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**THE LABORS OF KARL MARX:
TEKHNĒ, VALORIZATION, REVOLUTION**

A Thesis in Philosophy

by

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Abstract

This dissertation comprises a comprehensive re-reading of Marx's understanding of labor. In order to make sense of Marx's emphasis on labor, I argue, we must take his own productive activity seriously. Doing so obviates many of the standard objections to Marx's critique of capitalism. It does so by redirecting attention towards Marx's effort to transform his readers from isolated individuals into a revolutionary laboring multitude.

I begin with an examination of "concrete labor"—the intentional production of useful things—which reveals that this is the motor of human history for Marx because our products escape from the intentions that formed them. The materiality of production, Marx shows, confounds the idealism of intentionality. This dynamic is greatly exacerbated by capitalism, to which I turn next. The abstract logic of capitalist production is so divorced from its material effects that it threatens to utterly use up the earth and the workers on which it depends.

Having reconstructed Marx's account of labor and capital, however, only establishes the terms of the problem. The idealisms of concrete labor and capital have brought society to an impasse. In order to show how Marx confronts this impasse, I argue that we must recognize the profound self-reflexivity of Marx's writings. Marx does not just write about labor, he engages in his own form of productivity. He endeavors, through his own writing, to redirect his readers away from both traditional intentionality and capital and towards the revolutionary materiality that conditions and frustrates these idealisms.

My reading here gives special attention to Volume I of *Capital*, which is Marx's most elaborately developed attempt to work this transformation on his readers. I demonstrate that Marx in fact extensively modeled *Capital* on Dante's *Inferno*. Adapting the structure and purpose of Dante's poem, Marx leads us on a descent through the mystifying categories of modern economics (the idea of capitalism) in order to free us from the fear of eternal imprisonment in this modern equivalent to Hell. Overcoming this paralyzing fear is Marx's real labor. His hopeful materialism is an affirmation of what he calls "the movement that overcomes the present."

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Preface

Labor seems a quite simple category.

Grundrisse, "Introduction" (1857)¹

I begin this dissertation on Marx by noting the inescapability of Hegel. When Charles Taylor published his book on Hegel in 1975, he could say that, although Hegel's problematic and approach are still centrally important to our time and thought, "his conclusions are dead."² Thirty years on, even the conclusions seem to have arisen to walk amongst us again. John Rawls proclaimed for political philosophy (a subject he almost single-handedly revived in America) the task of reconciling us to our time.³ John McCumber has striven to comprehend much of Twentieth Century Continental and postmodern thought as a series of gestures towards a very Hegelian project of freedom.⁴ Robert Brandom, Robert Pippin, and John McDowell have led the charge to rehabilitate Hegel within an Analytic idiom, which is especially astonishing given the deep-seated, virtually constitutive opposition of Analytic philosophy to anything resembling muddle-headed German dialectics.⁵ Habermas seems to be right about this; "we remain contemporaries of the Young Hegelians,"⁶ belabored by the *Geist* of one long dead.

¹ G 103

² *Hegel*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 570.

³ *Justice as Fairness: a Restatement*, ed. E. Kelly, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard Univ. Press, 2001), pp. 3-4.

⁴ See, e.g., his *The Company of Words: Hegel, Language, and Systematic Philosophy*, (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1993), and *Philosophy and Freedom: Derrida, Rorty, Habermas, Foucault*, (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000).

⁵ Robert B. Brandom, *Making It Explicit* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994) and *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Robert B. Pippin, *Idealism as Modernism: Hegelian Variations*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); John McDowell, *Mind and World*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

⁶ *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, tr. Frederick G. Lawrence, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), p. 53.

Because philosophy finds itself haunted by Hegel, I want to turn to Marx. If the death of those regimes that held Marx aloft as their standard initially catalyzed proclamations that Hegel had triumphed over Marx,⁷ it has also set Marx free. Without an official dogma, and a state apparatus to maintain it, it is suddenly not so clear what “Marx” actually means. Once the statues are torn down and the sloganeers fall silent, all we have left is an immense collection of texts, texts that are far less chiseled and monumental than the statues and slogans they replace. Hegel had to die before he could return to haunt us; only after the first wave of Hegelianisms had died out was there any room for a new appreciation to grow. Perhaps it is the same with Marx. Now that Marx is dead and buried, his specter has been set free to roam. And perhaps also that other ghost, the ghost of revolution that moves about beneath the earth. Perhaps it is “still preoccupied with journeying through purgatory,” as Marx says in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*; perhaps it will yet cause us to “spring from [our] seat and cheer: Well undermined, old mole!”⁸

When you look under *Arbeit* in Konrad Löw’s *Marxismus Quellen Lexicon*, you encounter this surprising statement; “While *Arbeit* is of central significance for the Marxian worldview, Marx and Engels did not concern themselves with it systematically.”⁹ The judgment is seconded by Julius Dickmann; “The central concept of Marx’s entire system of teachings is the concept of human labor. [...] But if one searches in the Marxian writings for a general conceptual definition of human labor,

⁷ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1992); Gertrude Himmelfarb, *On Looking Into the Abyss: Untimely Thoughts on Culture and Society*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), Ch. 3 (Himmelfarb cites a comment by Vaclav Havel as the source of the declaration).

⁸ EB, LPW 115; translation modified.

⁹ Konrad Löw, *Marxismus Quellen Lexicon*, (Köln: Kölner Universitätsverlag, 1985), p. 29.

one will not find it anywhere.”¹⁰ Nowhere in Marx’s writings is there a prolonged explication of the most fundamental category of his ontology and his politics. Even more perplexing, one hundred and fifty years of Marxology has not supplied the lacking elaboration.¹¹ Indeed, we seem barely to have noticed the absence. After all, everyone knows what work is.

Only maybe we don’t know what work is. Moishe Postone has written of Marxological discussions of labor; “Many interpreters [of Marx] have proceeded too quickly to the analytic level of immediate concrete social reality, and, consequently, have overlooked some crucial aspects of the fundamental structuring categories themselves.”¹² Is it a matter of moving too quickly, or a matter of never moving at all? Since Marx’s analytic begins with the immediate concrete social reality, not with the structuring categories,¹³ the problem seems to be that the traditional interpretations of Marx never move beyond this immediate starting point, the form of labor given by our social world. Work is taken to be an empirical, sociological category in need of no further explanation. Work is conceived as industrial labor, as standing on an assembly line, as if Soviet “socialist realism” had given us all the exemplary picture of work. Perhaps it is critically updated to include service work, or office work, or house work, or some other variety of modern drudgery that doesn’t appear on Soviet propaganda posters, but this addition is generally taken to be a *revision* of Marx’s concept, needed to reflect a changed social reality or to express a “new” understanding of labor. For example, Hardt and Negri claim to be altering Marx’s conceptual

¹⁰ Julius Dickmann, *Der Arbeitsbegriff bei Marx*, (Wien: Bureau EREBE, 1932), p. 3.

¹¹ Aside from Dickmann’s obscure little book, which was self-published and never translated,

¹² *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), p. 20.

¹³ See Marx’s “Notes’ on Adolph Wagner”; “In the first place I do not start out from ‘concepts’, hence I do not start out from ‘the concept of value’ [...] What I start from is the simplest social form in which the labor-product is presented in contemporary society, and this is the ‘*commodity*’. I analyze it, and right from the beginning, in the *form in which it appears*” (LPW 241, emphasis in original).

framework by discussing the “dematerialization” of labor in the contemporary world, implying that the computer technician or fast food clerk is engaged in some novel form of labor, and that, indeed, the socialist realist image of material production is the proper depiction of Marx’s category of *Arbeit*.¹⁴

This is unsatisfying, as it substitutes an interminable series of *ad hoc* emendations to Marx for a thoroughgoing process of exploration and appraisal of Marx’s own mode of thinking. We continue to reproduce the lack of systematic concern for work that Löw notes in Marx himself. This is even true of Postone, who wants to fundamentally reinterpret Marx’s critical theory by calling it back to its basis in the critique of modern labor, yet nowhere provides us with a survey of Marx’s statements about labor or an attempt to reconstruct a theory of labor out of those statements. It is just such a survey and reconstruction process that I propose; or rather, since labor does not seem to lie on the surface of Marx’s discourse in an easily surveyable way, I propose an excavation that will draw out labor from where it lies under that surface. The aims of this excavation will be: 1) to define Marx’s concepts of labor in their most general application, 2) to delineate the various forms of labor and their roles in Marx’s understanding of history, 3) to specifically grasp the revolutionary aspect of labor, and 4) to identify the structural function of labor within Marx’s thought as a totality.

¹⁴ See, e.g., *Empire*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 289-300.

