to penetrate immediacy. It is of course precisely this recognition that makes Lukács's analysis of the antinomies of bourgeois thought so informative. We might question however whether Lukács is able to traverse his discussion of subjectivity at this level of abstraction to a discussion of the question of class subjectivity.<sup>105</sup> Or to pose the question more concretely, whether such a traversal requires an analysis of the various forms in which human beings interact with each other in definite social contexts.

## **b) Between Lukács and Gramsci**

I will shortly be turning to an investigation of subjectivity in Antonio Gramsci. I will therefore venture a few comparative observations based on the study of Lukács's *HCC*. It seems that there is an interesting point of similarity in both thinkers' emphasis on the methodological importance of the idea of tendencies.<sup>106</sup> For Lukács, tendencies represent an authentic reality, placed on a higher level than the "facts" which must be exhibited through them [*HCC*, p.183-184]. Whilst Gramsci does not enunciate a similar critique of immediate facts, this does not mean that such an analysis is incompatible with his conception. For Gramsci, the intellectual tradition in Italy was predominantly a sophisticated anti-empiricist form of idealism, epitomised by Benedetto Croce. In this context, he was able to assume a critique of empiricism as given. By contrast, the various forms of mainstream bourgeois empiricism that Lukács had to confront are central targets for his attack in *HCC*.

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<sup>105</sup> Arato and Breines *The Young Lukács*, p.139 – Arato and Breines theorise such a criticism through the absence of a notion of intersubjectivity in Lukács's *HCC*. It would be fruitful to interrogate Arato and Breines further to find out whether their notion of intersubjectivity is necessary, or an abstraction that can more adequately be handled by a concrete analysis of the type put forward by Gramsci.

<sup>106</sup> For Gramsci, Ricardo's great achievement is to introduce the idea of law as tendency. Gramsci understands the tendency of the rate of profit to fall as an interaction between tendency and counter-tendency.



Lukács's early intellectual association with the tragic worldview of a doomed bourgeois culture is in marked distinction from the more positive assessment by Gramsci of the bourgeoisie's ability to construct an adequate conception of the world. It would be interesting to assess in what way this influences each thinker's ability to give an account of how classes are formed into subjects. Another point of difference is Gramsci's very sympathetic position towards pragmatism in comparison to Lukács's more hostile attitude, perhaps here influenced by the Kantian urge to expunge the contingent from philosophy.

Gramsci emphasises a conception of all human beings as philosophers, whose experience must be made critical. In one sense, the emphasis that Lukács places on an immanent critique of bourgeois philosophy, whose obscure product is the dialectical method, is in tension with its grounding in the lived experience of the proletariat. Gramsci's consideration of all aspects of life, including philosophy, in the context of the development of hegemonic projects, could therefore be said to give a more concrete and comparative analysis from the outset. Gramsci's focus on the content of the political level is in marked contrast to Lukács's more formal discussion of political leadership. However, I would also argue that Lukács's sensitivity to the Kantian tradition gives rise to his particular capacity to critique and theorise the limitation of power, as well as the notion of the overthrow and seizure of power. Here is a point of possible convergence with Gramsci's interest in the new institutions of a counter-hegemonic (or proletarian hegemonic) power. The next chapter's investigation of the development of Gramsci's conception of class subjectivity and its relation to his understanding of philosophy seeks to deepen the basis of these summary comparisons.

# Antonio Gramsci: Power, Autonomy and the Formation of Class Subjects

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## 1) Introduction

### a) *The Prison Notebooks* in Context

The experience of class struggles in Italy during the *Biennio Rosso* (1919-20), the troubled birth of the Italian Communist Party, and the rise of fascism in Italy all profoundly shaped the subsequent political and philosophical writings of Antonio Gramsci. Over the course of his political and intellectual life post-1917, both at large and during incarceration, Gramsci attempted to synthesise the lessons of these experiences with the traditions of Leninism. The result was the development of a distinctive account of class subjectivity motivated initially by his enthusiasm for the Russian Revolution. The evolution of Gramsci's conception of proletarian subjectivity within a field of class forces was in many ways a development of the practical working hypotheses that Gramsci was, through his leadership of the Italian Communist Party in the early 1920s, in the process of testing against reality.

This practice was beginning to demand a conceptual apparatus capable of theorising the problems associated with this strategy. Thus if the proletariat could not be conceived of as forming a subject on its own, a theory would have to be formulated by which the hegemony of the bourgeois regime could be dissipated, destroyed and ultimately replaced by an alliance of anti-capitalist forces under the hegemony of a proletarian leadership. Gramsci's imprisonment produced the seminal intellectual expression of this new conception in his *Prison Notebooks*.<sup>1</sup>

### b) What Kind of Theory of Subjectivity do we Find in Gramsci?

Gramsci's studies of various moments in Italian, European and world history in the *Prison Notebooks*, from the Sicilian Vespers through the Medieval Communes to the English and French Revolutions and the Risorgimento, to contemporary analyses of Fascism and Fordism can be characterised by

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<sup>1</sup> Gramsci, *A Selections from the Prison Notebooks* ed. and trans. Hoare, Q and Nowell-Smith, G (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971) – Henceforth referenced in the text as [SPN, p.page], i.e. [*Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p.page].

their comparative nature. This comparative method establishes the common features and the specificities of each. Through an analysis of the contending class forces and of the various moments of the hegemonic project of the dominant class in each situation, Gramsci attempts to construct the conceptual apparatus for a general theory of class power. In doing so he establishes a distinctively concrete account of the class subjects that take part in these events.

For Gramsci the history of the ruling classes is “essentially the history of States”, and his account of the State traces the course of its historical development, its expansion, and changing function in society [SPN, p.52]. However it may also be useful to recall the direct context of Gramsci’s writings on the State. He is forced to come to terms with an Italian State in the hands of a fascist regime.<sup>2</sup> It is an on-going difficulty for those interpreting Gramsci to bear in mind both of these registers of concern: the formulation of a general theoretical framework, in his words, “für ewig” and the discovery of direct political insights into a particular historical or contemporary situation [SPN, p.x].

A problem that the editors of the *Selections*<sup>3</sup> frequently contend with in their notes is that it must often be surmised from the context of Gramsci’s writings to which historical period an observation is intended to apply, or indeed whether it may have multiple applications.<sup>4</sup> We can infer that Gramsci believes that fruitful experimental work can be achieved through the juxtaposing or inverting of contexts in this way. Furthermore, these two registers are not necessarily mutually exclusive, since for Gramsci: “all of history bears witness to the present” [SPN, p.267].

Gramsci attempts to translate the “science and art of politics” into a “body of practical rules” for research and observation [SPN, p.175]. His historico-political analysis emphasises the importance of distinguishing and maintaining the correct relation between the elements of the “organic” and the

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<sup>2</sup> This historical conjuncture raised specific questions for Gramsci: whether the overthrow of fascism would result in its replacement by a new type of bourgeois regime, or a more fundamental social transformation? And consequently, whether the overthrow of fascism required external intervention, or whether possibilities exist for a counter-hegemonic project to emerge within a fascist State?

<sup>3</sup> Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith

<sup>4</sup> e.g. the case of passive revolution: see Gramsci *Selections* p.107 fn.101. Perry Anderson refers to this type of writing as a “‘desituated’ mode of discourse” (Anderson, P “*The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci*” *New Left Review* 1/100 (November 1976 – January 1977), p.20).

“conjunctural” [SPN, p.178]. Failure to do so, he argues, can lead to twin dangers, of “economism”, the over-emphasising of mechanical causes, or of “ideologism”, exaggerating the element of voluntarism in a historical situation [SPN, p.178].

Whilst averse to making “categorical or absolute” judgements, and preferring to “describe certain aspects of a situation”, Gramsci does not retreat from attempting to create generalising abstractions to describe reality [SPN, p.275]. The purpose of these is twofold, to evaluate the activity in a situation in order to change it, and to give those who have risen above the situation and “modified” activity “within their own ranks” the capacity to achieve greater prominence [SPN, p.275].

### **c) Investigating Gramsci’s Theory of Subjectivity**

This chapter will investigate the distinctive nature of the conception of class subjectivity developed by Gramsci, focusing particularly on the role played by the intellectuals as the fundamental unit in his theory of the construction of political leadership. Examining Gramsci’s conception of the “traditional” intellectuals, we will find that Gramsci ultimately undermines their claims to autonomy as a social group. Yet, his theorisation of the “traditional” intellectuals produces a comparative framework through which Gramsci characterises the specific features of different bourgeois hegemonic projects.

Second, Gramsci’s conception of class subjectivity is tested by the existence of a collective subject not self-evidently explicable in terms of class subjectivity, namely the State. We will propose a new categorisation of two related modes of analysis of the State employed by Gramsci: a constitutive and a holistic mode of analysis. The constitutive mode, exemplified in his analysis of the recruitment of the State bureaucracy, illuminates the class basis of the ‘molecular processes’ through which the process of State formation takes place [SPN, p.194 p.267]. This mode explains the emergence of the apparent autonomy of the State within the framework of a class analysis. On the other hand, the holistic mode of analysis relates class and State through a totalising analysis, as seen in Gramsci’s analysis of prestige in the relations between State and class. This mode demonstrates the active role

that the State plays in creating a class subject. Gramsci's analysis of the State requires the articulation of both of these modes, and an explanation of their interrelationship.

The class subjectivities of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat will be examined comparatively through an analysis of their respective hegemonic projects. A relationship will be drawn between these projects and Gramsci's conception of philosophy, particularly his notion of 'catharsis', and its connection with the development of a subaltern, and specifically proletarian, subjectivity. In his discussions of the problem of creating proletarian organic intellectuals, we find that Gramsci's key concern is with the emergence of the proletariat as a subject, as a *class-for-itself*.

#### **d) Is there a Theory of Fetishism in Gramsci?**

In this thesis I have followed the close connection between the emergence of the working class as a revolutionary subject and the overcoming of, variously, alienation (Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*), commodity fetishism (Marx's *Capital*), and reification (Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*). Tracing the development of this theme further within Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* presents a challenge that is not easily surmounted.

Recent scholarship, such as Peter Thomas's *The Gramscian Moment*, has highlighted the sophistication of Gramsci's understanding of Marxist economics.<sup>5</sup> Despite this, the predominantly political terrain of Gramsci's investigations means that he rarely focuses on economic mechanisms, and never directly elaborates a theory of commodity fetishism. In the absence of an explicit discussion of commodity fetishism or reification in Gramsci's work, it may however be possible to establish whether he has an implicit conception of these concepts.

In highlighting the unity arising from the "dialectical development of the contradictions between man and matter (nature-material forces of production)", Gramsci discusses value as the "unitary centre" of economics, as an 'alias' for the "relationship between the worker and the industrial productive forces" [SPN, p.402]. Thus he criticises the adherents of "crass vulgar materialism" who

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas, P *The Gramscian Moment* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2009), p.347

see “machines in themselves – as constant and technical capital – as producers of value independent of the man who runs them” [SPN, p.402]. This appears to demonstrate that Gramsci’s dialectical grasp of economics is one that addresses the problem of the machine, here equated by Gramsci with capital, as an apparently self-valorising agent.<sup>6</sup> Thus he confronts a problematic similar to the authentic subjectivity or quasi-subjectivity of capital that Marx solves with the mechanism of fetishism.

Nevertheless, Gramsci’s main concern in *The Prison Notebooks* is to address the philosophical and political levels of this unity between “man and matter” [SPN, p.402]. Therefore the phenomenon of commodity fetishism is manifested in Gramsci’s thought not primarily economically, but at the level of philosophical praxis and of political organisation. In philosophy he examines the relationship between “human will (superstructure) and economic structure”, and in politics between “State (centralised will)” and civil society [SPN, p.403]. The absence of a direct focus on economic mechanisms may not be a problem for Gramsci, since he argues that the activities of philosophy, politics and economics are all implicit in each other. Despite having a “specific language proper to each”, he claims that they can be reciprocally translated [SPN, p.403].

At the political level, I will argue that the projected forms of practico-critical activity that Gramsci associates with a revolutionary political party perform a de-fetishising function in his thought. Gramsci denotes the experimental organisational form of this activity, after Niccolo Machiavelli, as the ‘Modern Prince’. At the level of philosophy, the proletariat must work out a coherent and unified world-view in order to realise its hegemonic project. Philosophy, as conceived by Gramsci, is not the isolated preserve of intellectuals, but a collective project that implicitly involves all members of a social group. Nevertheless, the primary task of the proletariat is to create its own independent group

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<sup>6</sup> Gramsci elaborates the specific attributes of a critical political economy, his distinctive contribution to which is a conception of ‘automatism’ as “a group freedom, in opposition to individualistic free will” (Gramsci, A *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks* ed. and trans. Boothman D (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995), p.179). A further discussion of Gramsci’s critical political economy can be found in Krätke, M “Antonio Gramsci’s Contribution to a Critical Economics” *Historical Materialism* Vol. 19:3 (2011), pp.63-105.



of organic intellectuals who can organise this project. Marxism, as the philosophy of praxis, is therefore an on-going attempt to construct this coherent and unified world-view.

Since it arises from within the world of capitalism, this project confronts the fact that the subaltern classes have a world-view that is disjointed and episodic. The social position of the working class is characterised by a contradictory consciousness [SPN, p.333]. He argues that the consciousness of the worker is 'composite', and that the world-view expressed by workers' collective activity stands in direct conflict with general conceptions transmitted through the networks and institutions maintaining the ruling group's hegemony. Thus Gramsci sets the terrain for an ideological struggle between the consciousness arising from collective forms of working class struggle, and the disintegrating and disorganising effect of the hegemonic apparatus of the ruling group upon the subaltern groups.

Marx's discussion of alienation in general, and in particular of commodity fetishism in *Capital*, is distinguished by his repeated recourse to analogies drawn with the "misty realm of religion".<sup>7</sup> Here, in order to explain the process of penetrating fetishistic appearances, Marx relates to the kind of inversions employed by Feuerbach in his analysis of Christianity. Thus the process of inversion through which the illusion of religion is brought down to earth is seen as similar to the mechanism by which the apparently natural character of capitalism is revealed as being historically specific.

By contrast, for Gramsci, there is a blurred boundary between religion and modes of acting. Collective practices are thus treated as forms of popular religion, as popular tradition. Gramsci is concerned with analysing the construction of tradition, and the positive aspect that can be derived from this, such as the strength with which Catholicism grips and organises the masses.<sup>8</sup> Gramsci's historical analysis of the structural location of "traditional" intellectuals in each society dismantles their "esprit de corps", the particular status or prestige they enjoy, and reveals the class basis of

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<sup>7</sup> Marx, K *Capital* Vol. I (London, Penguin, 1990 [1976]), p.165

<sup>8</sup> Gramsci frequently paraphrases Marx's *Introduction* to his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, in which Marx says that theory becomes a "material force once it has gripped the masses" (Gramsci *Selections*, p.377, p.404 – Marx, K *Early Writings* (London: Penguin, 1992 [1975]), p.251).

their subjectivity. This gives Gramsci's comparative framework its particular theoretical strength by identifying how the specific features of the formation of political leadership can be characterised in different hegemonic projects.

At the same time, Gramsci is very attentive towards the process by which a worldview becomes ossified and separated from its manifestation as a material force. Thus, while an increasingly anachronistic worldview continues to dominate the world, this can be overcome through the development of the "instinctive feeling of independence" of the subaltern classes. This process requires the working out of the contradictory consciousness of workers into a "coherent conception of the world" and their organisation as a class subject through the 'Modern Prince' [SPN, p.333].

Gramsci's project for the proletariat to realise itself as the hegemonic class shares much with Lukács's desire for the proletariat to become the revolutionary subject of history. Yet whilst the theoretical counterpart of Lukács's concept of reification is his notion of the proletariat as the potential 'identical subject-object' of history, Gramsci's hostility to speculative and metaphysical thought tends to steer him away from conceptualising the proletariat as an abstract philosophical absolute.

Gramsci's focus on the immanent development of Marxism as a moment of modern culture means that he characterises the "passage" between the "'spontaneous' feelings of the masses" and the theory of Marxism as a "'quantitative' difference of degree" [SPN, p.198-199]. By contrast, Lukács emphasises the element of transcendence by conceptualising the "leap" from the empirical consciousness of the proletariat to its ascribed/imputed consciousness as "*a turning in the direction of something qualitatively new*".<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, I will argue that Gramsci's definition of this passage as a process of "catharsis" bears comparison with Lukács's conception of a "leap" as complementary aspects of a dialectical theory of class consciousness [SPN, p.366].