Acknowledgments

Althusser says somewhere that no materialist works alone. He forgot to mention that idealists don't work alone either, no matter what they might imagine. What follows is a stew of ideas I have gleaned from a countless multitude of encounters. Yet some figures stand out from that background of debt. Among those who have particularly marked my work by their conversation, companionship, commentary, and criticism are Asma Abbas, John Christman, Omar Rivera, Heike Schotten, Charles Scott, Hasana Sharp, and Amy Wendling. I also owe much to my comrades at the GFTEO, another underground entity I hope is continuing its work. Mitchell Aboulafia, Rick Lee, Nancy Love, Patrick Murray, Geert Reuten and Sherry Roush have generously given their time to offer me constructive feedback on various portions of my project. Terrell Carver has offered almost continuous assistance and support. Finally, Dan Conway has advised, guided, and encouraged this project from its inception; his empowering interpellation and enthusiastic interlocution have meant the world to me.

One
—
Concrete Labor: The Making of ‘Man’

Every actual labor is a *particular* labor, the exercise of a particular branch of labor differentiated from the others.

Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy
Part III, “Capital” (Manuscript, 1861)¹

Despite the centrality of labor, production and the working class to Marx’s effort to critically analyze and overcome modernity, the only place in his published writings where he undertakes to explicitly define and elaborate upon the “what is” of labor is Chapter Seven of *Capital*, “The Labor Process and the Valorization Process.”² This discussion opens Part Three of Marx’s *magnum opus*; Part One had set out the principles of commodity exchange, and Part Two had considered the mysterious nature of capital, seeking the origin of its growth—“the secret of profit-making.”³ Marx’s search had reached an aporia, for no matter how it tries, capital cannot expand—augment itself with surplus value—merely by means of exchange. The first premise of the market is that everything is exchanged for its equivalent, and even if one seller is constantly cheating his buyers, this would only redistribute wealth—that is, value—not create any in the aggregate.⁴

Therefore, Marx concludes, the investigation of capital’s augmentation must proceed “outside the market or the sphere of circulation.”⁵ It is only the employment of

¹ MECW 30, p.55; translation modified.

² In what follows, I will also have recourse to Marx’s unpublished (during his lifetime, that is) remarks on “production” in the “1844 Manuscripts” (EW) and *The German Ideology* (MECW 5), as well as to the earlier drafts of his critique of political economy. These latter include not only the *Grundrisse* (tr. Martin Nicolaus, [New York: Vintage Books, 1973]), but also the draft version of Part Three of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, which includes “Theories of Surplus Value,” and is published in MECW 30-34/MEGA² II.3.1-6.

³ C1 280

⁴ See, e.g., C1 266. I will return to this issue in detail in Chapter Two.

⁵ C1 279

a very peculiar commodity—human labor-power—that can account for capital's growth. Labor-power, like any commodity, has both an exchange aspect and a use aspect. Its exchange-value is only relevant to the market, and so cannot be the source of surplus-value; capitalization cannot arise from buying labor-power below its value, any more than it can from buying any other commodity on the cheap. The only remaining avenue of investigation is to examine the use-value of labor-power, the consumption of this strange commodity. This consumption of labor-power takes place in production itself.⁶ This is the starting point of Chapter Seven: "The use of labor-power is labor itself. The purchaser of labor-power consumes it by setting the seller of it to work."⁷

Marx divides his discussion into two parts, and characterizes the subject of the first part, "The Labor Process," as production considered according to its own aims and objectives. The second part, "The Valorization Process," considers production, by contrast, only from the point of view of the aims and objectives of capital. Labor produces both useful things and valuable things. The former aspect—the labor process—is the precondition for the latter aspect—the valorization process. "In order to exhibit his labor in commodities, [the worker] must above all exhibit it in use-values, things that serve to satisfy needs of one kind or another."⁸ Because of this fact that the labor process is a precondition for the capitalist production process, Marx says that it is not as such altered by capitalism, and that he can, therefore, "consider the labor process independently of any determinate social form."⁹

⁶ C1 279-80

⁷ C1 283

⁸ C1 283, translation modified.

⁹ C1 283, translation modified. In the first edition (1867), Marx elaborated upon the independence of the labor process by adding that it was to be considered "in its abstract moments" (MEGA² II.5, p. 129). Marx cut this clause from the second German edition (1872) (MEGA² II.6, p. 192), but it reappeared in the first French edition (1872-5) (MEGA² II.7, p. 145), before disappearing for good from all subsequent editions. In the 1861 draft of the section, Marx had repeatedly emphasized the abstract character of his

Thus, what Marx says appears to be quite straight-forward; labor *qua* labor—“labor as such”¹⁰—produces use-values, while labor *qua* a factor in capitalist production produces value. The essence of labor is the production of useful things. The accidental form of labor under capitalism is the production of exchangeable value that dominates and displaces use.

What one actually finds on closer examination, however, is that labor produces much more than use-values. What is simmering beneath the apparent brevity and clarity of Marx’s account of the labor process is the discord between the aims of labor and its many actual results. It is this submerged discord that I want to bring to the surface in this chapter. I will do so in three stages. First, I will examine Marx’s determination of labor as *tekhnē* in Chapter Seven of *Capital*. This section will flesh out Marx’s condensed and rather telegraphic presentation, in particular by drawing upon the Aristotelian lineage of his line of thinking. Marx’s concept of concrete labor will be found to rest on the identification of functionality as labor’s principle—its origin, rule, and aim; labor is human activity subordinated to functionality. Second, I will elaborate upon the relationship between the functionality of labor and human life, or species-being. Via a consideration of Hannah Arendt’s critique of Marx, the second section will explore labor’s role in the creation of humanity, that is, in the positing of an acknowledged species-life. This species-life, however, is fundamentally distinct from, even opposed to life as a physical occurrence. The labor process, it turns out, is fundamentally conservative in intention; it is our constant effort to stabilize the world by appropriating it to our life as we know it. Finally, however, I will turn explicitly to the discord between this intention and the manifest tendency of labor’s outcome to

consideration of the production process; see MECW 30, pp. 54f and 97f. Abstraction as such will be considered in some detail in Chapter Two.

¹⁰ C3 964

relentlessly overturn the life that it sought to conserve. This—the dysfunctionality and anarchism of labor—is, for Marx, the matrix of human history, but it can be traced back into nature itself, providing the key to understanding Marx’s repeated claim that human history and natural history are two sides of the same investigation.

These initial steps will establish the parameters for an investigation, in Chapter Two, of labor under capitalism, or the way in which labor comes to be subordinated to valorization, the aim of capital.

A. Labor and *tekhnē*

...the investigation [...] of the labor process in its actuality [belongs] in *technology*.

Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy
Part III, “Capital” (Manuscript, 1861)¹¹

1. Technical Purposiveness

The use-value of labor-power is useful labor, labor that produces other use-values. But the production of useful things is not a sufficiently precise definition of “labor,” for it would cover, as well, the many operations whereby animals produce objects useful for their lives. Therefore, Marx differentiates the labor that “belongs exclusively to humans” by the criterion of purposiveness.¹²

A spider conducts operations that resemble those of the weaver, and a bee would put many human architects to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect has built the cell in his head before he builds it in wax. At the end of every labor process, a result emerges that was already in the imagination [*Vorstellung*] of the worker at the beginning, thus was already present ideally. Not only does he effect [*bewirkt*] a change in the form of natural things, he simultaneously actualizes [*verwirklicht*] in the natural things his purpose, of which he is

¹¹ MECW 30, p.55; translation modified.

¹² C1 283f, translation modified. I will come back to the question of humanity’s exclusive hold on labor thus conceived in subsection B.3 below.

aware, which determines the type and manner of his activity as a law, and to which he must subordinate his will.¹³

The distinguishing characteristic of the human labor process is a *Vorstellung*, the presence of the final result at the beginning, and thus, the teleology of the process.¹⁴ The labor process does not simply change something into something else. It is not just any activity that manifests an effect, even a useful effect. Rather, it is the bringing into effect of something ideal, something imagined.¹⁵ I conceive of this sentence, compose it in my imagination, try out different wordings; and when I have typed it, then I have effected what I had only imagined before. I have labored, and I have realized my purpose. Not a glorious example of labor, perhaps, but an indication of how omnipresent such purposive activity is in our lives.

Such purposive production was first theorized by the Greeks as *tekhnē*, and Marx's initial presentation of it is very much of a piece with Aristotle's discussion of technical activity.¹⁶ He even embraces the terminology, to a certain degree; in addition

¹³ C1 284, translation modified.

¹⁴ Paul Walton and Andrew Gamble, claiming to follow Lukács, write that "labor or man is the only existing form of teleological being" (*From Alienation to Surplus Value*, (London: Sheed & Ward, 1972), p. 28). I think this is doubly wrong. First, as we shall see in more detail in Chapter Two, capital is just as teleological as labor. Second, "man" is neither identical with labor, nor teleological, for Marx's argument is precisely that humanity has never been present to itself as a goal. The production of humanity has been a great series of accidents. Even if humanity is, according to Marx, destined to become a goal for itself (an open question, both textually and historically, at this point), it is far from clear how this coming teleology could be assimilated to the teleology of the labor process. This will become clearer as this chapter proceeds.

¹⁵ Thus, in his manuscripts from 1861-3, Marx refers to past labor as "the degree of idealization the materials of nature have already undergone" (MECW 30, p. 55).

¹⁶ Compare Patrick Murray, "Enlightenment Roots of Habermas' Critique of Marx", *The Modern Schoolman*, 57, 1979, p. 11: "Marx's description of labor recalls Aristotle's treatment of human action, for example, building a house." (To be precise, building a house is, for Aristotle, not action [*praxis*] but making [*poiēsis*]; see below.) One of Marx's earliest texts is a notebook in which he translated and annotated most of *De Anima*; see MEGA² IV.1, pp 155-182. David DePew, (on the authority of David McLellan) claims Marx contemplated a book on Aristotle, in which "he would refute Trendelenburg's currently influential interpretation and redeployment of Aristotle. Trendelenburg, he [Marx] writes, is 'merely formal', whereas Aristotle is truly 'dialectical'" ("Aristotle's *De Anima* and Marx's Theory of Man", *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 8:1/2, 1981-2, p. 137). The relationship between Marx and Aristotle has gained significant attention in the wake of analytic Marxism. See especially: George McCarthy, *Marx and the Ancients*, (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990) and ed., *Marx and Aristotle*, (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1992); Scott Meikle, *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx*, (London: Duckworth & Co., 1985); Jonathan E. Pike, *From Aristotle to Marx: Aristotelianism in Marxist Social Ontology*,

to the epigraph to this section, Marx equates labor and *tekhnē* in “Theories of Surplus Value,” referring to “the labor process or the technological process.”¹⁷ According to the Aristotelian conception, *tekhnē* is the transformation of accident into intention.¹⁸ Thus, Aristotle agrees with Agathon that “*tekhnē* loves chance,” for “they are concerned with the same objects.”¹⁹ *Tekhnē*’s origin is the experience of “finding yourself” doing something. This is the moment when you suddenly realize that a certain event *x* has not simply happened, but has been produced, brought forth by a sequence of other events *a*, *b*, *c*, etc. (either your actions or events that you can see *could be* your actions). Such a realization can take place only on the basis of memories of previous events, previous examples both of *x* and of the *a*, *b*, *c*, etc., that lead up to it. Once memory has turned this corner, once you have recovered these memories as a set of experiences, you recognize that you can bring about the event that you had previously only happened upon. If you want *x*, you can do *a*, *b*, *c*, etc., and get *x*.

An illuminating example is the origin of agriculture, as archeologists have reconstructed it from excavated early human settlements.²⁰ Agriculture is literally a flower on the dung heap of history. As hunter-gatherers, we would collect and eat the fruits and seeds of the most suitable plants. We would then shit or otherwise discard many seeds—which have widely evolved digestion-resistant coatings that aid effective dispersal by animals—into the latrines and garbage dumps near our settlements. Eventually, we started to notice that all of our favorite plants were growing in a very concentrated way in these dumps. We’ll never know how many false starts there were before the series of events—plant selection, eating, shitting, plant growth—was

(Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publ. Ltd., 1999); and Allen Wood, *Karl Marx*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).

¹⁷ MECW 32, p. 406.

¹⁸ See *Metaphysics*, A, 980b25-30.

¹⁹ *N. Ethics*, 6.4, 1140a17-20.

²⁰ I take my account from Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: A Short History of Everybody for the Last 13,000 Years*, (London: Vintage Books, 1997), pp.114-23.

grasped well enough that the latrines became gardens, or how long an interval separated the first realization from the realization that the seeds did not have to pass through our guts in order to grow. Nonetheless, the outline of the process itself—the series of steps we had to take before becoming agriculturists—is clear.

As this example demonstrates, *tekhnē* is a sort of knowledge. Human beings came to possess the art of agriculture in the same moment we came to know how to produce our own food. Aristotle, therefore, classes *tekhnē* as the intellectual virtue appropriate to making, *poiēsis*.²¹ Likewise, Socrates allows, in the *Apology*, that the artisans he questioned actually did *know* something, unlike the poets and the politicians.²² Quite literally, *tekhnē* is know-how; the artisan knows how to act in such a way as to bring about a preconceived result. But *tekhnē* is also the act of transforming the world according to this knowledge. In Aristotelian terms, the artisan is fully actual as an artisan only when she is putting her skill to work in making. More properly, the artisan's skill is only fully actualized in the work itself, the product.

Because *tekhnē* is only realized in the functional product, it is purely instrumental action. Its end lies outside itself, and, therefore, its end is more “choice-worthy” than the technical activity itself.²³ The activity, from the standpoint of *tekhnē*, is only a necessary evil. Where you can obtain the useful thing without going through the labor of making it, you will. Thus, labor is a self-denigrating sort of activity; it has an immanent drive to minimize itself as much as possible. Add to this the fact that, at any point before the completion of the work, this instrumental activity can come to naught. Things can go wrong with *tekhnē* in countless ways. Perhaps the materials are not suitable: the wood of the chair leg cracks, the soil is too alkaline for the seeds to

²¹ *N. Ethics*, 6.4, 1140a20-24.

²² *Apology*, 22d.

²³ *N. Ethics*, 1.1, 1094a5.

grow, the clay is too wet or too dry to be formed. Perhaps, instead, the steps of the plan are not properly executed: improperly cut parts won't fit together, the argument of the first chapter contradicts that of the second, the rice burns while you're busy cutting the vegetables. Then again, perhaps something external interrupts the process: there is an early frost, a fire destroys the workshop, the onset of war cuts off the supply of necessary materials.

For these reasons, Aristotle ranks *tekhnē*, the intellectual virtue proper to *poiēsis*, lower than *phronēsis*, the intellectual virtue proper to *praxis*. The actualization of a prudent action lies in the act itself; it does not have to wait anxiously to be realized in a result that is separate from it. *Phronēsis* is nothing but the form of the activity. Aristotle refers to this as the greater self-sufficiency (*autarkheia*) of *phronēsis* (and more so of *epistemē*, and even more so of *noiēsis*), over against *tekhnē*. Oddly, to modern ears, the more self-sufficient an activity, the more preconditions it has. The self-sufficiency of the higher intellectual powers refers to the fact that once their preconditions (cities, good laws, good habits, leisure) are in place, they can carry on their business in relative—or absolute, in the case of *noiēsis*—independence. The material conditions form a stable basis for the activity, not an alien content that must be continuously re-assimilated.

Labor, on the other hand, is formative activity. The *Vorstellung* is a form that must be actualized in the material, must appropriate the material to itself. “This applies whether the change of form is chemical or mechanical, whether it proceeds of itself, through the control of physiological processes, or merely consists in the removal of the object to a distance (alteration of its spatial location), or only involves separating

it from the body of the earth.”²⁴ If the intended change of form does not actually come about—if the material is *deformed* rather than *formed*—then the labor has failed. I might know my aim and go through all the proper steps, and yet—as in the above examples of unsuitable materials and external interruptions—fail to produce what I set out to produce.

2. *The Double Subordination*

By a strange reversal, however, precisely because it might fail, because it is so dependent on external factors, successful *tekhnē* appears to epitomize freedom and power, especially in modernity. Because it is always a bit of a gamble, because it involves strategy and risk, the successful actualization of *tekhnē* seems more of an accomplishment. The flower on the dung heap is that much more valued because of the shit that surrounds it, and from which it has been won.

A reflection of the esteem in which *tekhnē* has been held is Western political philosophy’s general assimilation of politics—which “ought” to be a higher form of activity—to a technology of power.²⁵ This can be seen, for example, in Plato’s emphasis upon the statesman as an artisan who weaves his human material into the *polis*,²⁶ or in Machiavelli’s insinuation that the prince must dominate fortune if he is to achieve his end.²⁷ Sometimes, as in Hobbes, the technology of state power rests upon an empirical psychology of human beings.²⁸ Other times, as in Kant, it rests upon a

²⁴ MECW 30, p. 59.

²⁵ Hannah Arendt’s work is a prominent Twentieth Century attempt to reassert the primacy of political action over technology. I will discuss her understanding of *tekhnē* below.

²⁶ *The Statesman*, 311c.

²⁷ *The Prince*, Ch. 25.