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<sup>9</sup> Lukács, G *History and Class Consciousness* (London: Merlin, 1971), p.250

## 2) Intellectuals, Autonomy and the Problem of ‘Tradition’?

Gramsci’s ideas regarding the formation of intellectuals are less frequently discussed than his concepts of *hegemony* and *passive revolution*. However, Gramsci’s theory of intellectuals is central to his thought, particularly in regard to the problem of subjectivity. The intellectuals, for Gramsci, can be likened in their role to the commodity in Marx’s *Capital*. For Marx, the commodity is the conceptual unit or building block of capitalist society, a society that is based on generalised commodity production. Similarly, for Gramsci, the intellectual is the unit in the construction of political leadership. To understand Gramsci’s generalised theory of class power, and its application to historical case studies, we must clarify the constituent elements at its core.

### a) Organic and ‘Traditional’ Intellectuals

All humans are intellectuals, as Gramsci points out, but not all people in society have the “function of intellectuals” [SPN, p.9]. For Gramsci, each social group<sup>10</sup> that “emerges on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production” creates organically alongside it, “one or more strata of intellectuals” [SPN, p.5].<sup>11</sup> These “organic” intellectuals play the role of giving the group “homogeneity and an awareness to its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields” [SPN, p.5]. Thus Gramsci places a strong emphasis on the intellectuals as a constituent element of the construction and organisation of a class as a force or subject. In particular, he is interested in the “problem of creating a new stratum of intellectuals”, and the

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<sup>10</sup> According to the editors of the *Selections*, Gramsci employs the term “social group” to avoid the Marxist overtones of “class”, although it often has a broader meaning. Class is unambiguously implied by the term “fundamental social group” (Gramsci *Selections*, p.5 fn.1).

<sup>11</sup> The “organic” intellectuals created alongside a new class are, says Gramsci, “for the most part ‘specialisations’ of partial aspects of the primitive activity of the new social type which the new class has brought into prominence” (Gramsci *Selections*, p.6).

relationship between “intellectual activity” and “muscular-nervous effort” that this entails [SPN, p.9].<sup>12</sup>

Elsewhere Gramsci argues that his conception of the intellectuals is not simply the commonly understood meaning of the term, but the “entire social stratum which exercises an organisational function in the wide sense”, whether that be in the “field of production”, of “culture”, or of “political administration” [SPN, p.97 fn\*\*]. Thus Gramsci admits that he engages in a “considerable extension of the concept of intellectual”, but argues that this is the “only way which enables one to reach a concrete approximation of reality” [SPN, p.12].<sup>13</sup>

Every new stratum of “organic” intellectuals (up to the present), he says, finds already in existence various “categories of intellectuals”<sup>14</sup> which *seem* to represent a “historical continuity uninterrupted”, despite the most “radical changes in political and social forms” [SPN, p.7]. In Gramsci’s Italy, the most common example of these “traditional” intellectuals were the ecclesiastics, who were formerly “organically bound to the landed aristocracy” [SPN, p.7]. Alongside the ecclesiastics developed a stratum of administrators, scientists and non-ecclesiastics who were once associated with the growing “central power of the monarch ... up to absolutism” [SPN, p.7]. These “traditional” intellectuals share the characteristic of having played an organic role in a preceding form of hegemony.

The “traditional” intellectuals experience “through an *‘esprit de corps’* their uninterrupted historical continuity”, leading them to advance themselves as “autonomous and independent of the dominant social group” [SPN, p.7]. Regardless of the veracity, or not, of their “self-assessment”, Gramsci

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<sup>12</sup> For Gramsci all human activity entails some degree of specific intellectual activity. It is however muscular-nervous effort, as an element of general practical activity, which is perpetually changing the world, and which becomes the basis of a “new and integral conception of the world” (Gramsci *Selections*, p.9).

<sup>13</sup> This is an example of Gramsci operating with both a “common” conception of a concept and simultaneously elaborating a critical understanding which stretches this meaning – see also later in this chapter the discussion of the State, in its commonly understood and critical forms (arguably corresponding to the distinction between narrow/technical and integral State). Peter Ives, after Anne-Showstack Sassoon, argues that this transformation, or ‘subversion’, of language is key to Gramsci’s analytic process (Ives, *P Language and Hegemony in Gramsci* (London: Pluto, 2004), p.65).

<sup>14</sup> The term “category”, argue the editors of the *Selections*, may refer to “trade or profession” or to a more general meaning (Gramsci *Selections*, p.5 fn.1).

argues that this claim has important and wide-ranging “consequences in the ideological and political field” [SPN, p.7]. The stance assumed by these intellectuals is an expression of the “social utopia”, which he says can be connected to the “whole of idealist philosophy”, of regarding themselves as “‘independent’, autonomous, endowed with a character of their own” [SPN, p.7-8].

This manifests itself in different ways for the different categories of “traditional” intellectuals. For example, the Pope proclaims his link with Christ and the Apostles, but conceals his connection with the modern industrialists. On the other hand, Benedetto Croce, the pre-eminent Italian non-ecclesiastical thinker for Gramsci, feels himself connected with Aristotle and Plato, but is open about his relationship with the industrialists [SPN, p.8]. This difference is important, argues Gramsci, for understanding the significance of Croce’s philosophy for Italian culture.

Gramsci tries to establish what the possible “‘maximum’ limits of acceptance of the term intellectual” should be [SPN, p.8]. He asks whether there is a “unitary criterion” by which the activity of intellectuals can be distinguished “in an essential way” from that of other “social groupings” [SPN, p.8]. He concludes that the most common error is to search for this in the “intrinsic nature” of intellectual activity, rather than by examining the position of these activities in the complex ensemble of the system of social relations [SPN, p.8].

The “traditional” intellectuals have an attachment to a historical class formation, but which is somehow more concealed or more mediated than with the “organic” intellectuals. Gramsci expends significant effort on his study of the problem of the formation of the traditional intellectuals. For Gramsci, the distinction between “intellectuals as an organic category of every fundamental social group” and “intellectuals as a traditional category” is “the central point of the question” [SPN, p.15]. It is from this distinction that “flow a whole series of problems and possible questions for historical research” [SPN, p.15].

One way of characterising the complexity introduced by Gramsci’s conception of the “traditional” intellectuals is that they appear, to themselves and other groups, to be a social group independent

of a particular class project. I will argue that Gramsci's theory of class subjectivity seeks to expose this conception of the "intellectuals" as a social category independent of class as a "social utopia" or a myth.<sup>15</sup>

Whereas the "organic" intellectuals are organically connected to the class alongside which they arise, the same is not obviously true for the "traditional" intellectuals. Nevertheless, the "traditional" intellectuals are still bound to a class project, even if in a more mediated or complex way. The importance of the inter-class aura of the "traditional" intellectuals is that they are the strongest form of the above-mentioned myth.

## **b) Autonomy and the 'Traditional' Intellectuals**

In his note on "*The Formation of the Intellectuals*", Gramsci asks whether intellectuals can be considered as an "autonomous and independent social group", or whether each social group has its own "particular specialised category of intellectuals" [SPN, p.5]. Gramsci does not ascribe genuine autonomy to the intellectuals as a social group, since they are based in the framework of class relations, but he acknowledges the complexity of the problem. The source of this complexity and the means to investigate it both lie in the "variety of forms assumed to date by the real historical process" [SPN, p.5].

Gramsci argues that the relationship between the intellectuals and the "world of production" is less direct and more "mediated" than it is with the "fundament social groups" [SPN, p.12]. This is because their relationship with the world is "mediated" by the "whole fabric of society and by the complex of superstructures" [SPN, p.12]. The intellectuals are in fact the "functionaries" of this complex of superstructures [SPN, p.12].<sup>16</sup> Gramsci suggests that it is technically possible to measure the "organic quality" of the intellectual strata, their "degree of connection to the fundamental social

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<sup>15</sup> Further comparative investigation of Gramsci's conceptions of utopia and myth would be a useful exercise. For Gramsci, myth appears to denote a positive social content, as in his notion of Machiavelli's *Prince*, whereas utopia seems to suggest a form detached from its content.

<sup>16</sup> Gramsci's investigation of bureaucracy, discussed below, points out that the "problem of functionaries partly coincides with that of the intellectuals", and that the former provides inspiration for solving problems regarding the latter (Gramsci *Selections*, p.186).

group” and to grade their functions and the superstructures “from the structure upwards” [SPN, p.12]. As an approximation however, he discerns two “major superstructural ‘levels’” corresponding to the functions of “hegemony” exercised by the dominant group throughout society, and the “direct domination” that is “exercised through the State and ‘juridical’ government” [SPN, p.12].

The intellectuals therefore play the role of the “dominant group’s ‘deputies’” [SPN, p.12]. They are part of the particular division of labour employed by the dominant group to organise social hegemony and state domination [SPN, p.13]. This conception comes into conflict however with “preconceptions of caste” [SPN, p.12]. Gramsci finds the model of military organisation an apt tool to explain the manifestation of these preconceptions in the complex gradations of the strata of intellectuals.<sup>17</sup> In particular those “officers” of the intellectuals who have risen from the ranks, comparable to the NCOs in the army, display the “most blatant” attachment to the “*esprit de corps*” or feeling of solidarity with the rest of the intellectual strata [SPN, p.13 fn.\*]. In this respect Gramsci discusses the “spirit of caste”, the sense of community which exists amongst scholars and particularly leads those of lower grades to follow the higher “university professors and great scholars” [SPN, p.104].<sup>18</sup> This “spirit of caste” has a social reality acknowledged by Gramsci. By explaining the “*esprit de corps*” of the “traditional” intellectuals, he seeks to dissolve the myth of the autonomy of intellectuals from its strongest point.

Gramsci notes that intellectuals who characterise themselves as independent of class struggle, a “crystallised social group...continuing uninterruptedly through history”, connect themselves “with a preceding intellectual category by means of a common conceptual nomenclature” [SPN, p.452]. New types of society, he argues, create new superstructures and require “‘new’ intellectuals” [SPN, p.452]. But if these intellectuals maintain a direct connection with previous “intelligentsia”, they are

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<sup>17</sup> Gramsci’s repeated use of military concepts for purposes of analogy is a distinctive feature of his analysis: the organisation of social forces as an army, the role played by the NCOs within this (See also Gramsci *Selections*, p.97 fn.\*\*), the war of position/manoeuvre distinction, his analysis of voluntarism and commando tactics (Gramsci *Selections*, p.230), etc.

<sup>18</sup> In this context we might also consider Croce’s desire to create an “international union of the great intellectuals of all nations” (Gramsci *Selections*, p.270).

not in fact new, but a “fossilised left-over” of a “historically superseded” group [SPN, p.453]. The situation is complicated, however by the possibility of a new “historical cultural content” maintaining an old conceptual form [SPN, p.454].<sup>19</sup>

Gramsci accounts for the forms taken by the claims of these intellectuals to independence from the class struggle in modern society.<sup>20</sup> Gramsci is concerned to dismantle the ideological representation of the “traditional” intellectuals as standing for universal values. He argues that “all intellectuals, however ‘pure’, are always expressive of certain tendencies” [SPN, p.289]. We will now investigate how successfully Gramsci generates the necessary mediations to explain the complex role that this stratum plays in society.

### **c) Autonomy Reduced? History and Structural Location**

Gramsci analyses the structure of different types of intellectuals. Urban intellectuals are closely connected to industry. They mainly articulate the relationship between “entrepreneur and the instrumental mass”, whereas the “top” urban intellectuals are associated with the “industrial general staff” [SPN, p.14]. There is thus a division between the execution of production plans and the autonomous initiative associated with their elaboration. On the other hand, Gramsci argues that rural intellectuals tend to be “traditional” intellectuals linked to the “social mass of country people and the town (particularly small-town) bourgeoisie” [SPN, p.14].

The welding together a particular group’s organic intellectuals and the traditional intellectuals is the task of the political party [SPN, p.15]. Thus the function of the political party becomes more apparent when a concrete analysis of the organic and traditional intellectuals is developed “in the context of different national histories and...the development of the various major social groups

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<sup>19</sup> Gramsci’s interest in developing new conceptions of the world consequently transforms language, although he contrasts the formal aspect of language and its content: “Identity of terms does not mean identity of concepts” (Gramsci *Selections*, p.456). Thus he distinguishes between a tendency’s “instrumental values” and its “transient historical value” (Gramsci *Selections*, p.453).

<sup>20</sup> An absence of the necessary nexus of relations between the intellectuals and the element which “feels”, which Gramsci calls the “people-nation”, gives rise to the intellectuals becoming a “caste” or “priesthood” (Gramsci *Selections*, p.418).



within each nation" [SPN, p.16]. Gramsci analyses the formation of the "traditional" intellectuals in each historical epoch, i.e. in the classical world, under feudalism, and in modern society.

Gramsci compares the relations between "traditional" and organic intellectuals in different national formations. He points towards the phenomenon of "cosmopolitanism" amongst Italian intellectuals as both "cause and effect" of the state of Italian disintegration from the Roman Empire up until 1870 [SPN, p.17-18]. France is seen as the paradigm of a "harmonious" development of national energies and intellectual categories, whereas England and Germany represent a "suture" between the old regime and the capitalist class, albeit in Germany with a specific caste drawn from the old regime providing military-bureaucratic personnel [SPN, p.18-19]. Gramsci describes this as "an industrial civilisation that develops within a feudal-bureaucratic integument" [SPN, p.23]. Japan also represents a society of this type, although with particular features of its own.

Different class societies are characterised by the relative position of the "traditional" intellectuals in each. The purpose of this historical analysis is to exhibit the structural similarity of the position of each stratum of "traditional" intellectuals within their respective societies in each epoch, whilst accounting for the origin of national variations. Thus Gramsci attempts to reveal the class framework upon which the apparent continuity of the "traditional" intellectuals is based. Whilst the continuity between the relative structural positions of these strata is real, the "traditional" intellectuals are in fact always in a "mediated" relationship with fundamental economic groups that have the only authentic claim to autonomy.

In explaining the structural location of the "traditional" intellectuals in each society, he seeks to undermine the particular status or prestige they enjoy in society. Gramsci asks whether historically and "realistically" explaining the structural location of the "traditional intellectuals" from a "rationalistic" viewpoint is sufficient to undermine their claim to autonomy as a social group. Certainly in the case of other myths, Gramsci does not think that a popular superstition can be destroyed "merely by being explained" [SPN, p.235].

#### d) Dissolution and Integration of the ‘Traditional’

While the “traditional” intellectuals are a complexity rather than an anomalous group for Gramsci, they play a special role in bourgeois thought. Gramsci’s concern is to undermine the influence of the “traditional” intellectuals over the national-popular forces which the proletariat is attempting to organise and lead. Thus Gramsci critiques the thought of Benedetto Croce, the epitome of a “traditional” intellectual, despite not being a clergyman.<sup>21</sup>

For Gramsci, the “traditional” intellectuals are a component that needs to be dissolved and re-incorporated as a constituent of a new historical bloc led by the organic intellectuals of the working class. The key task “of any group that is developing towards dominance is its struggle to assimilate and to conquer “ideologically” the traditional intellectuals” [SPN, p.10]. It is therefore important for Gramsci to specify what elements can be absorbed from Croce, as the philosopher of Italy’s passive revolution. While the revolutionary party must interact with “traditional” intellectuals in order to give leadership to the working class as a whole, it is only the agency of a political party as a cohesive unit can channel the activity of the organic intellectuals.

The category of intellectuals has undergone an “unprecedented expansion” in the modern world [SPN, p.13]. The corresponding expansion of education is, says Gramsci, “an index of the importance assumed in the modern world by intellectual functions and categories” [SPN, p.10]. He recognises both the necessity for defensive organisations provoked by the “mass formation” of “standardised individuals”, but also the emancipatory potential of this tendency towards standardisation and conformism. Gramsci’s project to analyse the formation of the “traditional” intellectuals is part of realising this potential by creating a “new type of intellectual” that can form the basis of an education “closely bound to industrial labour” [SPN, p.9].

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<sup>21</sup> Gramsci criticises Croce, as typifying those intellectuals, who regard themselves as “arbiters and mediators of real political struggles”, as personifying “catharsis” – a concept we will examine later in this chapter (Gramsci *Further Selections*, p.343 – Henceforth referenced in the text as [FSPN, p.343], i.e. [*Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p.343]).