²⁸ Thus, *Leviathan* begins with the consideration “Of Man”, the matter to be ordered, before going on to treat “Of Common-wealth”, the form to be imposed on that matter.

microscopic knowledge and policing of the boundaries of the property of each citizen.²⁹ Whenever politics is treated as an applied knowledge—whether that knowledge is Aristotle’s *politikē* or Dewey’s experiment³⁰—the notion is present that politics might become, under proper conditions, what Engels longed for and aptly named “the administration of things.”³¹

Given this Western love affair with *tekhnē*, and the widespread belief that it continues, or even culminates, in Marx, it is striking to notice that Marx’s text does not simply serenade the freedom and power of labor, but that it wavers, highlighting the ambiguity of any freedom grounded in the success of the labor process.³²

First, the purpose itself is described in the passage quoted above, not as my own will being done, but as a law that determines my activity, and to which I must precisely “subordinate” [*unterordnen*] my will.³³ In purposeful activity I am not free to do whatever I want; rather, all of my activity must follow from the goal I seek to realize. Once I have imagined the desired sentence, that *Vorstellung* dictates what I must do to bring it into effect. I cannot let my mind wander, or I will forget what I wanted to say. I cannot get up from the computer. I must attend to the placement of the letters on the keyboard and, given my poor typing skills, constantly double-check the screen to see

²⁹ Kant, Immanuel, *Metaphysical Elements of Justice: Part I of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 2nd ed., tr. John Ladd, (Indianapolis & Cambridge, UK: Hackett Publishing Co., 1999), pp. 33, 116.

³⁰ *The Public and Its Problems*, in *John Dewey: The Later Works: 1925-1953*, Vol. 2, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1988), pp. 315-364.

³¹ *Herrn Eugen Dührings Umwälzung der Wissenschaft* (“*Anti-Dühring*”), Bücherei des Marxismus-Leninismus, Band 3, (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1948), p. 348.

³² For a useful overview of interpretations of Marx’s conception of freedom, see George G. Brenkert, *Marx’s Ethics of Freedom*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983). The dominant “school” holds that Marx understands freedom to be self-realization. Those who disagree form a fragmented field, a hodgepodge of disparate views. Brenkert own interpretation is that Marx understands freedom as self-determination (pp. 86ff). I will have occasion below to refer in more specificity to Brenkert’s reading. Also worth reading is Kevin M. Brien, *Marx, Reason, and the Art of Freedom*, (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1987). Brien distinguishes between three aspects of Marx’s understanding of freedom: transcendence of the given, freedom as a mode of being (rather than as an act), and spontaneity. My own reading of Marx strongly rejects the first aspect, strongly endorses the second aspect, and qualifies the third aspect.

³³ It will become apparent, as we proceed, why this cannot be recast as a Kantian sort of autonomy, as a case of giving ourselves the law.

that I am indeed producing the words I intended. Further, if my work isn't to disappear without a trace, I must save the document, preferably in multiple places, and care continuously for its material existence.

This subordination of the worker's will to the *Vorstellung* of the goal is not, Marx tells us, a "momentary act." It defines the activity as labor, and accompanies the process from beginning to end. Attention is just what it means to keep the *Vorstellung* in mind throughout one's activity. The more attention the activity requires, the more closely it approaches pure *tekhnē*, and an activity requires more attention "the less the work, through its own content and its type and manner of being carried out, sweeps the worker up in it, the less he delights in it as the play of his own bodily and mental powers."³⁴ *Tekhnē* is essentially a disciplining of the body and its activity, an ordering of its motions through constant policing and monitoring. Furthermore, as this attention must, in the first instance, be a self-monitoring, *tekhnē* helps to produce the subject as self-aware and self-controlling.³⁵

Second, the details of the labor process reveal the extent to which the worker's activity is directed by the *means* through which she works. My writing process, for example, is completely different from that of someone who writes out their thoughts longhand, or dictates them to be transcribed later. This difference is due, not to my freedom, but to the means of labor I employ.³⁶ Marx writes; "A means of labor is a thing, or complex of things, which the worker interposes between himself and the object of his labor, and which serves as a director [*Leiter*] of his activity onto the

³⁴ C1 284, translation modified.

³⁵ This attention and subordination of the worker to the end of her activity thus suggests comparison to Foucault's discussions of discipline, a comparison along lines that I hope my description makes clear; see *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, tr. Alan Sheridan, (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), especially pp. 135-94.

³⁶ *Arbeitsmittel* has, in English translations of Marx, always been translated "instrument of labor"; I prefer the more literal "means of labor" because it better conveys the breadth of Marx's category, which includes "all the objective conditions for carrying on the labor process" (C1 286).

object.”³⁷ The point of this passage is lost in the usual translation of *Leiter* as “conductor” because of the ambiguity of the English word, which indicates as much the passive transmission of electrical current by a copper wire as it does the active directing of an orchestra. It is this latter sense that is conveyed by Marx’s German. Thus, he uses the same word to name the capitalist’s role as manager or director of cooperative labor,³⁸ in which context he spells out not only the orchestral metaphor³⁹ but also its military parallel.⁴⁰ The means by which I labor—the tools I use and the conditions in which I use them—conduct my activity the way a conductor conducts an orchestra, or a general conducts a field exercise. They tell me when and how to act. They gather together and coordinate the activities of the various parts of my body, regulating their temporality and spatiality.⁴¹

In a passage from “Theories of Surplus Value,” Marx stresses the difference between the material conditions of labor—the materials and means of labor and the means of life—considered as such and considered as capital. In the former, technological aspect, “they do not by any means express any *other* domination of these things over labor, *apart from the fact that activity must be appropriate to the material*, otherwise it would not be purposeful activity, labor.”⁴² In other words, the domination of labor peculiar to capital does not inhere in the material conditions of labor as such. Nonetheless, besides capital’s domination, there is an “other domination,” definitive of purposeful activity as such, “the fact that activity must be appropriate to the material.” Of course, this “other domination” is what we might call an enabling

³⁷ C1 285, translation modified.

³⁸ *Leitung* for “directing” and “control” on C1 449, and for “direction” on C1 450; *Leiter* for “leader” on C1 450. See MEGA² II.8 328ff.

³⁹ C1 449

⁴⁰ C1 450f

⁴¹ I will return to the fact that Marx refers to both the tool and the capitalist as *Leiter* in Chapter Two, section D.

⁴² MECW 32, p. 398; my emphasis.

constraint, but then again, so is capital's domination.⁴³ My point is simply that the means of labor are equally—to make an awkward coinage—*constraining* enablers. They make possible certain avenues of activity only insofar as they close off other avenues, confining activity to a delimited set of possibilities.

Therefore, I would argue, Marx's reference to Hegel's cunning of reason—in a footnote to his discussion of the human use of means of labor—should be read as ironic. It is not enough to say that Marx is transposing Hegel's cosmological reason into the realm of concrete, reasoning human beings, though it is certainly true that there is a strong continuity between this passage and a younger Marx's insistence that Hegel's subject must be transformed back into a predicate of individual human beings.⁴⁴ It is not enough to say this because Marx also seems to be poking fun at the very notion that reason, in the guise of purposive labor, could, “while it permits the objects to follow their own bent and act upon one another till they waste away, and does not itself directly interfere in the process, [...] nevertheless only [be] working out its own aims.”⁴⁵ Or, rather than “poking fun,” we could say that Marx's text *fleshes out* what it means “to work out one's own aims.” And once the cunning of reason is fleshed out—that is, once it is embodied in the corporeal movements of individual workers—it does not seem nearly so much like absolute freedom as it does in Hegel's text.

⁴³ That Marx considers capital to be an enabling constraint comes out very clearly in the *Manifesto* (LPW 6f), as well as in this passage from TSV: “Ricardo, rightly for his time, regards the capitalist mode of production as the most advantageous for production in general, as the most advantageous for the production of wealth. He wants *production for the sake of production* and this with *good reason*. To assert, as sentimental opponents of Ricardo did, that production as such is not the object, is to forget that production for its own sake means nothing but the development of human productive forces, in other words the *development of the richness of human nature as an end in itself*” (MECW 31, pp. 347f; Marx's emphasis).

⁴⁴ See, for example, his attack on the speculative method in *The Holy Family* (MECW 4, pp. 57-60).

⁴⁵ C1 285n2

It is because of these complications that Marx, as mentioned above, contrasts the technical nature of the labor process, and the concomitant requirement of the worker's close attention [*Aufmerksamkeit*], with "the play [*Spiel*] of [the worker's] own bodily and mental powers." In this play of powers—reminiscent of Kant's account of the experience of the beautiful⁴⁶—the activity loses its *telos*, or rather, the *telos* is folded into the activity itself, ceases to be an external imposition on the activity, and the "labor" becomes, as it were, an end in itself, the enjoyment of which is to be had in the activity, not in its result. (Remember that it is precisely this difference between an external aim and an internal one that marked the difference between *poiēsis* and *praxis* for the Greeks, and elevated the latter over the former. If making came to overshadow action in modernity, then Marx seems to be holding out the possibility that making might itself become a sort of action.)⁴⁷

When I get caught up in writing, when I experience it as myself flowing out into the words, I lose sight of any pre-conceived end, a situation I might convey by saying, "My writing took me somewhere unexpected." Similarly, a jazz musician in the midst of an improvisation is not attending to any *Vorstellung* of a final result. Nor is any artist who is taken up in their art. This sublimation of teleology, I suspect, is why works of art—and psychotropic agents, as well—have functioned as a repository of hope for critical theorists, concerned as they are that purposive activity will never lead us out of oppression. The purposiveness of labor is experienced as a sort of tyranny.

I think this point is reinforced by the oft-quoted passage from *Capital III*: "The realm of freedom in fact first begins where labor that is determined by necessity and external purposiveness [*Zweckmässigkeit*] ceases; it thus lies, according to the nature

⁴⁶ When we judge something to be beautiful, we experience a "state of *free play* of the cognitive powers, accompanying a presentation by which an object is given"; *Critique of Judgment*, tr. Werner S. Pluhar, (Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co., 1987), §9, p. 62.

⁴⁷ This possibility, and what it could mean, will be explored in greater depth in Chapter Five.

of the matter, beyond the sphere of properly material production. [...] Beyond this begins the human development of powers that counts as an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which can only burst into blossom, however, on this realm of necessity as its basis.”⁴⁸ It is striking the extent to which this passage reiterates the Aristotelian understanding of *tekhnē*, and insists that freedom cannot be understood along technical lines.⁴⁹ It also suggests that *tekhnē* is not the flower on the dung heap of history after all, that it is itself still too much engaged in—to use Aristotle’s fitting phrase—shit-work,⁵⁰ and that Marx is awaiting another flower.⁵¹

3. Form and Function

In both instances of labor’s subordination—in its relation to its *telos* and to its means—the labor process is dominated and regulated by use or by functionality.⁵² The *telos* of the software engineer’s or the carpenter’s or the author’s activity is obviously a program or a table or a book, and, as discussed above, this structuring aim is a form,

⁴⁸ C3 959; translation modified. The entire passage occurs as a long parenthesis in Marx’s manuscript from 1864-5; see MEGA² II.4.2, p. 838. I call attention to the manuscript status of the passage because this is frequently overlooked. I am generally of the opinion that caution ought to be used when citing from Marx’s manuscripts, as few writers have had such extreme cases of logorrhea. *Capital I* remains the last substantial statement of Marx’s critique of political economy that he saw through to publication, and its statements ought to be taken as the touchstone for interpreting the other two volumes, the manuscripts of which substantially predate the first edition of Volume One, and entirely predate the second German edition of Volume One. I do think, however, that this passage supports and deepens what Marx wrote in *Capital I*, and it is in this supplementary role that I introduce it (and other such unpublished passages).

⁴⁹ Such a technical conception of freedom does not always come in the form of a Promethean longing for engineered happiness. It also appears as a misplaced romanticization of “organic craftsmanlike work activities,” as it does in Axel Honneth’s discussion of labor (“Work and Instrumental Action,” in *The Fragmented World of the Social: Essays in Social and Political Philosophy*, ed. Charles W. Wright, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 15-49).

⁵⁰ *Rhetoric*, 1354b29.

⁵¹ Daniel Brudney also notes the similarity, but confuses matters when he writes: “Philosophers have long insisted that a condition of the best human life is freedom from necessary labor. Were Marx to locate the self-realization activity in non-necessary labor, his difference from the philosophical tradition [...] would be his advocacy of varied activities rather than a single ‘best’ activity” (*Marx’s Attempt to Leave Philosophy*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 163). If human flourishing is not found in necessary labor, it does not follow that it is found in non-necessary labor. It may not be found in labor—in the concrete, technical sense—at all.

⁵² *Zweckmäßigkeit* could be translated just as easily by either of these two terms as by purposiveness; German thus preserves the link between aim [*Zweck*] and function better than does English.

present both in the mind of the maker and in the finished product.⁵³ However, we must now focus our attention on the fact that what actually makes the product of labor a program or a table or a book is the product's usefulness as just such a thing.

As Marx writes:

The table that serves me for writing upon possesses as its own form and its own properties what previously appeared as the form-giving quality or determinateness of the joiner's labor. I have to do with it so far as I use it as a means for further labor, so far as it serves as a use value, as a table with a determinate useful application.⁵⁴

A table, a book, a computer program—these, and all other common names, are actually functional denominators. Form is function—“determinate useful application”—and not simply appearance. The *eidos* is not merely the iconic shape of a thing, but the totality of its appearances in the course of our normal interaction with the thing, our “having to do with it.” This totality of appearances amounts to the object's suitability to be employed as an object of that type; at each moment it continues to fulfill our expectation that it is, e.g., a table by continuing to seem table-like. If it ceases to appear that way, then, as Aristotle would say, it is only a “table” nominally or equivocally. When appearances break down like this, the object looks like what it is not.

In other words, if a joiner's labor is regulated by its goal, and its goal is a table, the joiner's labor is really regulated by the functionality or use of what she produces. A “joiner” who made useless “tables” would not really be a joiner, because she would not really be making tables.⁵⁵ Thus, when I compose and type my sentences, the

⁵³ Aristotle, *Meta.*, Z.7, 1032b1: “from *tekhnē* proceed the things of which the form is in the soul of the technician.”

⁵⁴ MECW 30, p. 71; translation modified.

⁵⁵ Reacting to Marx's comments about human making in the “Notes on James Mill,” Daniel Brudney projects this functionalism of labor into the future communism: “Complementarity within a communist society must—ideally—be absolutely perfect. It is actually crucial that *too much* not be produced. Otherwise some individual would have made objects that on one would use [and] would not have the enjoyment of satisfying another's need” (*Marx's Attempt to Leave Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 174). I think there

Vorstellung that regulates my work is the *Vorstellung* of an anticipated functionality of my sentences—to communicate the argument, to persuade, to evoke an emotion, or whatever. It is this functionality that I intend, and I have succeeded in my work if the sentences I write can actually function in the way I intended. If they don't, if they communicate something else entirely, or are confused enough that they don't communicate anything at all, then my writing technique needs work.

Likewise, in labor's relation to its means, what manages or directs the activity is the functionality of the tools or setting employed. When a worker uses a particular tool, she not only is engaged in production, but also is using the product of a past production, and is thus at the other end of the conduit of functionality.⁵⁶ The means of labor are what they are because they have certain functions. Hammers are made for pounding nails. Cash registers are made for calculating and tracking money transactions. But, precisely because every tool has a specific utility, it also precludes all sorts of other activities, channeling labor into the same tasks over and over again. Thus I can be told that I can't have my sandwich in a way that doesn't appear on the menu, because the cash register doesn't have a button for that option.⁵⁷

Every means of labor thus imposes a certain logic on activity. Indeed, that's precisely what a form is: a logic of activity. *Tekhnē* is a process of propagating forms. Through the use of something, I come to understand its form. Once I understand this form, I can set it in front of me as a guide for my labor, which, if successful, will

is good textual reason for doubting this prognosis. As Marx writes in EPM, "Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it—when it exists for us as capital, or when it is directly possessed, eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc.—in short, when it is *used* by us" (EW, p.351). I think George Brenkert is nearer the mark when he interprets Marx as claiming that; "One who objectifies himself in his activities on various objects and only sees in those objects their utilities or abstract characteristics has not objectified himself as he should" (*Marx's Ethics of Freedom*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 108).

⁵⁵ C1 287f

⁵⁶ C1 287f

⁵⁷ This channeling operation of our tools is the truth behind theories of technological determinism.

reproduce that same form. The reinstantiation of the form will, in turn, impress itself upon others through being used. The use of tools in labor interacts with the dictates of the *Vorstellung* and helps to determine what can be made, and how. The workings of the sewing machine decree what sorts of seams can hold together a garment. The features of the word processing program delimit possibilities for self-expression. The physical arrangement of the lecture hall establishes parameters for the teacher's interaction with the students.