### 3) The State as Collective Subject: Beyond Class Subjectivity?

In the *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci constructs a general theory of class power, the process by which classes constitute themselves as subjects through the construction of hegemonic projects. This raises the question however, of whether there exist other kinds of collective subject in Gramsci's conceptual framework. We will consider whether his account gives the State the status of a subject. For Gramsci, the creation of the State corresponds with the realisation of a hegemonic project. We will examine evidence that Gramsci sees the State as a collective subject with an apparent autonomy from the hegemonic class. We will ask whether this phenomenon can be accounted for within his conception of class subjectivity, in terms of particular classes developing their hegemonic projects.

In order to carry out this investigation we will postulate two different modes identified in Gramsci's analysis of the State. The first of these we shall call the 'constitutive' mode of analysis, and the second, the 'holistic' mode of analysis. The constitutive mode examines the recruitment of the State bureaucracy's personnel. This constitutive mode preserves Gramsci's framework of class subjectivity by explaining the class basis of the 'molecular processes' through which State personnel are formed [SPN, p.194 p.267].

The second, holistic mode of analysis views the interaction between State and class at a holistic or totalising level. Here Gramsci examines the prestige endowed by a State upon the dominant class in the creation of a fully operative hegemonic project. This mode demonstrates the active role that the State plays in creating a class subject. Gramsci's study of the phenomenon of 'State spirit' is another example of this mode of analysis. We will discuss the interrelationship between the constitutive and holistic modes of analysis and will attempt to demonstrate that an adequate account of Gramsci's conception of class subjectivity and the State requires the articulation of both.

## a) Gramsci's Project and the State

Whilst Gramsci is opposed to the blanket application of “abstract sociological schemas”, his method of study generates complex abstractions derived from the analytical comparison of historical phenomena [SPN, p.114].<sup>22</sup> In particular, Gramsci believes that the modern French State created by the French Revolution provides a paradigmatic case of a bourgeois hegemonic project against which he measures other modern European states [SPN, p.114]. Gramsci does not believe that a conception of the State “according to the productive functions of the social classes” can be mechanically applied to the interpretation of Italian and European history [SPN, p.116]. For the capitalist bourgeoisie and modern proletariat, the State is “only conceivable as the concrete form of a specific economic world, of a specific system of production”, but this does not mean that the “relationship of means to end” takes the form of a “simple schema” [SPN, p.116].

For Gramsci, the “historical unity of the ruling classes” is “realised in the State” [SPN, p.52]. Whilst juridical and political unities are important elements of this “fundamental historical unity”, it in fact results from the “organic relations between State or political society and ‘civil society’” [SPN, p.52]. In contrast to this, the subaltern groups, defined by their disunity, are presently unable to become a “State” [SPN, p.52]. The tendency of the subaltern groups towards unification in their historical activity is continually interrupted by the activity of the ruling groups. Although fragmented and episodic, Gramsci argues that every trace of this independent initiative of the subaltern groups is of “incalculable value for the integral historian” [SPN, p.55].

## i) The Narrow/Technical and the Integral State

Some clarification is required in addressing Gramsci's usage of the concept of the State, due to his employment of the term in multiple senses. Gramsci operates on the one hand with a narrow conception of the State as a “government technically understood” [SPN, p.267], which appears to mean the State solely as a “politico-juridical organisation in the narrow sense” [SPN, p.261]. The

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<sup>22</sup> Gramsci tends to oppose “rigid schemata” in favour of “practical criteria of historical and political interpretation” (Gramsci *Selections*, p.217).

functions of this “State as policeman”<sup>23</sup> are restricted to the “safeguarding of public order and respect for the laws” [SPN, p.261]. In this narrow sense, the State is the “governmental-coercive apparatus”, constituted of the army, police, judges, and bureaucracy [SPN, p.265] .<sup>24</sup> However, it should be registered that in “everyday language” the State is often conceived of in this narrow sense, and it is “commonly understood as the entire State” [SPN, p.268].

On the other hand, there is a broader conception of the State that Gramsci terms the “integral State” [SPN, p.267]. This critical conception of the State is more deeply involved in all levels of the manifestation of a hegemonic project and the creation of a new culture and a new “conception of the world” [SPN, p.265, p.267]. It is difficult, perhaps with good reason, to locate a succinct treatment of the integral State in the *Prison Notebooks*. The concept itself lies at the centre of a matrix of interrelated concepts, not least of which is Gramsci’s conception of “civil society”, or the “ensemble of organisms most commonly called ‘private’” [SPN, p.12]. Gramsci’s method, we might argue, is to attempt to penetrate the “State organism” [SPN, p.210]. The importance of the task is emphasised by Gramsci’s recognition that “little understanding of the State means little class consciousness”, and that such understanding is mobilised not simply to defend the State, but also to attack and to overthrow it [SPN, p.275].

In particular, the intellectuals are not necessarily part of the State in the narrow/technical sense, but play a role in helping the dominant class to fulfil its hegemonic project, and thus to constitute itself as a subject. Thus Croce, although not the leader of a party in the conventional sense, plays a role for the Italian State of providing the intellectual General Staff for, what Gramsci terms, the “organic party” of the bourgeoisie.<sup>25</sup> A consequence of his project of study into the intellectuals, understood

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<sup>23</sup> A conception that Gramsci suggests originates with Lassalle (Gramsci *Selections*, p.262).

<sup>24</sup> Elsewhere defined by Gramsci as a “coercive apparatus to bring the mass of the people into conformity with the specific type of production and the specific economy at a given moment” (Gramsci *Selections*, p.56 fn.5).

<sup>25</sup> Gramsci contends that in the modern world, the “exigencies of struggle” have compelled the parties of the bourgeoisie to be fragmented. There exists however, an organic party that has a reality for Gramsci more fundamental than the “movement of interrelated parties” (Gramsci *Selections*, p.150). The intellectual General Staff of the “organic” or fundamental party appears to operate as if it was “a directive force standing

in its expansive conception, “leads to certain determinations of the concept of State” [SPN, p.56 fn.5]. Whereas normally conceived as simply the “coercive apparatus”, as we have seen above, the operation of the intellectuals in the field of civil society opens up the conception of the State “as an equilibrium between political and civil society” [SPN, p.56 fn.5].

This critical conception of the State raises the question of “hegemony of a social group over the entire national society”, a project carried out through “private organisations, like the Church, the trade unions, the schools, etc.” [SPN, p.56 fn.5]. The window on the State provided by the theorisation of the function of the intellectuals, helps explain, argues Gramsci, the historical weakness of the Italian mediaeval Communes. He defines the Communes as a “syndicalist state”, since the dominant economic class failed to create a “category of intellectuals” capable of exercising hegemony as well as dictatorship [SPN, p.56 fn.5]. It is the transcendence of the ‘syndicalist’ phase to organise hegemony that Gramsci associates with Machiavelli’s advice in *The Prince*, and with the creation of an “integral State” [SPN, p.56 fn.5].

Gramsci links the impoverishment of the concept of the State with the decline of “political science and the art of politics” and the rise of sociology, and the associated “evolutionary and positivist theories” which study society purely by the methods of the natural sciences [SPN, p.243]. Gramsci affirms a broad conception of the State, when he rejects the reduction of ‘politics’ to parliamentary politics and constitutionalism. The State, he argues, is “the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules” [SPN, p.244].

## ii) The State as Part of a Hegemonic Project

Gramsci’s discussion of the State is predicated on his analysis of the various moments or levels in the “relation of forces” [SPN, p.180]. He distinguishes three moments in the “relation of forces”: the social, the political, and the military [SPN, p.180]. The first moment, the relation of social forces, is a

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on its own, above the parties” (Gramsci *Selections*, p.148). Gramsci also describes Croce as “a kind of lay pope” (Gramsci *Selections*, p.56 fn.5).

“refractory reality”, tightly bound to a structure that Gramsci defines as “objective, independent of human will”, and one that can be “measured with the systems of the exact or physical sciences” [SPN, p.180].<sup>26</sup> The material forces of production provide the basis for the emergence of social classes, and the relation of social forces is closely linked to this structure [SPN, p.180].

Within the second moment, the relation of political forces, Gramsci elaborates three sub-moments of collective political consciousness [SPN, p.181].<sup>27</sup> At the highest of these levels, where an analysis of the “passage from the structure to the sphere of the complex superstructures” is possible (i.e. the “universal” rather than the corporate plane), the creation of the hegemony of the fundamental social group can be explained [SPN, p.181]. Finally, the relation of military forces plays a decisive role in the outcome of conflicts between social forces [SPN, p.185].<sup>28</sup> The development of history is, for Gramsci, the continual oscillation between the social and military moments, mediated by the political moment [SPN, p.183]. It is all of these elements however which constitute the “concrete manifestation of the conjunctural fluctuations of the totality of social relations of force” [SPN, p.185].

As Gramsci points out, the State can be seen as the “organ of one particular group” and its purpose as the creation of “favourable conditions for the latter’s maximum expansion” [SPN, p.182]. On the other hand, the development and expansion of this particular group is “conceived of, and presented” as being “the motor force of a universal expansion” [SPN, p.182]. Thus Gramsci argues that there is a concrete coordination of the dominant group with the interests of the subordinate groups. The “life of the State” is therefore understood as a continuous process of “formation and

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<sup>26</sup> In this quote, as often elsewhere, Gramsci paraphrases Marx’s Preface to *The Critique of Political Economy* – see also (Gramsci *Selections*, p.138) for Gramsci’s particular engagement with this passage.

<sup>27</sup> The three sub-levels of collective political consciousness (and their corresponding social group) can be abbreviated as the “economic-corporate” (the professional group), the “politico-juridical” (the wider social group, or ‘economic’-class), and the passage from “structure to complex superstructures” (the hegemonic class). See Gramsci *Selections*, p.181.

<sup>28</sup> The relation of military forces is sub-divided into two aspects, the “technical military” and “politico-military” (Gramsci *Selections*, p.183).

superseding of unstable equilibria (on the juridical plane)”, in which the dominant group’s interests prevail, but stop short of their “narrowly corporate economic interest” [SPN, p.182].

The contradiction underlying the State is that the State both needs to appear as an autonomous subject to be an instrument of class domination for the bourgeoisie, and yet so long as this tends to be the result, it undermines the claims of those who maintain the notion of the autonomy of the State above the class struggle. The situation is complicated in Gramsci’s conception by the fact that the formation of a fully operative hegemonic project does appear to project a State with the qualities of a subject.

For Marxists, the bourgeois hegemonic project is crisis-prone due to the internal contradictions in its economic foundations. The crises of bourgeois hegemony, such as that which followed the First World War, have exposed the strength and depth of that hegemony (“the elements of trench and fortress represented by the elements of civil society” [SPN, p.238]). As we have noted, however Gramsci is aware of and analyses the variations in the hegemonic projects of the bourgeoisie of Western Europe. These variations are in some cases the product of classical bourgeois revolutions (e.g. France), in others a product of “passive revolution” (e.g. Italy), whilst others still are constituted by a more mixed composition (e.g. Germany, England).

Although the Italian Risorgimento creates a form of bourgeois hegemony, it is problematic in some aspects. In Gramsci’s view, it does not create the fullest form of hegemony, as displayed in the paradigm case of the French Revolution. This full hegemony is constituted by the ‘ethico-political’ level of hegemony, by the extension of the political relations of force to the highest level of collective political consciousness. This type of hegemony creates the most developed structures of civil society, whose organic personnel have been created in the process.

I will argue that, for Gramsci, it appears that when the State is serving a fully operative hegemony, in the sense that the hegemonic project engages the subaltern classes at the highest ethico-political level, it behaves like a subject in its own right. The Hegelian conception of the State might suggest



that this state is essentially autonomous of class antagonisms, however Gramsci's class framework argues that the State remains a factor in the establishment of full hegemony serving the interests of the project of the dominant class. We will now investigate this question of whether these qualities constitute the State as an authentic subject, or whether we can in fact account for this quasi-subjectivity within the class framework of Gramsci's account.

## **b) The State as Autonomous Subject?**

One of the obstacles to making a precise analytic distinction between the hegemonic class as subject and the State as subject is Gramsci's movement beyond a narrow conception of the State: the notion that the private forces constituting civil society are the "State itself" [SPN, p.261]. When considering whether the State plays the role of a subject, we should make clear whether we are referring to the 'integral' or 'narrow/technical' State. Furthermore, the identification between State and government, argues Gramsci, is a "representation of the economic-corporate form", of the "confusion between civil society and political society" [SPN, p.262]. As an initial observation, it seems that the appearance of the 'integral' State as subject corresponds to the case of fully-operative hegemony, whereas in situations where hegemony is only partially operative the possibility of the State as subject is limited to the 'narrow/technical' State.

In historical situations constituting a crisis of the dominant class's hegemony, the question of the role of the State becomes paramount, since attempts to resolve the crisis may revolve around the attempts of the dominant group to intervene and regulate class relations. Gramsci is keen to emphasise that the State is never neutral. For example, *laissez-faire* liberalism is also a form of State "regulation", and even when a "weakened State structure" is being re-organised by "illegal private action" it is not inert [SPN, p.160, p.232]. In this latter context, he is particularly interested in the concept of "Bonapartism" or "Caesarism" [SPN, p.219].

Gramsci theorises the state of affairs when two fundamental social groups locked in combat find themselves in a position of unstable stalemate that is inclined, if unresolved, towards "reciprocal

destruction" [SPN, p.219]. In this case, Gramsci examines the historical phenomenon of "Caesarism" in which a third force C intervenes between the two fundamental social groups A and B. Caesarism appears to be an example of the State acting as more of an autonomous phenomenon. The question is whether this represents Gramsci thinking about the State in non-class terms, or whether it represents simply a concrete example of the particular problems faced by classes attempting to develop their hegemonic projects.

Gramsci identifies two conceptions of the State opposed to the notion of "the State as policeman": the "ethical State" and the "interventionist State" [SPN, p.262]. The two are not identical however, the former has philosophical and intellectual associations (notably with Hegel), and the latter is associated with the economic sphere and national policies of protectionism and/or the reform of capitalist excesses [SPN, p.262]. These "diverse tendencies" combine in different ways, and are even capable of combining within individuals (intellectuals who claim to be "liberals in the economic field and interventionists in the cultural field") [SPN, p.262].

### **i) Identity of State and Class: The Reflection of Prestige**

In contrast to the common conflation between State and government in the popular consciousness, Gramsci suggests that the "identity State/class is not easy to understand" [SPN, p.269]. It is very important therefore that the "State/government, conceived as an autonomous force" reflects "prestige upon the class upon which it is based" [SPN, p.269]. We can only develop a "realistic concept of the State itself" through a satisfactory explanation of this phenomenon, which is general, he claims, to all types of States [SPN, p.269]. A class "as an economic fact" must establish the "intellectual or moral prestige" required for establishing its hegemony and therefore for creating a State in the integral sense [SPN, p.269].

In discussing the causes of the French revolution, Gramsci makes use of this conception in pointing out that the "rupture of the equilibrium of forces" did not occur due to "direct mechanical causes", but in the context of conflicts on a "higher plane than the immediate world of the economy" [SPN,

p.184]. These conflicts he argues relate to the realm of class “prestige” that we have discussed above. It is only through the transmission of all of these elements through the various levels in the relations of force, from the social to the political to the military, that a satisfactory analysis can be attempted.

Gramsci’s analysis of the role of prestige in the relations between class and State belong to the holistic mode of his analysis of the State. The purpose of this concrete analysis of the relations of force is not abstract or an end-in-itself, but to enable a concrete intervention, or an “initiative of will” [SPN, p.185]. An understanding of the State/government as an autonomous force and of the role of “prestige” is therefore also important in the understanding of the relationships between parties and the classes that they represent. For if a class “as an economic fact” is not capable of establishing “intellectual and moral prestige”, and consequently hegemony, it will not itself be capable of founding a State [SPN, p.269].

## ii) ‘State Spirit’

In his note on the *Elements of Politics*, Gramsci discusses the development of the concept contained in the expression “State spirit” [SPN, p.146]. The term, as the editors of the *Selections* point out, is derived from Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*, but was subsequently adopted by Mussolini and the fascists [SPN, p.146 fn.31]. Gramsci claims that it has a “quite precise, historically determinate meaning”, but he does not clarify exactly what this is [SPN, p.146]. He does suggest however, that every movement, which is not an arbitrary expression of individualism, has something similar to a “State spirit” [SPN, p.146]. This implies that every movement “presupposes ‘continuity’, either with the past, or with tradition, or with the future”, or in other words, “every act is a moment in a complex process, which has already begun and will continue” [SPN, p.146].