This insight may be most familiar to us in the form of Marshall McLuhan's dictum: The medium is the message.⁵⁸ McLuhan, however, got it from Marx, *via* Walter Benjamin.⁵⁹ According to McLuhan's observations, the interaction of users with any means of communication will alter both the quality of the users' perceptions and the ratio of their senses to one another. Thus, for example, print helps to produce visually oriented, linear-thinking beings. The telephone, on the other hand, makes its users more tactile and auditory, impinging upon vision.⁶⁰ But the same point applies to other means besides those of communication. Better yet, all means of labor *are* means of communication, for they are the medium through which the worker communicates the form she has grasped to the material upon which she works. Thus, the sewing machine does not merely determine the form of the item of clothing; it shapes the worker, by honing particular motor skills, by setting the rhythm of work, by habituating the body and mind in many minute ways, even by exerting subtle evolutionary pressures—machines and their factories bestow reproductive advantages

⁵⁸ *Understanding Media*, reprint edition, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994).

⁵⁹ See Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, tr. Harry Zohn, (New York, Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 217-51.

⁶⁰ McLuhan, *op. cit.*, pp. 170-8, 265-74.

on different sorts of humans than do open fields and heavy manual labor, carried out in relative isolation.⁶¹

The opposite, but twinned myths of *tekhnē* are: 1) some new implements are good, while others are pernicious; and 2) tools are indifferent, it's all in how they are used. Marx's approach denies the disjunction. Every tool exists to be used, and will be used, in particular ways; the means exert pressure upon the ends, and upon the activity. But what is requisite in each case is to examine both the avenues of action opened up by a tool, and those foreclosed by it. These cannot be simply and moralistically proclaimed.

For example, while driving along I-80 a couple years ago, I collided with a deer. I pulled over to the side of the road, but before I even had a chance to assess the damage to my car or begin to formulate what I would do about this situation, another motorist had stopped behind me and called the police on his cell phone. A cop arrived within five minutes, and I no longer had any options about what would happen next: the damage was assessed, I was directed to take certain steps, and was escorted through those steps by the officer. It thus occurred to me that certain knowledges—how to diagnose and remedy car troubles, what to do about a dead animal on the road, how to un-strand oneself, how to ask the right people for the right sort of help—were becoming largely superfluous in America. The widespread presence of cell phones links even those of us without them into a communication network that renders many “survival skills” generally obsolete.

⁶¹ Masculinity, for example, has been deprived of most of its traditional habitat in the last two hundred years, and is now analogous to the deer who invade the suburbs of major American cities, struggling to survive on chemically fertilized lawns. It seems to me that whatever reproductive advantage accompanied traditional masculinity up until modernity is already depleted, and that the sub-species of “the real man” will be extinct within a handful of generations.

This can be—and frequently is—bemoaned as a loss of independence and individual responsibility. It is. It can also be hailed as a democratization of independence—extending it to populations that might otherwise feel too vulnerable to travel alone—and an extension of social responsibility. It is this, too. Cell phones and related communication networks establish linkages that socialize us to an ever greater extent, making it ever less necessary that each individual replicate certain bodies of knowledge. This makes us more dependent on others, but also more individualized, for rather than *all* of us learning about cars, road-kill, hitch-hiking, etc., *each* of us can learn something completely different. And increased specialization just makes communication that much more necessary, driving the process onward. None of these consequences is consciously chosen by us when we purchase or use a cell phone, but they are part of the logic of activity that is cell phone use.⁶²

B. The use and disadvantages of labor for life

The object of labor is therefore the objectification of the species-life of man...

“Estranged Labor”
(Manuscript, 1844)⁶³

1. Life and Function

The question that now confronts us is: What are the functions, the uses, to which human activity is subordinated in the labor process? According to Marx, the totality of the functions that direct labor is human life.⁶⁴ It is the life functions of

⁶² This is quite harmonious with Adam Smith’s discussion of the division of labor; see *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1976), Book I, Chapters One and Two. See also Kant, “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent,” in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, tr. Ted Humphrey, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), pp. 29-32.

⁶³ EW 329

⁶⁴ The translation of the section of *Capital* on the labor process obscures the prevalence of *Leben* by rendering it as either “needs” or “subsistence” or “existence”. As “needs”: C1 283; as “subsistence”: C1 284, 285, 289, and 290; as “existence”: C1 290.

humanity—initially of the particular producer, eventually of humanity as a species—that determine what we make and how we make it. We labor in order that we might live, a fact that Marx protested with much pathos in his “1844 Manuscripts”: “For labor, life activity, productive life itself, appears to man in the first place merely as a means of satisfying a need—the need to maintain physical existence. [...] Life itself appears only as a means to life.”⁶⁵ The pathos disappears in his later texts, but labor retains its characterization as the means to life. Therefore, Marx’s clearest definition of concrete labor is that it is the activity we undertake “in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form useful to [our] own life.”⁶⁶

Life must be construed quite broadly here. We can start with Aristotle’s definition of life as the power of a natural body to engage in certain movements.⁶⁷ At the most basic level, these are the movements of nutrition and reproduction, whereby the form of the body is preserved and reiterated. But the powers of sensing, of locomotion, of judging and knowing are just as much the powers of the body.⁶⁸ In the final analysis, whatever we do is a part of our life; “As individuals express their life, so they are.”⁶⁹ Therefore, whatever we need in order to do what we do—to express our life—is a need of our life, a means of our life [*Lebensmittel*]. The universe of such means of life constitutes, in the formulation of *The German Ideology*, our “material life.”⁷⁰

Marx nowhere attempts to delimit these powers. While there are certain basic powers—Aristotle’s nutritive soul—without which life could not, by definition, exist—and Marx stresses the importance of these powers, especially in *The German*

⁶⁵ EPM, EW 328; translation modified.

⁶⁶ C1 283; translation modified.

⁶⁷ *De Anima*, 2.2.

⁶⁸ Marx is a less ambivalent materialist than Aristotle in the case of knowing.

⁶⁹ MECW 5, p. 31.

⁷⁰ MECW 5, p. 42.

Ideology—Marx does not circumscribe the possible range of the powers of life. Thus, he does not provide us with a traditional theory of human nature. Whether as a holdover of his youthful Promethean reveries, or as an uncharacteristically modest result of his historical sense, Marx seems to believe fundamentally that life can be expressed in an indefinite number of ways. Any concept of human nature, any attempt to define the human according to its essential powers, could only take the form of a provisional “gathering together of the most general results” of historical observation,⁷¹ as, for instance, his claim that “the history of industry [...] is the open book of human essential powers, the sensuously present human psychology.”⁷² I will examine Marx reticence on this point from a different angle—one that I think will help to ground it in the nature of his investigation—in section 3 below.

I will note as an aside that I actually believe that Marx is only justified in offering a Darwinian “definition” of the human; the human being is just a line of descent. I recognize, of course, that Marx actually offers a number of other statements that seem to define the human. This is especially true in the “1844 Manuscripts.” Nonetheless, I think that, in context, these statements can all be read as (generally failed) attempts on Marx’s part to elucidate the peculiar effects of labor on its practitioners. I do not generally advocate a strong “early Marx/late Marx” dichotomy, but on this question I think there are strong grounds for bracketing these early remarks about the human *Gattungswesen* as “youthful.” Marx began to analyze the labor process as a concrete phenomenon with concrete effects on its practitioners only in *The German Ideology*, and a vast majority of his precise thought on this subject is

⁷¹ MECW 5, p. 37; translation modified.

⁷² EPM, EW 354; translation modified.

confined to the years after 1861.⁷³ This is the locus of the account that I will spell out in section 3. For now it suffices merely to stress that the movements of life are nowhere—not even in the “1844 Manuscripts”—catalogued or categorized by Marx; the expression of life is left indeterminate.

However, we can actually go one step further and state that, for Marx, life is not a static—though indeterminate—set of functions. Rather, he positively insists that it varies across geography and history. Marx inherited a radicalized strain of Montesquieu’s insistence on the geographical determination of the human, shared by materialists in general. This, incidentally, gives rise to some rather strained attempts—hinted at in *The German Ideology*,⁷⁴ but only given full vent in a later exchange of letters with Engels—to explain observable racial characteristics by reference to geographic, and ultimately geological bases (soil composition, etc.).⁷⁵ Obviously, however, it is the temporal element that dominates in Marx’s thought, and it is the historical variation of human life functions that he particularly insists upon; “the whole of history is nothing but a continual transformation of human nature.”⁷⁶ Indeed, history comes to trump geography in the end, for the creation of the world market, the mass migration of labor, the rise of world-wide media, and the capitalization of the whole globe so thoroughly mix peoples and cultures from different

⁷³ In the “1844 Manuscripts”, Marx *generally* uses the word “labor” only as shorthand for “estranged labor.” For instance, he writes that “labor is only an expression of human activity within alienation [*Entäußerung*], an expression of life as alienation of life [*Lebensäußerung als Lebentäußerung*]” (EW 369). This makes it extremely difficult to determine what, if anything, Marx has to say about labor “as such,” concrete labor, in these manuscripts. This textual fact casts a pall over much humanist Marxism, reliant as it often is on Marx’s early writings for its conception of happy, species-affirming, human labor; see Christopher J. Arthur, *Dialectics of Labor: Marx and His Relation to Hegel*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), Chapter One, for details.

⁷⁴ MECW 5, p. 31n.

⁷⁵ Marx to Engels, August 7, 1866, and August 13, 1866; Engels finally puts a rest to Marx’s speculations in his reply of October 5, 1866.

⁷⁶ PP 100

areas, and so effectively militate against any sort of settlement stable enough for new geographic differences to develop, that space approaches the 0-limit as a variable.

Nonetheless, we can certainly say that the needs of our life vary along the same axes of time and—even if to a diminishing degree—space.⁷⁷ And, if our needs differ thus, then so does the labor by which we produce the things that satisfy those needs. We make whatever we need; this means, we make whatever will function as a means for the expression of our powers. The actual expression of our life-powers, it follows, is just the consumption of what we have made for that purpose. “Use-values are only actualized in use or in consumption.”⁷⁸ That is, as Marx puts it in the *Grundrisse*, “a product becomes a real product only by being consumed [...]; a house where no one lives is in fact not a real house.”⁷⁹ Completing this Aristotelian line of thinking, he claims that consumption is “the aim [*Zweck*] of production.”⁸⁰

Life is therefore identified with consumption, but this identification is posited, ironically, by production, by *tekhnē*. Again, just as in the case of the technical subordination of activity to life, the young Marx protested this identification of life with production for consumption. In the “1844 Manuscripts,” Marx complains that, according to Ricardo, “nations are merely work-shops for production; the human being is a machine for consuming and producing [...].”⁸¹ With time, however, Marx came to appreciate Ricardo’s perspective, his cynicism. In “Theories of Surplus Value,” Marx returns to the same theme, but this time to praise Ricardo:

It is not vulgar when Ricardo equates the proletariat to machinery or beasts of burden or commodities, since it furthers ‘production’ (from his

⁷⁷ “Natural wants themselves change continually. What variety there is, for instance, in the objects which serve as the staple food among different peoples!” (PP 43)

⁷⁸ C1 126; translation modified.

⁷⁹ G 91

⁸⁰ G 93/MEGA² II.1.1, p. 30.

⁸¹ EPM, EW 306; translation modified.

point of view) that they are merely machinery or beasts of burden, or since they really are merely commodities in bourgeois production. This is stoic, objective, scientific.⁸²

It is this stoicism that Marx himself learned to adopt. The righteousness of his early pathos is replaced by the cool rhetoric of scientificity. We'll have occasion to consider this shift further on; for now what matters is that the characterization of *tekhnē* as activity subordinated to life, and the consequent identification of life and consumption are constants in Marx's work.

2. Arendt's Protest

It is precisely these aspects of Marx that have been passionately protested by Hannah Arendt, in her book *The Human Condition*.⁸³ An examination of Arendt's protest will, I believe, allow us better to grasp the relationship between Marx's theory of *tekhnē* and his theory of history, or, in other words, the relationship Marx posits between *tekhnē* and the temporal variation of life.

Arendt wants to insist upon a distinction she finds to be operative in language, but ignored in philosophy—and especially in modern philosophy—the distinction between *labor* and *work*.⁸⁴ Labor, according to Arendt, is of the body, of nature, and of life. It is the repetitive maintenance and reproduction of the organism, under the weight of natural necessity, the “burden of biological life.”⁸⁵ As such, it leaves no trace, but melts away in the process of consumption. “The ‘necessity of subsisting’ rules over both labor and consumption, and labor, when it incorporates, ‘gathers,’ and bodily ‘mixes with’ the things provided by nature, does actively what the body does even more

⁸² MECW 31, p. 349; translation modified.

⁸³ (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1958).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp 79ff.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

intimately when it consumes its nourishment.”⁸⁶ Arendt is especially drawn to the production of food, and to agricultural labor, as the epitome of this continuously renewed labor, timed to the rhythms of nature,⁸⁷ though she also calls special attention to cleaning, maintenance and repair.⁸⁸

Tekhnē, on the other hand, is *work*, and work does not produce consumer goods, but durable things; it does not incorporate, but reifies. The products of work, according to Arendt, are distinguished from the results of labor by being works in the sense of Herodotus, things that remain in the world as monuments to human activity. Useful things last; they are used without being used up. “The reality and reliability of the human world rests primarily on the fact that we are surrounded by things more permanent than the activity by which they were produced, and potentially even more permanent than the lives of their authors.”⁸⁹ “The distinction between bread, whose ‘life expectancy’ in the world is hardly more than a day, and a table, which may easily survive generations of men” is of decisive importance for Arendt.⁹⁰ Marx’s presentation of the labor process, according to her, conflates labor and work, and, worse, subordinates work to labor, sinking the objectivity of the world in the ceaseless monotony of life as surely as Foucault’s man is erased by the lapping of the waves on the shore.

Nonetheless, Arendt waffles on what exactly constitutes this all-important distinction. Generally, as in the passage just cited, she rests her argument on the relative longevity of the concrete products of work, as contrasted with the fleeting existence of the concrete product of labor. Thus, for example, she writes; “What

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 100.

⁸⁷ Ibid., pp 96ff.

⁸⁸ Ibid., pp100f.

⁸⁹ Ibid., pp 96f.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 95.

distinguishes the most flimsy pair of shoes from mere consumer goods is that they do not spoil if I do not wear them, that they have an independence of their own, however modest, that allows them to survive even for a considerable time the changing moods of their owner.”⁹¹ However, she sometimes rests her distinction, contrarily, on the eternal quality of the guiding *Vorstellung*. “It is of great importance,” she writes, “[...] that the image or model whose shape guides the fabrication process not only precedes it, but does not disappear with the finished product, which it survives intact, present, as it were, to lend itself to an infinite continuation of fabrication.”⁹²

Neither of these accounts of the difference between work and labor is satisfactory, however. The baking of bread is just as much guided by the presence of an *eidōs* as is the constructing of tables, so the permanence of the *Vorstellung* cannot serve to differentiate the two activities at all, and can be dismissed immediately. What then of the relative difference in the longevity of the products? The difficulty here is one that Arendt herself admits; the danger of hanging a distinction of kind on a mere difference of degree is that changed circumstances can lessen the degree of difference to the point where the distinction itself disappears. And this is precisely what the use of machinery and the division of labor have done, even according to Arendt herself:

Although machines have forced us into an infinitely quicker rhythm of repetition than the cycle of natural processes prescribed [...] the repetition and the endlessness of the process itself put the unmistakable mark of laboring upon it. This is even more evident in the use objects produced by these techniques of laboring. Their very abundance transforms them into consumer goods. The endlessness of the laboring process is guaranteed by the ever-recurrent needs of consumption; the endlessness of production can be assured only if its products lose their use quality and become more and more objects of consumption, or if, to put it another way, the rate of use is so tremendously accelerated that the objective difference between use and consumption, between the

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 141.

relative durability of use objects and the swift coming and going of consumer goods, dwindles to insignificance.⁹³

Therefore, it is not the ignorance of the distinction between labor and work among philosophers that constitutes the real problem, but rather the active and effective erasure of the difference by modern production. The difference between Arendt's account and Marx's lies not in their diagnoses of the current state of things, but in Arendt's insistence that there is something *untrue* about the way things have turned out, that the world itself has ceased to recognize a real distinction, one that it ought to recognize, as compared to Marx's stance—despite his own youthful anguish over both the subordination of activity to life, and the identification of life with consumption—that the modern world has actually revealed the truth of *tekhnē*, and that this truth has made a lie of the old distinctions and hierarchies.

Tekhnē has grown up, as it were, and in the same way that the shape of man holds the key to the shape of the ape,⁹⁴ the shape of the modern labor process reveals what *tekhnē* had been tending towards all along. The division of labor and the development of machinery did not invade *tekhnē* from the outside and turn it into labor. Rather, *tekhnē* itself developed into the production and consumption machine that is modern society. It is worth examining this development in some detail: first, to see how *tekhnē* is itself responsible for both the concept of life deployed by Arendt and the species-life that makes every thing into something to be consumed; and second, to note the crucial differences between this “bio-technology” and life as it occurs “by nature.” These will, respectively, form the subjects of the next two subsections.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁹⁴ G 105

3. *The Technicity of Life*

I have already noted that Marx claims in *Capital* to examine the labor process as independent of any particular historical form. He even goes so far as to call useful labor “an eternal natural necessity.”⁹⁵ Such statements invite Arendt’s interpretation—and she is not alone in reading Marx this way—according to which Marx defines human being as the *animal laborans*. Nonetheless, that they invite that interpretation does not mean that they justify it. A number of different claims must be sorted out. It is clear that Marx does *not* mean for his concept of concrete labor to be coextensive with human activity. Humans do other things besides labor; we contemplate, we free-associate, we day-dream, we exercise and eat and have sex, we fly into rages and cry out in joy, all without having a concrete end in view. Neither is concrete labor the essential human activity, that which defines us as human, for there are humans who don’t and can’t labor in this way.⁹⁶

Nonetheless, Marx does state in more than one place that humans are the only beings that labor; he claims to “presuppose labor in a form in which it belongs exclusively to humans.”⁹⁷ Why doesn’t this amount to defining humans as essentially laborers, as so many interpreters and critics assert?⁹⁸ Here Marx’s language from *The German Ideology* is helpful, despite the fact that Arendt herself reads it as support for her interpretation. Marx writes; “One can differentiate humans from animals by consciousness, by religion, by what one will. They themselves begin to differentiate

⁹⁵ C1 133

⁹⁶ One of the most undertheorized coercive institutions of modern America is the workshop for the mentally retarded and the mentally ill, where we try everything in our power to make those with no concern for tomorrow into laborers, where we try to implant our own *Vorstellungen* in their stubbornly resistant heads.