The “State spirit” is the responsibility for the process of being in “solidarity with forces which are materially “unknown” but which nevertheless feel themselves to be active and operational” [SPN, p.146]. Account is taken of these forces, “as if they were physically ‘material’ and present” [SPN,

p.146]. This process is in practice bounded by an organic calculation. The awareness of “duration”, argues Gramsci, must be “concrete and not abstract”, i.e. it must not “go beyond certain limits” [SPN, p.146]. Gramsci is not discussing what he calls the “*cult* of tradition”, which he suggests is the basis for an ideology [SPN, p.147]. Rather Gramsci’s conclusion is that a “State spirit”, in his understanding of it, is to be found “in everybody” [SPN, p.147]. He suggests that the “party spirit” is the fundamental component of the “State spirit” [SPN, p.147].

For Gramsci there is an interaction between the creation of a party, its development into a State, and the creation of a new conception of the world. Gramsci refers at points to the party as an “embryonic State structure” [SPN, p.226]. He also suggests that all parties are “only the nomenclature for a class” [SPN, p.152]. However these parties are not the “mechanical and passive expression” of the class, but “react energetically” on them to “develop, solidify and universalise them” [SPN, p.227]. Furthermore a conception of the world is not conceived simply as a set of ideas, but as a “total and molecular (individual) transformation of ways of thinking and acting” [SPN, p.267]. This in turn reacts back upon the State and the party, necessitating a “continual re-organisation” and the emergence of new and original problems [SPN, p.267]. It seems therefore that there is a great deal of fluidity between the various moments in Gramsci’s conception of the nexus between State, party and conception of the world. We appear to have identified a number of senses in which the State in Gramsci appears as an autonomous subject. This can perhaps only adequately be explained in the elaboration of a full critical understanding of the integral State that entails the articulation of the moments of State, party and conception of the world.

We have characterised the mode of analysing the state where the relationship of class and State are dealt with at a totalising level as a holistic mode. In examining the prestige reflected on a dominant class by the State, we have an example of the State playing an active role in constituting the dominant class as a subject. This mode of analysis appears to preserve this active moment. Taken at face value, and in conjunction with his analysis of the phenomenon of ‘State spirit’ within

movements, Gramsci appears to be making a very Hegelian/idealistic presentation. We will proceed now however to investigate a second mode of analysis, the constitutive mode, that attempts to explain the emergence of this active moment within a class framework. We will then consider whether, taken as a totality, Gramsci develops an account in the *Prison Notebooks* of these two modes that is capable of rendering this active moment compatible with his articulation of a conception of class subjectivity.

### **c) The State within Class Subjectivity**

As I have argued in the section dealing with the intellectuals, class subjectivity plays a fundamental role in Gramsci's conception of the world. Whilst we have thus far investigated the apparent autonomy of the role of the State in Gramsci's conception, we will now investigate whether his account of the State is compatible with the conception of class subjectivity he develops, and whether it might represent a certain complexity in the process of the formation of a hegemonic project.

#### **i) 'Statolatry' and the State as Absolute**

In the process of identifying and explaining the origins of false attitudes towards the State, Gramsci diagnoses the phenomenon of "statolatry" [SPN, p.268]. It refers to an attitude that identifies the State with the individuals of a social group. A social group, he argues, must strive to construct a "well-articulated civil society" that is the "normal continuation", the "organic complement" of political society, rather than in conflict with it [SPN, p.268]. For the proletariat that has not had the bourgeoisie's opportunity of independent "moral and cultural development" within the previous mediaeval society, a period of statolatry is "necessary and opportune" as an "initiation to autonomous State life" [SPN, p.268]. But Gramsci warns against the dangers of this statolatry becoming "perpetual" [SPN, p.268].

Gramsci is concerned not to deny but to explain the strongest manifestations of the State as an apparently autonomous subject, and to render them compatible with a class-based analysis. A

consequence of his class framework is that Gramsci is able to explain how those intellectuals which are not “firmly anchored” to a “strong economic group” tend to present the State as a “rational absolute” or as “something in itself” in order to abstractly rationalise their own “historical existence and dignity” [SPN, p.117]. It is this motive which underlies, he suggests, the modern philosophical current of idealism, is connected with the “mode of formation of the modern States of continental Europe”, and is also essential for understanding the concepts of “passive revolution” and “revolution/restoration” [SPN, p.117].

## **ii) Bureaucracy and the Constitution of State Power**

Gramsci makes a detailed study of the historical formation of bureaucracy and its significance for the form of the State. For Gramsci, classes produce parties, and parties “form the personnel of State and government, the leaders of civil and political society” [SPN, p.227]. Whilst this does not exhaust the relationship between classes and the State, it can be seen that one mode in which Gramsci addresses the construction of state power is by analysing the personnel of which its institutions are constituted. Functionaries, in this sense, are like intellectuals in that they are the building blocks of the narrow/technical state apparatus. Thus Gramsci takes very seriously his study of the phenomenon of bureaucracy.

The historical development of “political and economic forms” increasingly produces a “new type of functionary” [SPN, p.185]. Gramsci describes these personnel trained for civil and military bureaucratic work as “career” functionaries [SPN, p.186]. The process of their formation has a primary importance for the development of the form of the State. This is because each form of society and State has a system of selection and a method of training its own particular type of functionaries. Gramsci argues that, similarly as with the case of the intellectuals (with which the problem partly coincides), the processes by which these systems have evolved historically must be reconstructed [SPN, p.186].

In certain periods, Gramsci says, social classes become “detached from their traditional parties” [SPN, p.210]. He is particularly interested in periods of “organic crisis”, whose content is the “crisis of the ruling class’s hegemony” [SPN, p.210]. To analyse parties in these situations he distinguishes between three distinct elements: the “mass membership”, the “bureaucracy” and the “General Staff” [SPN, p.211]. The bureaucracy, he argues, is capable of becoming a “dangerously hidebound and conservative” force [SPN, p.211]. If the bureaucracy constitutes itself as a “compact body” and “feels itself independent of the mass of members”, a party can become anachronistic and void of social content [SPN, p.211].

A party’s ability to influence a situation at historically vital moments is dependent on its capacity to react against a tendency to become “mummified and anachronistic” [SPN, p.211].<sup>29</sup> We might ask whether or not Gramsci provides the conceptual apparatus in his account with which to explain the origins of this tendency in the structure of society. If not, we might suggest there is an absence of explanatory power to critique this tendency towards bureaucratic ossification, even if its symptoms have been powerfully identified. We will attempt to examine this apparent aporia later in this chapter. Rather Gramsci describes a very concrete process by which various intermediate strata, or class fractions, are conditioned to play a role in the formation and functioning of the State [SPN, p.212].<sup>30</sup>

Gramsci’s conception of Caesarism adopts what we have called a mode of constitutive analysis of the State. It gives a description of the strata which provide the bulk of the bureaucratic element of the State’s civil and military apparatus [SPN, p.212]. We could argue that the apparent autonomy of the State demonstrated in the case of Caesarism can be explained through this constitutive analysis to be the product of molecular processes that are grounded in a class framework. Caesarism is in this

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<sup>29</sup> We will further discuss the implications of this tendency towards ‘mummification’ in the next section of this chapter (Gramsci *Selections*, p.211).

<sup>30</sup> Of particular interest in this respect is his repeated analogy to the NCOs in the army, and the distinction between immediately directive functions and overall organisational planning (Gramsci *Selections*, p.13).

view a tool deployed by Gramsci to address particular complex situations in the struggle between class forces.

This constitutive analysis is complicated by the fact that the stratum in modern Europe for whom the bureaucratic career is very important, historically conditioned by the relations between “industrial strength” and “agrarian reform”, is the rural petit-bourgeoisie [SPN, p.212]. In the constitution of the State however, this stratum does not represent its own interests, but the interests of the bourgeoisie as a whole. Gramsci explains this through the distinction between the bureaucracy’s directive “command” function, and the overall organisational and “ordering” role played by the ‘General Staff’ of the bourgeoisie [SPN, p.213-214].

### **iii) The Modern State and the Disintegration of the Bourgeoisie**

The bourgeois revolutions brought about a transformation in the function of the State, consisting particularly in what Gramsci calls the “will to conform”, or the “ethicity of the law and of the State” [SPN, p.260]. In contrast to previous dominant groups, the bourgeoisie is not conceived as a “closed caste”, but tends to construct an “organic passage” from other groups into its own, both “‘technically’ and ideologically” [SPN, p.260]. Since the bourgeoisie presents itself as an “organism in continuous movement”, capable of assimilating the whole of society, the State, argues Gramsci, takes on the function of an “educator” [SPN, p.260].

More recently however, this process has halted, and the State is again conceived as “pure force”, as the bourgeoisie becomes “saturated”, and begins to “disintegrate”, not absorbing but losing elements [SPN, p.260]. In the modern period, the traditional intellectuals, argues Gramsci, have given the “most extensive and perfect consciousness of the modern State”, but are now detaching themselves from the dominant social group “marking and ratifying the crisis of the State in its decisive form” [SPN, p.270]. There is a tendency, he notes, of conservative and reactionary forces to be reduced to an economic-corporate stage, whilst the “progressive and innovatory groupings”, due to their nascent state, have not yet advanced beyond this stage either [SPN, p.270].



## d) Two Modes of Analysis

We have suggested that two modes of analysis can be distinguished in Gramsci's analysis of State power. The first is what we call a constitutive analysis. This examines the molecular processes through which the formation of the personnel of the State and shows how they are based in a class framework. In particular, the constitutive mode includes Gramsci's investigation of the phenomenon of bureaucracy. The second mode, more difficult to describe, attempts to deal with the relations between State and class at a more holistic and totalising level. This mode attempts to analyse the active role played by the State in the constitution of the dominant class's hegemonic project through the phenomenon of class prestige and the notion of 'State spirit'.

I will argue that a one-sided presentation of Gramsci's thought that emphasised only one of these modes would be open to challenge. The holistic mode of analysis alone might simply assert the active role of the State in the constitution of a hegemonic class subject and thus be seen as teleological. On the other hand, a constitutive analysis divorced from its holistic counterpart, might be accused of reducing collective subjectivity to an aggregate of individual molecular processes. I suggest that the dichotomy that we have tried to examine in this section, that the State both appears to exhibit the qualities of an autonomous subject within Gramsci's investigations and that it is also conceived of as being contained within or compatible with his conception of class subjectivity, is only explicable if we fully articulate both of these moments of analysis.

I will argue that Gramsci's method leads us to consider the two modes as having a dialectical interrelationship. However, it should be registered that other explanations could be asserted. For example, a functional explanation, such as that advanced by G. A. Cohen, might also present a possibility for considering the relationship between these two modes.<sup>31</sup> From this perspective the active role played by the State in constituting the dominant class's hegemonic project might simply be considered as its expected function in the relationship between class and State. Does this

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<sup>31</sup> Cohen, G A *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Oxford: OUP, 1978), p.233

explanation have sufficient explanatory power to avoid the teleological trap outlined above, but also to explain the interconnection between these two modes?

We referred above to a potential aporia in Gramsci's framework. Let us now develop this further. We might ask whether a distinctive feature of Gramsci's analysis is that a "collective will" is always embodied in a person, or group of persons. A consequence of this might be an absence of the ability to theorise non-personal, or perhaps non-human, social domination. For example, would it make sense within Gramsci's conception to ask whether the authentic subjectivity underlying the apparent autonomy the State was in fact capital rather than the class subjectivity of the bourgeoisie?

This might be related to the relative absence of any felt need by Gramsci to explicitly engage with Marx's conception of the fetishism of commodities, or, in terms of consciousness, to develop a theory of reification along the lines of Lukács.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, we might ask whether the problem of bureaucracy is a lens through which Gramsci is able to develop concrete insights into the organisational form of a party capable of resisting the effects of what Lukács would describe as the bureaucratic ossification associated with reification. It should be noted however that Gramsci does not elaborate a 'universal' framework for this process.

Gramsci's investigation of the State certainly poses a critical challenge to commonplace conceptions of the State, but also the further challenge of establishing, from his experimental mode of study, the limits of the critical concept which Gramsci is attempting to advance. The extent to which his concept of the integral State may exhibit a necessary elasticity is perhaps evidence that Gramsci is in the process of attempting to carry out the task of expanding the formula of the "United Front",<sup>33</sup> not simply theoretically, but by a "reconnaissance of the terrain and identification of the elements of trench and fortress represented by the elements of civil society" [SPN, p.238].

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<sup>32</sup> In its place, in Gramsci, we find a more highly developed theorisation of the roles of myth and utopia in contrast to other Marxist writers. Gramsci takes on Sorel's conception of the myth as enclosing "the strongest inclinations of a people, of a party, or of a class" (Gramsci *Selections*, p.126 fn.4).

<sup>33</sup> The policy launched by the Comintern Executive in 1921, but identified by Gramsci as Lenin's (Gramsci *Selections*, pp.237-238).

## **4) Comparing Class Subjectivities: Bourgeois and Proletarian**

### **Hegemony**

Having examined the question of the intellectuals in Gramsci's thought and the question of the State as a collective subject, we will now investigate the internal differentiations in his conception of class subjectivity. We will examine the differences between bourgeois and proletarian subjectivity by comparing the formation of a hegemonic project in each case. First we will look at the distinctive features of the bourgeoisie as a subject, and the variations that appear in different bourgeois hegemonic projects, before contrasting the prospective features of a future proletarian hegemonic project. Finally we will examine whether there is a contradiction between Gramsci's notion of the proletarian hegemonic project as creating a new State (as a feature of all hegemonic projects), and the classical Marxist conception of the withering away of the State.

#### **a) The Bourgeois Hegemonic Project: the formation of the bourgeoisie as a subject**

Let us examine the features that make the bourgeoisie distinctive as a subject. In Gramsci's account, the bourgeoisie's hegemonic project is constituted by a variety of institutions that represent a division of labour: the integral State, made up of both the narrow/technical State, the police, the army and the bureaucracy, and the institutions of civil society, the Church, the education system, trade unions and other civil institutions. We might say therefore that the unity of the dominant class is not represented by a single transparent consciousness, due to the differentiated and institutionalised form of its class power.

The bourgeoisie is distinct from the proletariat in its ability to develop its hegemonic project within feudal society. It is even able to realise its hegemonic project in numerous forms, many of which involve the incorporation of sections of the previous dominant class, rather than their complete destruction or neutralisation. In particular, Gramsci notes that the "suture" that takes place between

bourgeoisie and the feudal aristocracy [SPN, p.18]. This is manifested in the development of industrialism within a “feudal-bureaucratic integument” in the cases of the English, German and Japanese bourgeoisie [SPN, p.23]. For Gramsci, this type of accommodation with the bourgeoisie would be impossible for the proletariat in its hegemonic project, as evidenced by his fundamental hostility to reformism.<sup>34</sup>

Gramsci’s study of hegemony is comparable to a historical “laboratory” in which he attempts to categorise the different types of bourgeois hegemonic projects [SPN, p.335]. We find that, for Gramsci, two main types of bourgeois hegemony can be distinguished corresponding to, or as the products of, the different transitions from the feudal order: classical bourgeois revolution and “passive revolution”, or “revolution/restoration” [SPN, p.109]. Gramsci analyses the modern Italian State and the failure of the Risorgimento to produce anything resembling the Jacobin-type movement of the French Revolution [SPN, p.80]. This demonstrates the weakness of the partially-operative hegemony resulting from the process of ‘passive revolution’ in contrast to the strength of a fully-operative bourgeois hegemony produced by a classical bourgeois revolution.

Furthermore, a full bourgeois revolution gives rise to the aforementioned complex structures of the integral State that provide a certain stability against the tempests of social conflict produced by social crises. It is these reserves of strength that enabled the bourgeois States of Western Europe to weather the crises following the First World War. Another aspect of this strength is in the creation of a stratum of organic intellectuals of the bourgeoisie. This stratum, Gramsci observes, is not possessed by the Italian bourgeoisie during the Risorgimento.<sup>35</sup> The critical difference in these two cases appears to be the presence of the Jacobins, and “Jacobinism”, a crucial concept for Gramsci [SPN, p.77]. In the French Revolution the Jacobins represent not only their immediate needs, but the

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<sup>34</sup> Gramsci’s methodological hostility to any kind of reformism is illustrated by his remarks on the degenerated dialectical method that tends to “enervate the antithesis”, by dismantling it into a “long series of moments” (Gramsci *Further Selections*, p. 377). From this point of view, the conception of “revolution-restoration” is reduced to its second term, in which the social organism is in need of “continually patching up”, since it is “unable to keep itself healthy” (Gramsci *Further Selections*, p. 377).

<sup>35</sup> As we have seen, it is Croce, as a private figure, who later comes to play this ideologically integrating role for the Italian bourgeoisie.

“revolutionary movement as a whole”, and are able to unite a bloc of national-popular forces, a composite class-subject, in order to create a modern bourgeois State [SPN, p.79].

Although Gramsci is somewhat ambiguous about the status of the subjectivity involved in the type of hegemony resulting from a ‘passive revolution’, it is not the case that such a process is without an element of subjectivity. Gramsci’s detailed studies of the complex relationships of political leadership in the Risorgimento between Cavour and the Moderate Party, the State of Piedmont, and international forces, over the Action Party of Mazzini and Garibaldi illustrate this [SPN, p.55-90]. The process of transformation in the case of ‘passive revolution’ does not involve a revolutionary subject of the national-popular type organised by the Jacobins, but it does involve a subjectivity that is able to control a gradual process of change. In this sense ‘passive revolution’ can be conceived as a displacement of revolutionary pressures, a “revolution without a revolution” [SPN, p.59]. The prolonged process by which this political leadership was maintained through the “gradual but continuous absorption” of the “active elements” produced by allied, or even antagonistic groups, is described by Gramsci as “transformism” [SPN, p.58].

## **b) Proletarian Hegemony and the Modern Prince**

Gramsci’s concern with the development of a subaltern hegemonic project led by the proletariat is a theme that runs throughout the *Prison Notebooks*. This manifests itself explicitly in his pre-occupation with the development of a stratum of organic intellectuals of the proletariat. It also raises the question as to what extent the conceptual apparatus developed by Gramsci in his investigation of bourgeois hegemonic projects can be adapted or transformed to provide insights into the development of a subaltern, and ultimately proletarian, counter-hegemony.

In contrast to the stronger and weaker forms of hegemony that may be identified amongst the bourgeoisie, Gramsci does not refer to a partially-operative hegemony being realised by the proletariat. In contrast, Gramsci tends to allude to the proletarian hegemonic project in terms of a “totalitarian” endeavour, although we should note that the term has very different connotations for

Gramsci than for contemporary political theorists [SPN, p.335]. For Gramsci, suggest the editors of the *Selections*, its meaning should be understood as “simultaneously ‘unified’ and ‘all-absorbing’” [SPN, p.335 fn.20].

The subaltern classes are however, by their nature, “not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a ‘State’” [SPN, p.52]. The history of their movements is “intertwined with that of civil society” [SPN, p.52]. It is also “necessarily fragmented and episodic” [SPN, p.54]. Many of the features of a subaltern class project are touched upon in Gramsci’s analysis of the term “subversive”, which refers to a “negative rather than a positive class position” [SPN, p.272]. Since the lower classes have historically been on the defensive, he argues, their self-awareness is achieved “via a series of negations, via their consciousness of the identity and class limits of their enemy” [SPN, p.273]. Gramsci argues however that this process has not yet reached the “surface” of society, at least not on the national level [SPN, p.273].<sup>36</sup>

If the proletariat is to fully realise its hegemonic project it is necessary for it to create a form of hegemony that obliterates the “division of labour” both between and within social groups, and therefore the division between worker and intellectual [SPN, p.144]. This is not so easily achieved since the progress of the mass, and not simply “small intellectual groups”, requires the creation of an “intellectual-moral bloc”, in order to raise the cultural level of all to a “higher conception of life” [SPN, p.332]. To explain this project, Gramsci introduces the conception of “contradictory consciousness” [SPN, p.333].

The “active man-in-the-mass”, according to Gramsci, has “two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness)” [SPN, p.333]. The first is “implicit in his activity” and “in reality unites him with all his fellow-workers in the practical transformation of the real world” [SPN, p.333]. The second is a “superficially explicit or verbal” consciousness that the worker has “inherited from the

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<sup>36</sup> It is important to note that Gramsci’s concept of ‘subversive’ does not necessarily refer to the proletariat, but often to the *morti di fame*, constituted of two general types: rural day-labourers and petit-bourgeois intellectuals (Gramsci *Selections*, p.273).

past” or “uncritically absorbed” [SPN, p.333]. Thus this “man-in-the-mass” takes on the conception of the world of the dominant class, but in a complex way that continues to express another conception that is implicit in the activity of workers [SPN, p.333].

The initial stage of the development of the consciousness of being part of a hegemonic force is found in an “instinctive feeling of independence”, which must be developed into a “coherent conception of the world” [SPN, p.333]. In Gramsci’s conception, the intellectuals play a crucial role in this process, since there can be “no organisation without intellectuals, that is without organisers and leaders” [SPN, p.334]. Their function is not to import a conception of the world to the proletariat from outside, but to explain the working class’s own conception of the world to itself, to “make critical” an “already existing activity” [SPN, p.331]. The “crucible”<sup>37</sup> where this unification of theory and practice takes place is the party, which are the “elaborators of new integral and totalitarian intelligentsias” [SPN, p.335].

Whilst Gramsci sees the proletariat at the centre of the process of socialist revolution, it is certainly not a ‘pure’ class subject. Gramsci postulates the necessity of an alliance between the proletariat and other anti-capitalist forces. This gives rise to a complex process in which institutionalisation and the formation of a hegemonic project go hand-in-hand. An important question for Gramsci is how a “movement” becomes a party. He identifies the necessary moments of this process, the creation of a centre of formation or irradiation, the organising of formal democracy and of a permanently active consent, and finally the gigantic aggregation of minute “molecular” processes standardising the masses that establish a party’s influence and “gives birth to a collective will” [SPN, p.191-194].

An important issue in Gramsci’s understanding of subjectivity is the question of the primacy of politics. In this regard, Machiavelli is a figure of great significance for Gramsci, both for himself and

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<sup>37</sup> Interestingly Lukács also refers to the party as a crucible of this sort in *History and Class Consciousness*.

in regards to the interpretation of Machiavelli by subsequent thinkers.<sup>38</sup> Machiavelli's "implicit assertion" in his way of posing problems, argues Gramsci, is that "politics is an autonomous activity, with its own principles and laws distinct from those of morality and religion" [SPN, p.134]. This raises the question of the location of politics in a "systematic (coherent and logical) conception of the world", within the philosophy of praxis [SPN, p.136].

For Gramsci, Machiavelli is the prototype of the modern political thinker, who constructs all questions of theory in terms of concrete political content. Gramsci talks about Machiavelli's *Prince* as a living work. It is neither simply utopia nor "scholarly treatise", but the fusion of political ideology and science in the "dramatic form" of a "myth" [SPN, p.125]. The "doctrinal, rational element" of this myth, the symbol of the "collective will", is embodied in the person of the *condottiere*, or the leader of a mercenary army [SPN, p.125]. It is the "exemplification of the Sorelian myth", the "creation of a concrete phantasy" that "acts on a dispersed and shattered people to arouse and organise its collective will" [SPN, p.126].

In the creation of the proletarian hegemonic project, the wider process of institution-building has at its core the creation of a new type of party, which Gramsci imagines as a modern version of Machiavelli's *Prince*. He asks what the *Prince* would be if translated into modern political language, either the leader of a government or State, or a political leader that aims to "conquer a State" [SPN, p.252]. The protagonist of *The Modern Prince*, he says, cannot be an "individual hero" but only a political party [SPN, p.147].<sup>39</sup> Whilst immediate historico-political actions can be incarnated mythically by a concrete individual, such an individual cannot provide the "long-term and organic character" necessary for the creation of "new national and social structures" [SPN, p.129].

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<sup>38</sup> Gramsci's relationship to Croce and others (e.g. Sorel, Bergson) is often played out on the terrain of the interpretation of Machiavelli (e.g. "the Jacobins were realists of the Machiavelli stamp and not abstract dreamers", see Gramsci *Selections*, p.78).

<sup>39</sup> The form taken by Gramsci's notes suggests that he imagined working them into a future published monograph entitled *The Modern Prince* (Gramsci *Selections*, p.130, p.132).



It is in the political party that the “first germs” of a collective will “tending to become universal and total” gather [SPN, p.129]. This modern prince, or “myth-prince” as he calls it, is a “complex element of society in which a collective will, which has already been recognised and has to some extent asserted itself in action, begins to take concrete form” [SPN, p.129]. The modern prince creates the “terrain” for the development of a “national-popular collective will” towards the “realisation of a superior, total form of modern civilisation” [SPN, p.133]. The modern prince is both the “organiser” and the “active, operative expression” of this national-popular will [SPN, p.133].

In contrast to Sorel, whose conception of a myth is “non-constructive”, Gramsci argues that “destruction and negation” of existing moral and juridical relations cannot exist without an “implicit construction and affirmation” of a practice, as “party programme” [SPN, p.129]. The modern collective will is for Gramsci, “an operative awareness of historical necessity, as protagonist of a real and effective historical drama” [SPN, p.130]. The aim of the new Prince is to found a “new type of State”, and it has been created “rationally and historically”<sup>40</sup> for this end [SPN, p.147].

### **c) Fetishism and the Party**

As we remarked earlier in this chapter, Gramsci regards one of the most important questions concerning political parties as their tendency to become “mummified and anachronistic” [SPN, p.211]. Gramsci’s study of the historical development of political parties takes note of the class differentiation in the ability of social forces to adapt to new tasks, epochs and the evolution of the overall relations of force [SPN, p.211]. The process of reorientation and reorganisation has different “rhythms” for different strata of the population [SPN, p.210]. The greater cadre resources of the ruling class than the subordinate classes give them the ability to reabsorb power after a “crisis of authority” [SPN, p.210].

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<sup>40</sup> It is important to note the close connection between the notions of rationality and historicity in Gramsci’s conception, and the distinctive meanings they have for him (Gramsci *Selections*, p.346). Their interchangeable usage certainly seems to distinguish him from Lukács, for whom rationality does not appear to be coincident with historicity.

In Gramsci's critique of the misuses of the term "organic centralism", the *Selections* provide us with interesting material from his *Notes on Machiavelli* [SPN, p.187 fn.83]. Here Gramsci investigates the fetishism that typically takes place in collective organisms, even those of 'voluntary' character (i.e. parties and trade unions). For Gramsci, a collective organism is made up of a collection of "single individuals" who "actively accept" a "particular hierarchy and leadership" [SPN, p.187 fn.83]. If these individuals experience this organism as something "external", Gramsci argues, it in fact no longer exists, but has become a "phantasm of the mind, a fetish" [SPN, p.187 fn.83].

There is, he suggests, a widespread tendency towards regarding the relationship between individual and organism in a fetishistic way, as a "dualism" [SPN, p.187 fn.83]. Expecting the organism to act independently of their own activity, individuals do not recognise the connection between their attitude and the inoperative organism. Further there exists both a widespread and common-sense "deterministic and mechanical conception of history" and an experience among individuals that the organism does in fact act despite their non-intervention [SPN, p.187 fn.83]. This leads each individual, says Gramsci, to project a "phantasmagorical being, the abstraction of the collective organism, a kind of autonomous divinity", which has neither a "concrete brain", nor "specific human legs", but nevertheless thinks and moves for itself [SPN, p.187 fn.83].

Although certain modern ideologies, such as idealism, seek to re-educate individuals about their identity with the State, Gramsci argues that these are merely "verbal and verbalistic" [SPN, p.187 fn.83]. Similarly the formula of "organic centralism", employed by Amadeo Bordiga in relation to individual communist parties and the Comintern, might fall within the ambit of Gramsci's criticism here, although his category of "organic centralism" seems to extend even beyond this to the "French Revolution and the Third Republic" [SPN, p.187 fn.83].

To what extent is Gramsci demonstrating a conception of fetishism linked to the structure of capitalist society? It certainly seems that Gramsci demonstrates an awareness of the phenomena theorised by Marx's conception of commodity fetishism, however we might suggest that his

framework of analysis leads him to ask very different questions than Lukács, whose general theoretical conception would lead him to analyse this phenomenon within the context of his theory of reification. We will investigate the relationship between Gramsci and Lukács further in the next section.

#### **d) The Construction or the Withering Away of the State?**

For Gramsci, the realisation of the proletarian hegemonic project is coincident with the construction of a new type of State. If we take this hegemonic project as Gramsci's presentation of the communist project, we must examine whether this implies that Gramsci's conception of communism abandons the classical Marxist conception of the withering away of the State, or whether they are in fact two formulations of the same process. I will argue that the latter appears to be the case, but will ask whether this is either problematic or a reflection of a necessary ambiguity in the philosophy of praxis.

#### **i) Construction of a new State: Regulated Society**

Let us first examine the concept of a "regulated society" that Gramsci introduces to explain the type of society created by communism, after the realisation of the proletarian hegemonic project and the creation of a new type of State. He uses the term, it is suggested by the editors of the *Selections*, as a short-hand for the type of society described by Engel's in the final lines of *Socialism Utopian and Scientific*, where he refers to anarchy in social production being replaced by "systematic, definite organisation" [SPN, p.257 fn.59]. Gramsci suggests that Marx, in "producing an original and integral conception of the world", has initiated an epoch that will last until "the disappearance of political society and the coming of a regulated society" [SPN, p.382].

Gramsci also disambiguates the concept of a "regulated society" from its use by the fascists. He combats the claims of fascist theorists of the corporate economy that the fascist state had already abolished the anarchy of liberal capitalism [SPN, p.257]. Gramsci attempts to undermine these claims, and to show that it is characteristic of the "middle classes and petty intellectuals", to confuse

the “regulated society” with the “class-State” [SPN, p.258]. For Gramsci, it was a virtue of utopian thinkers to understand that the class-State could never be the regulated society [SPN, p.257].

## ii) The Withering away of the State?

In contrasting Marxism with the “non-dialectical statist” ideas of Ferdinand Lassalle, Gramsci argues that the “doctrine of the State as regulated society” will have to pass from a stage in which the State is equal to ‘government’ to one in which it is “identified with ‘civil society’” [SPN, p.263]. In other words, the new State’s goal should be its own disappearance, or the “re-absorption of political society into civil society” [SPN, p.253]. This can only be achieved following a phase in which the State as a coercive organisation safeguards “the development of the continually proliferating elements of regulated society” [SPN, p.263]. Only with the progressive reduction of the necessity of this State’s authoritarian and coercive intervention is it “tendentally capable of withering away and of being subsumed into regulated society” [SPN, p.263].

The significance of this framework is the concrete nature of Gramsci’s analysis of the post-capitalist establishment of a regulated society, and consequently an investigation into what the organisational implications of the ‘withering away of the State’ might be. For Gramsci, it is the creation of an “era of organic liberty”, which requires both the reorganisation of the “real relations between men” and the “world of the economy or of production” [SPN, p.263].

The possible pitfalls of his analysis we might suggest are the dangers inherent in appropriating a conception of ‘civil society’ that must be qualitatively transformed from the content that it possesses in the bourgeois hegemonic project. For example, Gramsci discusses the will to create a new culture in which the self-government of the individual in civil society would become the “organic complement” to political society, the narrow/technical State [SPN, p.268].

The editors of the *Selections* suggest that Gramsci has a somewhat different interpretation of Marx’s concepts of the realm of necessity and the realm of freedom than Marx does himself [SPN, p.367 fn.59]. They argue that Gramsci’s conception of the philosophy of a future communist society is

similar to idealism, of a “free movement of thought” unencumbered by “tendentious ideology” or the need to take the contradictions of material production as its basis [SPN, p.367 fn.59]. As we will argue later, Gramsci undoubtedly has his own distinctive way of presenting the problem.

In particular, we could cite Gramsci’s suggestion that the philosophy of praxis might itself be superseded if the disappearance of the historical contradictions were to take place [SPN, p.405]. Indeed he suggests that the “conception of necessity” may then be superseded by the “conception of freedom” [SPN, p.382]. This is not to say that Gramsci does not take very seriously the concepts of regularity and necessity, as evidenced by his study of these concepts [SPN, p.410-414]. In this respect Gramsci’s estimation of the philosophical importance of David Ricardo for the philosophy of praxis is relevant [SPN, p.412].

### iii) Coincident conceptions?

The Hegelian conception of the ‘ethical State’, one that appears to be essentially autonomous of class antagonisms, belongs to an era in which the development of the bourgeoisie seemed limitless, and its “ethicity or universality could be asserted” [SPN, p.258-9]. But Gramsci argues that only the proletariat, the social group that “poses the end of the State and its own end” as its aim, can create an authentically “ethical State” [SPN, p.259]. This is one which “tends to put an end to the internal divisions of the ruled”, and to create a “technically and morally unitary social organism” [SPN, p.259].

I would argue that rather than abandoning the classical Marxist conception of the withering away of the State, Gramsci conceives the notion of the realisation of the proletarian hegemonic project, as creating a new type of State, to be coincident with this classical conception. This may appear paradoxical, and perhaps it is, but such a paradox could be said to exist in reality, and is one that can only be worked out in the future praxis of proletarian revolution. If this appears to impose a necessary ambiguity on the theorisation of the philosophy of praxis, this may have been recognised

by Gramsci more generally in his acknowledgement of the importance of utopias<sup>41</sup> or “abstract rationalism” in the initial phase of formation of new collective will [SPN, p.195]. Gramsci also notes Rosa Luxemburg’s observation that it is impossible to treat certain question regarding the philosophy of praxis until they have become “*actual* for the course of history in general or that of a given social grouping” [SPN, p.404]. It is the crisis of the hegemonic project of the current ruling class that presents an opportunity in which a counter-hegemonic project by the proletariat at the head of the subaltern classes might be formulated.

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<sup>41</sup> Since a utopia has a political value, and, for Gramsci, “every politics is implicitly a philosophy” it may also have a philosophical value (Gramsci *Selections*, p.405).

## 5) Philosophy, Catharsis, and the Proletariat

We will now examine Gramsci's distinctive conception of philosophy as a collective project and its relationship to the proletariat and the process of revolution. As we will see, for Gramsci, a concrete analysis of the diffusion of conceptions of the world reveals not simply a clash of "pure" rational, logically coherent conceptions, but the political (and social) struggle of concrete social groups, involving an interrelationship between the masses and the experts or authorities. Gramsci argues that the question "what is man?" is the principal question asked by philosophy [SPN, p.351]. He suggests that the distinguishing feature of the philosophy of praxis is to have demonstrated that there is "no abstract 'human nature'", but rather that human nature is the "totality of historically determined social relations" [SPN, p.133].

We will investigate whether the success of Gramsci's philosophical project is dependent on elaborating a renewed Marxist conception of the dialectic, mediated by his settling of accounts with Croce and others. Subsequently we will explore Gramsci's conception of 'catharsis', and evaluate its possible similarities with the Lukács's conception of the passage from empirical to ascribed or imputed class consciousness.

### a) Philosophy, Religion and the Proletariat

Philosophy is "intellectual order", according to Gramsci [SPN, p.325]. It is distinct from both religion and common sense, with the former being a fragmented element of the latter [SPN, p.325].

However the philosophy of praxis finds itself with a position similar to the "antithesis of the Catholic", with a schism between the "simple" and the intellectuals [SPN, p.332]. Unlike Catholicism however, argues Gramsci, it does not restrict the activity of the intellectuals to prevent a catastrophic split, but rather attempts to lead the masses to a higher conception of life through the construction of an "intellectual-moral bloc" [SPN, p.332-333].

Whilst philosophy is often counter-posed to religion, Gramsci suggests that for the “masses *as such*”, philosophy can only be experienced “as a faith” [SPN, p.339]. Gramsci’s interest lies in the “process of diffusion” by which old conceptions are replaced by new in the life of the popular masses. This process is far more complex than the simple clash of rival conceptions in their “pure”, “rational and logically coherent” form [SPN, p.338]. At work in this case are political and “in the last analysis” social factors, including the elements of authority and of organisation [SPN, p.339].

From an analysis of the difficulties of the Church in preventing ruptures with the “community of the faithful”, Gramsci argues that “specific necessities” can be deduced for “any cultural movement” that seeks to replace “common sense and old conceptions of the world in general” [SPN, p.340]. This includes the necessity of the repetition of arguments as a means of working on the “popular mentality”, but also the creation of a personality for this “amorphous mass element”, through the production of “élites of intellectuals of a new type” [SPN, p.340].

These new élites, arising from, but maintaining contact with the masses, have the potential to modify the “ideological panorama” of the age, says Gramsci [SPN, p.340]. They also produce within themselves a “hierarchy of authority and intellectual competence”, culminating in the creation of “great individual philosopher[s]” [SPN, p.340]. Gramsci’s very hierarchical conception of organisation is a striking aspect of his conception of subjectivity. This is particularly evident in his claim that it is much “easier to form an army than to form generals” [SPN, p.153].<sup>42</sup>

We have already touched upon these issues in our discussion of Gramsci’s conception of the organic and “traditional” intellectuals. Gramsci contrasts the “flexibility of movement” of the “individual brain” with the “modes of thought of a collective thinker” [SPN, p.340].<sup>43</sup> The “real critical test” of

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<sup>42</sup> It is important for Gramsci that the destruction of political armies leaves “as its heritage a ferment from which it may be recreated” (Gramsci *Selections*, p.153).

<sup>43</sup> It would be worth considering Gramsci’s notion of the “collective thinker” alongside Marx’s notion of the development of the “collective worker” Gramsci *Selections*, p.341 and Marx *Capital*, Vol. I (London: Penguin, 1990 [1976]), p.468).



the “rationality and historicity”<sup>44</sup> of modes of thinking is the adhesion or non-adhesion of the masses to an ideology [SPN, p.341]. Thus philosophical activity is not solely about the “individual” elaboration of coherent concepts, but primarily about the “cultural battle to transform the popular ‘mentality’”, and thus to make philosophical innovations “concretely—i.e. historically and socially—universal” [SPN, p.348].

## b) Gramsci’s Dialectic

Underlying Gramsci’s ability to give an adequate account of the issues we have highlighted in other sections of this chapter, e.g. the State, the Intellectuals, is an ability to mediate between different modes of his analysis that we have identified as constitutive and holistic. The theoretical apparatus that makes this possible is his conception of the dialectical method. For Gramsci, the philosophy of praxis is, in a sense, “a reform and a development of Hegelianism” [SPN, p.404]. On the other hand, it is also based on the methodological innovations of David Ricardo [SPN, p.401]. Gramsci’s interpretation of the dialectic is mediated through the studies of Antonio Labriola and reacts to the currents of Croce, Gentile, Sorel and Bergson [SPN, p.389].<sup>45</sup> Gramsci’s attempt at a renewal of the conception of Marxist “orthodoxy” is a familiar theme from our study of Lukács [SPN, p.462].

The problem of how we are to understand the dialectic is posed, says Gramsci, in Marx’s *Poverty of Philosophy* [SPN, p.109, p.416].<sup>46</sup> Central to his understanding is a “new concept of immanence” that has been transformed from the speculative form of its origins [SPN, p.400]. For Gramsci, all ideological systems are both “perishable” and simultaneously have a “historical validity” [SPN, p.138]. Whilst Gramsci often takes up and uses Crocean concepts, he very radically departs from Croce’s conception of “politics/passion” [SPN, p.138]. Croce’s conception excludes the possibility of an “organised and permanent passion” [SPN, p.138]. Although the “party in action” is not identical

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<sup>44</sup> As we have seen above, for Gramsci (in contrast to Lukács) the terms rationality and historicity often appear in close connection with each other.

<sup>45</sup> Labriola was, for Gramsci, “the only man who has attempted to build up the philosophy of practice scientifically” Gramsci *Selections*, p.387).

<sup>46</sup> *The Poverty of Philosophy* also has a central place in Lukács’s understanding of Marx’s development.

to the party existing previously, Gramsci argues that they may be considered the same organism [SPN, p.139].

Although Gramsci identifies the importance of Croce's dialectical philosophy in the theorisation of the ethico-political moment, and therefore as a bourgeois reflection of one element of Lenin's conception of the State, he identifies a very clear distinction between the Crocean dialectic and his own, that of the philosophy of praxis. For Croce's dialectic is a "degenerate and mutilated form of Hegelianism", which has a "blind fear of Jacobin movements, of any active intervention by the great popular masses as a factor of social progress" [FSPN, p.341].

The philosophical error committed by Croce, arising from "practical origin", is related to Gramsci's conception of the role of the antithesis in the dialectic. Counter to Croce, in a dialectical movement it is not possible to "mechanically" predict whether a thesis will be "preserved" in the synthesis emerging from the process of "supersession" [FSPN, p.342]. In real history, argues Gramsci, "the antithesis tends to destroy the thesis", and what elements of the thesis might be preserved in the synthesis cannot be foretold. Or in other words, one is not "able to 'award' points in advance according to Queensberry Rules" [FSPN, p.342].

For Gramsci, whereas other philosophies are non-organic, since they "aim at reconciling opposing and contradictory interest", the philosophy of praxis eschews a peaceful reconciliation since it is in fact the "very theory of these contradictions" [FSPN, p.395]. Rather than being an instrument of government, it is the expression of the subaltern classes who have an interest in avoiding all deceptions, even self-deceptions. The philosophy of praxis is therefore not "formally" dialectical like the "speculative and conceptual" dialectic in Croce, since it sees the dialectic in "historical becoming itself" [FSPN, p.396].

### **c) Catharsis, Freedom and Class Consciousness**

In a note on the *Problems of Philosophy and History*, Gramsci appropriates the term "catharsis", in what Geoffrey Nowell Smith, the editor of the note, suggests is a "highly original use...to indicate

(roughly speaking) the acquisition of revolutionary consciousness” [SPN, p.366 fn.58]. Although often overlooked, Gramsci makes some startling claims about this concept that merit further attention. Indeed despite occurring only eight times in the *Prison Notebooks*, Peter Thomas argues that it is “one of the central terms of Gramsci’s political theory”.<sup>47</sup> We will now briefly examine the term, Gramsci’s use of it, and finally make a comparison with the questions of the realms of freedom and necessity and of Lukács’s conception of the ‘leap’ from empirical to imputed/ascribed class consciousness.

In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, catharsis, in this sense, refers to the “purification of the emotions by vicarious experience”, with particular reference to its origin in Aristotle’s *Poetics*.<sup>48</sup> From the outset this might seem like a somewhat passive and spectatorial terminology to adopt.<sup>49</sup> Gramsci employs the term to “indicate the passage from the purely economic (or egoistic-passional) to the ethico-political moment”, or more concretely to indicate the “superior elaboration of the structure into superstructure in the minds of men” [SPN, p.366]. This explanation employs Crocean terminology, in demonstrating the movement from “particular” economic-corporate to “universal” hegemonic moments. Nowell Smith argues however, that the Crocean system is subverted by the central role of Gramsci’s conception of politics in his thought [SPN, p.366 fn.58].<sup>50</sup>

In addition, Gramsci argues that the term “catharsis” also means the “passage from ‘objective to subjective’ and from ‘necessity to freedom’” [SPN, p.367]. This might be interpreted as suggesting that the process of catharsis gives thought a free movement released from its basis in the “contradictions engendered in the world of production” [SPN, p.367 fn.59]. Marx makes clear in *Capital* that the “true realm of freedom” can only blossom with “the realm of necessity as its basis”

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<sup>47</sup> Thomas argues that the term derives from Gramsci’s engagement with “Croce’s aesthetics” and a “novel reading of the tenth Canto of Dante’s *Inferno*” – Thomas, P *The Gramscian Moment* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2009), p.294.

<sup>48</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd Edition – s.v. “catharsis”

<sup>49</sup> This may concur with Gramsci’s observation that the role played by the masses in the initial phases of a movement is largely by demonstrating “loyalty and discipline” as their ‘active’ contribution (Gramsci *Selections*, p.334).

<sup>50</sup> Politics is reduced by Croce to the status of an individual passion or absorbed into Ethics (Gramsci *Selections*, p.366 fn.58).

[*Capital*, III, p.959]. Although his observations are somewhat opaque, Gramsci does not explicitly contradict Marx's conception.

Rather Gramsci suggests that "catharsis" is a process in which structure "ceases to be an external force" that crushes, assimilates and makes humanity passive [*SPN*, p.367]. On the contrary, this process transforms structure into a "means of freedom", an "instrument to create a new ethico-political form", and a "source of new initiatives" [*SPN*, p.367]. The culmination of Gramsci's argument is that establishing the 'cathartic' moment is the "starting point for all the philosophy of praxis", and that the "cathartic process coincides with the chain of syntheses which have resulted from the evolution of the dialectic" [*SPN*, p.367].

Gramsci is keenly aware of the potential misuses and distortions of the Hegelian dialectic in general and therefore in particular of the notion of 'catharsis'. He notes that amongst the intellectuals, e.g. Croce, who conceive themselves as "arbiters and mediators of real political struggles", there is a tendency to see themselves as "personifying" this 'catharsis', and to deem themselves capable of manipulating the synthesis of the dialectical process "in a speculative fashion in their mind," [*FSPN*, p. 343]. Gramsci is interested in establishing, in opposition to this speculative act, the cathartic moment in the dialectic of the real historical process.

#### **d) Gramsci and Lukács**

We will now compare Gramsci's conception of catharsis with Lukács's understanding of the 'leap' between the empirical and ascribed/imputed consciousness of the proletariat. Lukács's understanding is often understood as representing the speculative and intellectual catharsis that Gramsci criticises above. We might ask however, whether Lukács's conception understood in more sophisticated terms is actually compatible with the authentic 'cathartic moment' in the Gramscian sense, as a starting point for a transition to the philosophy of praxis, rather than its messianic realisation in a lightning flash. If this were true, these two concepts of the 'leap' and the 'cathartic moment' would represent a point of convergence between these two distinctive conceptions of

Marxism. Nevertheless we might say that Gramsci gives the more concrete account of the acquisition of class consciousness in his appropriation from Sorel of the conception of the spirit of “cleavage” and its transformation with a reconstructive element that is historically exemplified in the modern *Prince* [SPN, p.52, p.126 fn.4].

In terms of a concrete engagement between the two thinkers, Gramsci is conscious of “Professor Lukács” and comments on the necessity of studying his position on the philosophy of praxis [SPN, p.448].<sup>51</sup> However Gramsci’s only theoretical commentary, in the *Selections*, consists of some speculation regarding Lukács’s position on the possibility of speaking of a dialectic for the history of man and not of nature, upon which Gramsci equivocates [SPN, p.448]. Gramsci is aware that Lukács, like him, is critical of the “baroque theories” of Bukharin’s *Popular Manual*, but suggests that Lukács’s reaction against this may have led him towards idealism [SPN, p.448]. But, as the editors of the *Selections* point out, it is unclear if these comments are based on a reading of any substantive works by Lukács, or merely on the accounts of Lukács’s critics.<sup>52</sup>

It is useful however to consider the possible complementarity of the Lukácsian and Gramscian frameworks as a whole. We can already observe from our studies thus far the substantial differences that exist in the focuses of their investigations. The most evident difference is Lukács’s central concern with the concept of reification and his critique of capitalist rationalisation. Although Gramsci is clearly aware of Max Weber’s writings,<sup>53</sup> Lukács’s attempts in *History and Class Consciousness* to systematically integrate Weber’s categories of rationalisation into Marxism marks his work as distinctive. It would perhaps be fruitful to investigate what benefits this might have for Gramsci’s more concrete framework of analysis in the *Prison Notebooks*.

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<sup>51</sup> Gramsci spent “several months in Vienna in 1924 when *History and Class Consciousness* was being widely discussed” (Jay, *Marxism and Totality* (Berkeley: University of California, 1984), p.158).

<sup>52</sup> e.g. Abram Deborin (Gramsci *Selections*, p.448 fn.94).

<sup>53</sup> Gramsci refers to Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Gramsci *Selections*, p.338) and to his critique of bureaucracy (Gramsci *Selections*, p.228).

According to Martin Jay, since Gramsci did not have a “firm belief in the existence of a meta-subject which objectified itself in the world”, his writings did not focus on the process of reified objectification.<sup>54</sup> In other words, Gramsci’s political thought is not concerned to posit the proletariat as an equivalent to Lukács’s identical subject-object of history. Gramsci was in fact hostile to anything identified as an idealisation of action, of the type that he identified and criticised in the thought of Giovanni Gentile. On the other hand, Jay suggests that we do find in Gramsci, counter to an initial positing of a meta-subject capable of creating the totality, an “intersubjective totalisation which is to be completed in the future” entailing the “achievement of a linguistically unified community with shared meanings”.<sup>55</sup> This leaves open the question of what in fact constitutes the grounding element of this totalisation, although we can perhaps agree with Jay that it is “no less cultural than it is economic”.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Jay *Marxism and Totality*, p.171

<sup>55</sup> Jay *Marxism and Totality*, p.159

<sup>56</sup> Jay *Marxism and Totality*, p.159

## 6) Conclusion

### a) Gramsci and Marx

In this chapter we have set out to study various issues in Gramsci's thought: the intellectuals, the question of the State, bourgeois and proletarian hegemony, and his conception of philosophy. We have found that the investigation of each of these leads itself by numerous paths onto the terrain of the others. Thus the determination of an adequate account of each is reliant on an account of the whole. More specifically, each of Gramsci's concepts is reliant on a set of related concepts for its concrete determination. In this character of his thought, we might argue that Gramsci is preserving an "orthodoxy" with respect to the method developed by Marx in *Capital* [SPN, p.462].

In contrast to the painstakingly ordered presentation of Marx's *Capital* (albeit not completed in his lifetime), Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* come to us as a set of notes that are famously labyrinthine and fragmented. This makes the effort of establishing the full determination of Gramsci's concepts no small task. Regarding its fragmentary nature, the *Prison Notebooks* may be a reminder of similar difficulties we encountered in the interpretation of Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* in a previous chapter.

We might conjecture that the difficulties of ordering Gramsci's work are not solely due to his condition of incarceration during its writing, although this is clearly a factor, but also with the difficulty of structuring and presenting material elaborating a Marxist analysis of class consciousness and the complex superstructures of capitalist society.<sup>57</sup> In addition, Gramsci's engagement with Marx's *Preface to the Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and the development of its themes is a recurring motif within the *Prison Notebooks*. Whilst many of the questions we have

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<sup>57</sup> Although, as we have attempted to convey, this does not detract from Gramsci's sharp understanding of Marxist economic theory and his account of the structure of capitalist society: e.g. as demonstrated by his understanding of economic laws as tendency, appreciation of the methodological innovations of David Ricardo, etc. (Gramsci *Selections*, p.400). This argument is developed by Thomas in *The Gramscian Moment* (Thomas *The Gramscian Moment*, p.347).

raised provoke further avenues of investigation, we have discovered that Gramsci presents us with a distinctive conception of subjectivity. We will attempt to summarise briefly our findings.

## **b) Gramsci's Conception of Subjectivity**

Gramsci's conception of subjectivity is distinctive in its concrete account of the constitution of class subjects through an analysis of their hegemonic projects. In elaborating the various aspects of class power, the comparative nature of Gramsci's analysis also marks him out as distinctive. Whilst we have differentiated Gramsci from the version of the Lukácsian problematic that seeks to establish a philosophical unity of subject and object, we have argued that the concept of totality enters into Gramsci's framework via other channels, particularly in the possibility of a 'cathartic' moment that becomes the starting point of the philosophy of praxis.

We have argued that the intellectuals are a fundamental and molecular building block in Gramsci's general theory of class power. We have analysed the complexities that the "traditional" intellectuals introduce into his conception of class subjectivity, and which he incorporates through a historical analysis that dismantles their "esprit de corps" and caste-status to reveal the class basis of their subjectivity. By examining the critical broadening of the common-sense definition of the intellectuals, and other concepts, we have also highlighted a crucial methodological aspect of Gramsci's thought: the key role played by the production of new conceptions in Gramsci's political (and philosophical) project, and the corresponding attention given to both the form and content of language.

In considering whether Gramsci's account of the State is compatible with his conception of class subjectivity, we have identified two distinct modes of analysis: holistic and constitutive. We have defined the constitutive analysis as that exemplified in his study of the formation of the State bureaucracy. In our assessment, this mode allows the apparent autonomy of the State to be reconsidered within the framework of the molecular processes through which the State recruits its personnel, which are themselves grounded in class. On the other hand, we have also argued that



Gramsci conducts his analysis through a second mode. This holistic mode considers the relations between class and State at a totalising level. When considered from the holistic mode, we have noted the active role played by the State in the constitution of the dominant class's hegemonic project. We have advanced the argument that Gramsci considers the relationship between these modes as a dialectical one, although it has been registered that other explanations could be asserted, e.g. a functional analysis.

Finally we considered Gramsci's distinctive conception of philosophy as a collective project, and his understanding of the dialectic in contrast to that of Croce. In particular we examined Gramsci's conception of 'catharsis' and the possibility emerging from this concept of making a comparative analysis of the differing ways in which the concept of totality enters into the theories of subjectivity of both Gramsci and Lukács. In summary, we have found that Gramsci's conception of subjectivity is a testament to his commitment to analysing, in the modern context, Marx's conception of "ideas becoming a material force" [*SPN*, p.333 fn.16].

# Conclusion

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## 1) Marxism as the Philosophy of Praxis

By tracing the development of conceptions of subjectivity through a selection of key texts in the classical Marxist tradition, this thesis has identified a theme relating the creation of a revolutionary subject to the overcoming of obstacles to working class subjectivity. These obstacles are expressed in various forms: alienated labour (Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*), commodity fetishism (Marx's *Capital*), and the phenomenon of reification (Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*). I have argued that Gramsci's project to construct a proletarian hegemonic project and its corresponding world-view also expresses a de-fetishising function. Although Gramsci conceives the processes upon which this function is performed very differently to Lukács, both seek to formulate the essential core of Marxism as a philosophy of praxis.

### a) Walter Benjamin and Contemporary Debates in Subjectivity

Through the works of Marx, Lukács and Gramsci, I have addressed the problem of revolutionary subjectivity as a question of political subjectivity, approaching the notion of the subjectivity of labour and the proletariat as a potential collective political agent. Thus I have focused on the political aspect in contrast to broader explorations of the notion of subjectivity undertaken by other thinkers. There are however many links between the political aspect studied here and these more general investigations. Michael Löwy has for example indicated the formative influence of Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* on the work of Walter Benjamin.<sup>1</sup>

In common with Lukács and Gramsci, Benjamin's theory of revolution, expressed in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, is one that counters the deterministic notions of progress associated primarily

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<sup>1</sup> Löwy, M *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'* (London: Verso, 2005), p.8

with the dominant Marxism of the Second International.<sup>2</sup> Benjamin sought to unify messianic and revolutionary thought by conceptualising revolution as the blowing open of the continuum of “homogenous empty time”, an oblivion filled with data into which the oppressed past disappears.<sup>3</sup> By rejecting conventional notions of progress, Benjamin’s *Theses* have in turn exerted a strong influence on subsequent Marxist and non-Marxist conceptions of subjectivity.

Indeed, in recent years the problem of subjectivity has been addressed in new ways by the radical philosophers Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou.<sup>4</sup> Their conception of revolutionary subjectivity can be understood in simple terms as a rupture from the normal routines of material existence. This theme, addressed so vividly by Benjamin, illuminates one aspect of the continuity between the concerns of Lukács and Gramsci and these contemporary thinkers.

Whilst Žižek tends to express his insights through the psychoanalytical framework of Jacques Lacan, these concerns are closely intertwined with his engagement with Marxism. For Žižek, the project of Leninist re-invention that was necessitated by the collapse of progressivism in 1914 must be repeated today due to the “stale, existing (post)ideological coordinates”.<sup>5</sup> In simple terms, Žižek’s notion of revolutionary subjectivity can be conceived as a reaction to certain extreme circumstances. Counter to the political assertion of post-modernism that “nothing really happens”, Žižek steers us towards Badiou’s notion of the *Event* and his affirmation that “miracles do happen”.<sup>6</sup> Badiou’s reference to miracles is reminiscent of Benjamin’s messianic notion of the sudden emergence of “now-time”, in which history becomes available to humanity.<sup>7</sup> Benjamin draws an explicit link between the possibility of such a “tiger’s leap into the past” and Marx’s conception of revolution.

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<sup>2</sup> Gramsci’s critical remarks on progress as a “democratic ideology” and its historical origins can be found in *The Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci, *A Selections from the Prison Notebooks* ed. and trans. Hoare, Q and Nowell-Smith, G (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), p.357 – Henceforth referenced in the text as [SPN, p.357], i.e. [Selections from the Prison Notebooks, page 357]).

<sup>3</sup> Löwy *Fire Alarm*, p.94

<sup>4</sup> Badiou, *A Being and Event* (London: Continuum, 2005) and Žižek, *S The Ticklish Subject: the Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999)

<sup>5</sup> Žižek, Slavoj “A Plea for Leninist Intolerance” *Critical Inquiry* 28:2 (Winter 2002), p.553

<sup>6</sup> Žižek *The Ticklish Subject*, p.135

<sup>7</sup> Löwy *Fire Alarm*, p.86

## b) Normality and Crisis

The adoption of a stance that breaks with normality is closely associated in classical Marxist thought with the notion of a revolutionary crisis. Indeed the thinkers studied in this thesis all have a conception of the increasing tendency of capitalist society to move into crisis. For Gramsci, a crisis consists, “precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born” [SPN, p.276]. In a period that he describes as an “organic crisis”, the masses are capable of re-organising “like lightning in comparison with periods of calm” [SPN, p.211]. Lukács’s conception of class consciousness gives a theoretical basis to this capacity of the proletariat to advance by “leaps” [HCC, p.249].<sup>8</sup>

Lukács attempts to use his theory of reification to demonstrate that the structure of a crisis is not qualitatively different to that of the “daily life of bourgeois society”, but is rather the peak of its intensity [HCC, p.101]. The influence of the tragic conception of bourgeois culture leads Lukács to emphasise the inherently crisis-ridden structure of capitalist society, and the necessity of an absolute break with it. Lukács seeks to give a philosophical basis to the privileged position of the proletariat in providing an escape route from this situation.

Gramsci’s thought appropriates from Georges Sorel the conception of the spirit of “cleavage” in order to articulate the necessary break with capitalist society, but transforms it with a reconstructive element that is historically exemplified in the ‘Modern Prince’ [SPN, p.52, p.126 fn.4]. Gramsci’s theory of hegemony investigates the capacities of developed capitalist societies to avert crises through the elaboration of the stabilising institutional apparatuses of civil society. Nevertheless for Marx, Lukács and Gramsci, the tendency towards crisis inherent in the capitalist economic system provides the opportunity for the conscious intervention of the working class.

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<sup>8</sup> Lukács, G *History and Class Consciousness* (London: Merlin, 1971), p.249 – Henceforth referenced in the text as [HCC, p.249], i.e. [*History and Class Consciousness*, p.249].

## 2) Labour and the Proletariat

### a) Characteristics of the Marxist Conception of Subjectivity

I contend that the defining characteristic of the conception of subjectivity that emerges from the writings of Marx, Lukács and Gramsci is that of the working class as the potential subject of the revolutionary transformation of capitalist society. The prime axis of this conception is the connection in this body of work between the notion of labour as a subject and that of the proletariat as a class subject. Whilst this does not preclude the classical Marxist tradition from acknowledging the agency of other actors in capitalist society, it is fundamental to this framework that a unique feature of the proletariat is its potential to be the subject of social revolution.

The centrality of labour for the Marxist conception of subjectivity can be identified from Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* onwards. At this early stage, many of the issues associated with the way in which the proletariat can constitute itself concretely as a class subject are necessarily somewhat theoretically underdeveloped. These questions are increasingly posed in theory and practice by the struggles over the length of the working day, the Paris Commune, and, for Lukács and Gramsci, by the revolutionary struggles of the early 20th century. However, the alienation of labour, one of the central theoretical issues for the Marxist conception of subjectivity, is already outlined in the *Manuscripts*.

The theme of alienation is a pre-occupation explicitly or implicitly throughout much of this thesis.<sup>9</sup> In each of the works that I have studied the process of the disruption of the potential subjectivity of labour and the creation of an alien power over and against it takes different forms. The process of the proletariat becoming a class-for-itself or of the realisation of a proletarian hegemonic project both, either explicitly or implicitly, involve a conception of the possibility of the positive overcoming of these obstacles. Whilst it is clear that the conceptual framework of Marx's investigation in *Capital*

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<sup>9</sup> For a recent close investigation of this theme see Sayers, *S Marx and Alienation: Essays on Hegelian Themes* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

is very different to the register he adopts in the *Manuscripts*, I have argued that Marx maintains a commitment to the potential revolutionary subjectivity of the proletariat.

This theme is closely linked with the concern of the classical Marxist tradition, from its origins in Marx's *Manuscripts*, with the problem of the apparent subjectivity of private property under the modern system of production. There is continuity with this theme in the emphasis that Marx places in *Capital* on the scientific investigation of the laws of capitalist development, and his analysis of capital as a "self-moving substance", the subject of its own process.<sup>10</sup>

I have tried to show that the analysis of *Capital* advanced by Moishe Postone runs counter to the classical Marxist tradition by displacing the role of the proletariat and the notion of labour as subject. Despite his concern with the notion of 'abstract labour', Postone presents labour one-sidedly as the object of Marx's critique in *Capital*. Whilst I found some substance to the claims by Michael Lebowitz that Marx treats workers as objects within the labour process in *Capital*, I argued that Marx continues to conceive the proletariat as the potential revolutionary subject. Postone's critique does demonstrate however the difficulties involved in attempting to adequately formulate both a theory of the determinate forms of social mediation and a class-based analysis of capitalism.

## **b) Social Relations and Class Consciousness**

Marx's *Capital* is closely concerned with the social relations of production that are embodied in the individual through a process of personification. These social relations of production allow classical Marxism to investigate the connection between the structure of society and the forms of consciousness that arise from it. I argued that Marx's notion of the person as a living incarnation of social relations must include the dimension of lived experience. At the same time, Marx is committed in *Capital* to making a concrete analysis of working class struggle and its influence on the functioning of the laws of capitalist production. In this context, I examined his exposition of the interaction between the working class movement and the factory inspectors, like Leonard Horner.

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<sup>10</sup> Marx, K *Capital* Vol. I (London: Penguin, 1990 [1976]), p.256

It would be possible to investigate further the relationship between Marx's conception of class struggle in the chapter on the *Working Day* and his analysis of large-scale industry. Or, in other words, to question how the further development of the processes detailed in Marx's writings on large-scale industry affect our understanding of the proletariat as a subject and the processes described in the sections on the class struggle over the working day. It is a contradiction that the Factory Acts, which seek to protect the conditions of workers' lives, tend to increase the speed at which the development of large-scale industry reduces workers to the level of objects within the labour process. An analysis of this problem could have important consequences for our understanding of the relationship between the workplace and wider society and make an important contribution to the transformation of these social relations.

### c) The Proletariat as 'Universal Class'

In the *Reification* essay of Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, I identified a potential separation between Lukács's conception of the proletariat as the solution to the philosophical problem of the antinomies of bourgeois thought, and the understanding of the proletariat as the empirically-existing working class. A comparable distinction can be located in the writings of Alain Badiou, who distinguishes on this basis between the proletariat as a revolutionary subject and the empirically-existing working class.<sup>11</sup>

In his book *The Resources of Critique*, Alex Callinicos contends that three contemporary thinkers, Badiou, Žižek and the political theorist Stathis Kouvelakis all oppose the notion of the proletariat as a universal class to the sociological working class.<sup>12</sup> Callinicos argues that the lesson of Marx's polemic in texts such as *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* is that the apparent autonomy of the political sphere must have an "anchorage in social reality".<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Callinicos, Alex *The Resources of Critique* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), p.93

<sup>12</sup> Callinicos *The Resources of Critique*, p.118

<sup>13</sup> Callinicos *The Resources of Critique*, p.118

Lukács's conception of the proletariat as the 'identical subject-object' of history builds on Marx's notion that the proletariat is the potential 'universal class'. In his *1843 Introduction*, Marx argues that the proletariat is "a sphere which has a universal character because of its universal suffering", since it elevates "to a principle for society what society has already made a principle for the proletariat".<sup>14</sup> In his commentary on Lukács's *Tailism and the Dialectic*, Žižek examines the dialectical logic of affirming the proletariat as the "universal class".<sup>15</sup> Žižek argues that the claim that the proletariat is the 'universal class' is equivalent to claiming that it is "radically dislocated ... with relation to the social body".<sup>16</sup> The danger of this dislocation is that it risks scrambling the coordinates of, what Callinicos calls, 'the class map of modern society' beyond recognition.<sup>17</sup>

Whilst Žižek does not dispute the potential misuses of the notion of proletariat as the 'identical subject-object' of history, he contends that it has a continuing significance.<sup>18</sup> For Žižek, Lukács's revolutionary subject does not force an objective situation. Rather a genuine political intervention has the effect of "reshuffling ... the global matrix".<sup>19</sup> I claim that the messianic conception of the 'leap' can be mitigated if an interaction between consciousness and its objects is seen to continually change the basis of the relationship between empirical and imputed consciousness. Thus Lukács's argument that a "sudden dislocation" is possible in a moment of crisis is crucial to the possibility of revolutionary subjectivity [*HCC*, p.101].

Žižek draws our attention to the Lukácsian concept of *Augenblick*, 'the blink of an eye', which is that moment in which "there is an opening for an *act* to intervene in a situation".<sup>20</sup> This concept is very close, he argues, to Badiou's central concept of the *Event*, "an intervention that cannot be

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<sup>14</sup> Marx, Karl *Early Writings* (London: Penguin, 1992), p.256

<sup>15</sup> Žižek, Slavoj "Georg Lukács as the philosopher of Leninism" in Lukács, Georg *Tailism and the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2000), p.161

<sup>16</sup> Žižek "Georg Lukács as the philosopher of Leninism", p.169

<sup>17</sup> Callinicos *The Resources of Critique*, p.119

<sup>18</sup> For some thinkers, Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* contains a pseudo-Hegelian logic that inevitably gives rise to a totalitarian regime, and consequently makes the work theoretically culpable for the rise of Stalinism.

<sup>19</sup> Žižek "Georg Lukács as the philosopher of Leninism", p.163

<sup>20</sup> Žižek "Georg Lukács as the philosopher of Leninism", p.164



formulated in terms of its pre-existing 'objective conditions'".<sup>21</sup> Žižek suggests that this aspect of Lukács's thought shows him in an unexpectedly 'Gramscian' light.

To explain this comment, Žižek characterises a distinction between the thought of Lukács and Louis Althusser. He contends that each articulates "a crucial problematic excluded from the opponent's horizon".<sup>22</sup> For Lukács, this is the "historical act", and for Althusser the notion of the *Ideological State Apparatuses* as the "material existence of ideology".<sup>23</sup> Although he acknowledges that no straightforward synthesis of their frameworks is possible, Žižek suggestively comments that Gramsci's work might help us to move beyond this impasse.

I have sought to investigate whether the challenges to Lukács's framework, his account of the proletariat becoming an 'identical subject-object', might be overcome with the benefit of insights derived from Gramsci's conception of contradictory consciousness and his distinctively concrete account of the formation of class subjectivity. This raises the question of whether the implicit understanding of fetishism that I argue can be found in Gramsci's thought and its explicit but particular theorisation in Lukács's theory of reification can be rendered compatible.

### 3) Lukács and Gramsci

#### a) The Formation of Class Consciousness

There is a close connection for both Lukács and Gramsci between the formation of class consciousness and the process by which the working class becomes a subject. Defining the separation between proletarian class consciousness and bourgeois class consciousness is a central concern for thinkers such as Lukács. Marxist theory is confronted by the problem of overcoming the domination of bourgeois ideology in capitalist society, which Lukács formulates as the gap between the empirical consciousness of the proletariat and its ascribed or imputed consciousness. Lukács's

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<sup>21</sup> Žižek "Georg Lukács as the philosopher of Leninism", p.164

<sup>22</sup> Žižek "Georg Lukács as the philosopher of Leninism", p.179 n.2

<sup>23</sup> Žižek "Georg Lukács as the philosopher of Leninism", p.179 n.2

conception of subjectivity focuses on theorising the principle by which the proletariat can create a revolutionary break with the current society, whilst Gramsci emphasises that it must construct this project with tools and ideas drawn from within it.

For both Lukács and Gramsci, this process is a collective project in which organisation and political leadership mediate between theory and practice. They conceive philosophy as a practico-critical activity in which knowledge plays an active role in social reality. Thus Gramsci returns again and again to Marx's concern with the processes by which the "fanatical granite compactness" of "popular beliefs" attains the energy of "material forces" [SPN, p.404].

Since class consciousness plays an active role in the transformation of social relations, this necessitates the exploration of the factors by which it is mediated. This mediation takes place at all levels, the economic, political, and cultural, and it involves the social institutions of the state, political parties, education, trade unions, etc. I have argued that the classical Marxist tradition attempts to generate these determinate forms of social mediation from a class-based analysis of exploitation. The most sophisticated expression of this method remains Marx's great work *Capital*.

I identified Lukács's notion of the 'leap' from empirical to ascribed/imputed consciousness and Gramsci's conception of 'catharsis' as a point of departure for studying the complementarity of their frameworks. Peter Thomas argues that for Gramsci 'catharsis' plays a central role in his understanding of the philosophy of praxis.<sup>24</sup> The editors of the *Prison Notebooks* suggest that 'catharsis' can be roughly understood as the "acquisition of revolutionary consciousness".<sup>25</sup> Whilst Lukács emphasises the qualitative element of transcendence, Gramsci highlights the immanent, 'quantitative' difference between popular conceptions and Marxist theory. I contend that each articulates a necessary element for a dialectical conception of revolutionary subjectivity.

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas, P *The Gramscian Moment* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2009), p.294

<sup>25</sup> Gramsci, A *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* ed. and trans. Hoare, Q and Nowell-Smith, G (Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), p.366 fn.58

## b) Immanence and Transcendence

Lukács's theory of reification seeks to provide a principle or cutting edge by which a distinction can be drawn between the proletarian and bourgeois standpoints. For Lukács, the proletariat is capable of penetrating the reified forms of consciousness generated by the commodity-form as a universal structuring principle under capitalism. Through its privileged social position, the proletariat is able to generate the mediating links necessary to delve beneath immediate appearances to an 'authentic' reality. A proletarian standpoint capable of penetrating reification provides the possibility of a sharp break with a doomed bourgeois culture.

By contrast, Gramsci is hostile to any solutions to philosophical problems that appear to be metaphysical or transcendental, which he sees as reinforcing a mechanical and determinist conception of the world. Gramsci characterises the twin problems facing Marxism as a philosophy of praxis: on the one hand, it arises as a moment of modern culture both influenced and influencing it, and on the other, it must create a new culture that is independent and original [SPN, p.388]. This requires a development of social relations arising from a revolutionary crisis, and a corresponding period of crisis in the cultural field, that he denotes as *Sturm und Drang* [SPN, p.388].

Gramsci's comparative method analyses the respective hegemonic projects of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. His philosophical emphasis on immanence is opposed to any speculative basis by which to distinguish between them [SPN, p.402]. The historicisation of 'truth' that Gramsci ascribes to the philosophy of praxis leaves him open to accusations of relativism. He acknowledges that for Marxism this makes it difficult to motivate revolutionary political action without necessitating a relapse into dogmatism [SPN, p.406-7].<sup>26</sup>

I would argue that the resistance of Gramsci's framework to accusations of relativism arises from his conception of the different elements of this relationship of unity between man and matter: economics, philosophy and politics. Gramsci's image as a non-economistic thinker has been

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<sup>26</sup> In this sense he suggests that an element of utopia is necessary in political thought and can have a positive value [SPN, p.381].

contested by recent scholarship.<sup>27</sup> His rejection of the notion that “every fluctuation of politics and ideology” can be read off as an “immediate expression of the structure”, does not imply his rejection of mediated importance of the economy [SPN, p.407]. Although Gramsci does not establish a general principle relating the generation of mediation to the economic position of the proletariat, his theory finds an anchorage in value as the unitary centre of economics [SPN, p.402].

He maintains that there is a mutual translatability between the scientific concepts appropriate to these levels [SPN, p.403]. I have argued therefore that the de-reifying function in Gramsci’s thought is expressed simultaneously at the levels of philosophy and politics: in the de-mummifying of popular culture by philosophy [SPN, p.417], and the de-fetishising function of the revolutionary party, the Modern Prince.

Lukács makes a high-stakes gamble by seeking to dissolve all reified phenomena into mediated processes, placing a heavy philosophical burden on the potential of the proletariat to become the ‘identical subject-object’ of history. The chapter on Lukács identified the difficulties of synthesising his conception of a philosophical absolute or ‘universal’ subject with the empirically-existing working class. This raises the question of how the capacity of the proletariat to generate mediations in consciousness concretely relates to the process of class struggle. One answer is to turn to Gramsci’s conception of class subjectivity, which is marked out as distinctive by the concrete account that he gives of the constitution of class subjects through an analysis of their hegemonic projects.

Lukács does attempt to mediate between his philosophical and empirical notions of the working class by addressing the organisational problems of a revolutionary party in the later essays in *History and Class Consciousness*. However, Lukács’s theory of the relationship between the revolutionary party and the working class tends to focus on matters of form rather than content. This content-less aspect may support suggestions that Lukács’s conception of the party shares some similarities with

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<sup>27</sup> See Perry Anderson’s claim that Gramsci’s “silence on economic problems was complete”, quoted and contested by Peter Thomas (Thomas, P *The Gramscian Moment* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2009), p.347).

Badiou's conception of the void.<sup>28</sup> There is a potential link between what Lukács calls the problem of genesis, and Badiou's concern with the process by which genuine novelty enters the world.

For Lukács, the problem of genesis, of the creation of new content in history, can only be solved by the proletariat. This leaves him open to the accusation that the proletariat is the sole subject in history, even prior to capitalism. Žižek rejects this characterisation of Lukács by arguing that it is necessary to distinguish between the different historical shapes of the "dialectical tension and interdependence between necessity and contingency".<sup>29</sup>

Lukács's conception of subjectivity emphasises the transcendence of the proletariat as a transparent acquisition of self-consciousness. Although he recognises gradations in class-consciousness, there is a certain absence of content in the analysis of these intermediate stages. On the other hand, for Gramsci the concrete forms of institutionalisation associated with the development of a hegemonic project mitigate against speculative excesses.

Lukács explicitly places the category of totality at the centre of his understanding of the dialectic. It is for him the "bearer of the principle of revolution in science".<sup>30</sup> In Gramsci's case the notion of totality enters into his framework via other channels: his emphasis on the 'organic', his valorisation of the 'totalitarian' in certain contexts, his conception of historical unity, and a philosophical commitment to the 'immanent'.

Gramsci was particularly hostile to anything that he deemed to be an idealisation of action, or to the positing of a meta-subject capable of creating the totality. However, Martin Jay argues that the important role played by language in Gramsci's conception of the formation of consciousness belies a totalising project in which a future "linguistically unified community with shared meanings" might be achieved.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> I am grateful to Anindya Bhattacharyya for suggesting this insight.

<sup>29</sup> Žižek "Georg Lukács as the philosopher of Leninism", p.171

<sup>30</sup> Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, p.27

<sup>31</sup> Jay, M *Marxism and Totality* (Berkeley: University of California, 1984), p.159

Gramsci's critical project is therefore reflected in language, constantly working on and re-working common sense conceptions to develop critical notions. The contradictory consciousness of the proletariat displays a composite nature. Ideas appropriate to working class self-activity can and must co-exist with conceptions transmitted through the dominant hegemonic project [SPN, p.324]. This necessitates a certain fragmentation inherent in the construction of a proletarian hegemonic project, and the closely related creation of a unified world-view.

In this sense, Gramsci's counter-position of the 'commonly understood' meaning of the State and his own expansive conception of the integral State is one of the pivotal questions of his project. Class subjectivity is realised for Gramsci through the construction of the hegemony of the State. Rather than the creation of a transparent collective subject, it is a complex institutionalisation that involves the various aspects of civil and political society.

This differentiated conception of the institutionalisation of subjectivity appears to be in tension with the explanatory unity of Lukács's conception of reification. However, these tensions seem to arise from the theorisation of sharpening contradictions that exist in reality, and these thinkers' attempts to grapple with the intensifying fragmentation of proletarian subjectivity under capitalism. This leads me to believe that I have identified aspects of the Gramscian and Lukácsian frameworks that indicate useful points of departure for pursuing a Marxist conception of subjectivity.

#### **4) The Subjectivity of Labour in the Twenty-First Century?**

Can the notion of the subjectivity of labour and of the proletariat, central for the classical Marxist tradition, endure in contemporary debates about subjectivity? Žižek attempts to reclaim subjectivity from the post-modern critique by reasserting the "spectre of the Cartesian subject".<sup>32</sup> He rejects the prioritisation of "cultural recognition over socioeconomic struggle" that is characteristic of certain

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<sup>32</sup> Žižek *The Ticklish Subject*, p.1

tendencies of post-modern political thought, such as ‘identity politics’.<sup>33</sup> However, Žižek’s counter-proposal for a “leftist, anti-capitalist political project” is less transparent than his critique.<sup>34</sup> His re-engagement with Hegel and defence of the ‘authenticity’ of Leninist politics,<sup>35</sup> leads him to argue for a “radical *repoliticization of the economy*”.<sup>36</sup> This notion raises interesting questions, but I would argue that Žižek draws up short of establishing the role played by the proletariat and labour as a potential revolutionary subject in this project. It appears that there is still much potential for clarifying the relationship between post-Marxist accounts of subjectivity and the framework that arises from the key works of the classical Marxist tradition.

In posing the proletariat as the potential revolutionary subject, the classical Marxist tradition, particularly its Lukácsian formulation, is necessarily exposed to accusations of re-creating a Hegelian absolute subject. I contend that this tradition, self-consciously critical of Hegel from its inception, rejects the false ‘catharsis’ that such a solution represents. At the same time, I argue that, for classical Marxism, the forms of subjectivity that arise from the proletariat have an intimate connection with the process of totalisation. The various exponents of this tradition, as I have shown with Lukács and Gramsci, develop very different ways of formulating the relationship between the proletariat and the process of totalisation.

The intervening historical period has seen the intensification of the processes of capitalist reification that gave rise to Lukács’s formulation of the philosophical basis of the proletariat as the subject of social revolution. The limitations of Lukács’s conception have been drawn out in this thesis. Whilst the problems of positing the proletariat as a meta-subject capable of generating the totality have been demonstrated, the fusion of a Lukácsian framework with other types of de-fetishisation implicitly found in the Gramscian project remains undeveloped. An account would be required that

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<sup>33</sup> Žižek *The Ticklish Subject*, p.3

<sup>34</sup> Žižek *The Ticklish Subject*, p.4

<sup>35</sup> Žižek *The Ticklish Subject*, p.236

<sup>36</sup> Žižek *The Ticklish Subject*, p.353 (emphasis in original)

critically assesses the particular strengths of Lukács's and Gramsci's approaches and synthesises both in a unified framework.

An impoverished version of 'traditional' Marxism has often been the intellectual sparring partner for trends of thought that lead away from conceptions of totality, towards the dissolution of the subject into flows of meaning and towards the constitution of reality through language. I claim that the reading of the classical Marxist tradition developed in this thesis possesses the theoretical tools to analyse language as social mediation.<sup>37</sup> For Gramsci, the problem of the development of the autonomy of the subaltern classes is closely connected to his analysis of language. He contends that conceptions of the world must be transformed through a practico-critical process. Here it could be argued that there is an underexplored path returning from the linguistic dissolution of the subject back to the concern with the construction of a proletarian hegemonic project, characteristic of the classical Marxist tradition.<sup>38</sup>

## 5) A Tradition Obscured

The classical Marxist tradition presented here – Marx's thought and its renewal by Lukács and Gramsci – predates both the rise of Stalinism and the later revolutionary movements of the twentieth century. However, the legacy of Stalinism accompanies all returns to Marx's writings in the twenty-first century. For this reason – just as Lukács and Gramsci sought to re-establish the spirit of Marx's thought – it must again be creatively renewed in the light of these experiences. However, it could be argued that the majority of attempts to do so have jettisoned the core content of this tradition.

The works studied within this project can be located as pre-cursors to entire trends of thought. Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* is a foundational text for the critical theory of Frankfurt

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<sup>37</sup> In this regard, the work of V.N. Voloshinov could be a useful additional element to draw on (Voloshinov, V N *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1973)).

<sup>38</sup> Although there are studies in this field, e.g. Ives, *P Language and Hegemony in Gramsci* (London: Pluto, 2004).



School thinkers and those whom they influenced in turn. Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* were selectively adopted by the Italian Communist Party after the Second World War, and later used to justify the strategy of Eurocommunism. Specific readings of Gramsci's concepts have been deployed in various fields: by the practitioners of cultural studies, and more recently by a neo-Gramscian trend within International Relations theory.

The texts studied in this thesis can be considered as theoretical points of origin for the thought of many post-structuralists and post-Marxists. Thus a chain of mediations has been extended from the present back to Marx, but often resulting in an obscuration of aspects of the original work. By re-examining key texts in the classical Marxist tradition this thesis has sought to construct a defensible conception of the solution advanced by Marx and his successors to the problem of subjectivity. It is part of an on-going project that aims to test the explanatory power of this tradition in the debates of the twenty-first century.

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