⁹⁷ C1 283f, translation modified.

⁹⁸ That it is read as such is evident, for example, from Lawrence Wilde’s statement; “For Marx, what makes us distinctly human is our ability to engage in creative social activity, to act on ‘external’ nature according to a plan.” (“Marx’s Concept of Human Essence and Its Radical Critics,” *Studies in Marxism*, 1, 1994, p. 24.)

themselves from animals as soon as they begin *to produce* their means of life.”⁹⁹ These sentences do *not* support the conclusion that humans *really are differentiated* from animals by the fact that humans labor. Rather, they make the more modest—and more interesting—claim that humans *differentiate themselves*—appear to themselves as differentiated—from animals as soon as they begin to labor. Labor explains the fact that we appear to ourselves as—to use Feuerbach’s term—a *Gattungswesen*. Labor does not follow from our *Gattungswesen* as an essential predicate thereof; labor is the activity that creates our *Gattungswesenheit*.¹⁰⁰ Marx’s sometimes clumsy, sometimes contradictory attempts to summarize the human species-being are driven by an insight more powerful than all the summaries, the insight that whatever the apparent content of our self-conception, the fact that we have a self-conception at all is an unintentional by-product of the intentional labor we have developed as a primary form of activity.¹⁰¹

This is signally important, because it indicates that Marx’s primary object of investigation is not human being, but labor; not a substantial being that precedes and underlies labor as an activity, but the form of that activity itself. Through this form of activity we have come to appear to ourselves as just such a substantial being. But that is a secondary consideration, as far as Marx’s argument is concerned, for we have also come to engage in other forms of activity as well, and these, too, have given rise to new

⁹⁹ MECW 5, p. 31; translation modified.

¹⁰⁰ This claim is supported by the observation that Marx does not himself put forward any formulae of the “man is the *x* animal” sort. Instead, he only cites and redeploys others’ formulae—e.g., those of Aristotle and Franklin—in a historicizing context, as symptoms of particular social forms, or as distinctive of a particular point of view. See, e.g., C1 286, C1 444, and MECW 30, pp 97f.

¹⁰¹ This is how I would also read Habermas’ interpretation of Marx on this point; “Because the tool-making animal distinguishes itself from all other animal species through the reproductive form of social labor, the human species is not characterized by any invariant natural or transcendental structure, but only by a mechanism of humanization” (*Knowledge and Human Interests*, tr. Jeremy Shapiro, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), p. 29. In footnotes throughout the remainder of this chapter, I will conduct something of an ongoing commentary on Habermas’ reading of Marx, for it has been influential, controversial, and (I think) extremely ambiguous in its effects.

modes of appearing to ourselves. To put this into the terms of Nietzsche's famous phrase, Marx's investigation of labor does not so much posit a doer behind the deed as it traces the series of events by which a particular deed—production according to *tekhnē*—posits such a doer "behind itself," as it were.¹⁰²

The formation of a unified and substantial doer does not necessarily begin with the *Vorstellung* that directs technical activity—beginnings are slippery things—but we can certainly conjecture that the latter must have formed a huge impetus to the former. This *Vorstellung* is, according to our previous analysis, the presentiment of some function. However, in order that an activity might be anticipated in this way, it must be thrown into the future from the past; one can only anticipate what one has already experienced. This structural requirement is implicit in the Aristotelian account given above of *tekhnē* arising from experience.¹⁰³ Engaging in labor always involves retaining the past as memory and projecting that past into the future as something expected to happen again, and for which one can prepare by making something that will serve precisely that function.¹⁰⁴ Life coming to appear as something constant and foreseeable must be coeval with *tekhnē*.

This predictability of life, this steadiness, is the fundamental moment in which life is delimited as a specific set of functions, in which *living* becomes *a life*. One now has certain needs that one can expect, count on, and this expectation gives a shape to

¹⁰² This way of reading Marx relieves him of the burden of any empirical claim about which animals do or do not engage in *tekhnē*. If Jon Elster is right that there are numerous other animals with "the capacity to work according to a mental plan," then, according to Marx's argument, these animal species have started down the path of the dialectic of labor that inexorably tends towards the creation of a *Gattungswesen* (see Elster's *Making Sense of Marx*, p. 65; in the surrounding pages, Elster catalogues and criticizes Marx's numerous statements about humans and other animals).

¹⁰³ See *Meta.*, A, 980b25ff.

¹⁰⁴ One could perhaps supplement this sketch with Nietzsche's discussion of pain and the origin of memory from Part Two of *Towards a Genealogy of Morals*. The sequence pain-memory-experience-*tekhnē* is, of course, nothing but a bare sequence, for it specifies no mechanism by which a body would develop one power out of the previous power. All origin stories of this sort seem to require the intervention of fate at the crucial juncture. Marx asserted; "*Generatio aequivoca* [spontaneous generation] is the only practical refutation of the theory of creation" (EPM, EW 356). It is also apparently the last resort of all theories of creation.

one's life. The functions that one anticipates and prepares for come to be definitive of life itself. This can be seen in a particularly vivid way in the Greek identification of life with the organic. *Organon*—which still supplies Americans with a word for signaling, if not the lack, then the lower intensity of the technological constitution of the means of life—is the Greek word for tool. An organ is a tool for life; an organism is a self-contained complex of such tools, a machine, really. The living being, from the moment it is recognized as such, is always already shot through with technical concepts. Life itself, as we have inherited it from the Greeks, is a technical concept, and Arendt's understanding of life as the repetition of needs is obviously part of this heritage.

And just as one's own *tekhnē* gives form to one's own life, so labor carried out on the presupposition of exchange gives form to the life of the species by anticipating the life functions of others. Production for exchange necessitates that my functions are identified with your functions, that our functions are interchangeable. I do not have to actually take on all of your functions—I can make things that I would not myself consume—but I nonetheless have to treat our functions as, in principle, interchangeable. Your functions must become options for me, something I could do if circumstances and inclination permitted. Thus, when exchange has reached a certain level of generality, both in scope and intensity, the notion of a human species, biologically defined and sharing a set of life functions, is bound to arise. Every first encounter of previously isolated peoples has been experienced on both sides as the encounter between “the people” as such and “non-people”—redskins, devils, ghosts. The expansion of the circle of humanity, and the specific differentiation of humanity as one form of biological life coincides with the expansion of trade and the concomitant anticipation of and identification with the life functions of an ever-expanding circle of others beyond one's immediate community. As Marx writes in the *Grundrisse*; “That

the need of one can be satisfied by the product of the other, and vice versa, [...] this shows that each of them reaches beyond their own particular need, etc., as a *human being*, and that they relate to one another as human beings; that their common species-being is recognized by all.”¹⁰⁵

Arendt is right to recognize, therefore, that the collapse of use into consumption entails the creation of a life of the species.¹⁰⁶ Just as the consumption of bread is the reproduction of my own life, so the consumption of buildings and streets and the earth itself is the reproduction of the life of humanity as a species. This consumption, and therefore this life, only comes fully into view in modernity. The life of the species has become a reality, and it has become a reality precisely through the action of *tekhnē*.¹⁰⁷

4. *The Anticipation Structure of Life*

Arendt’s protest is valuable, therefore, because it brings into focus an overlooked aspect of the labor process as Marx theorizes it. The labor process, because it proceeds under the sway of the worker’s *Vorstellung*, is not simply activity in the service of life; this would just as well encompass, as I mentioned above, the non-technical operations of the spiders and bees. Rather, when I make something for my own use, I make something in view of an *anticipation* of the needs of my life. But life as something anticipated is very different from life as a natural occurrence.

Life as it happens, natural life, does not anticipate. The teleology we see in nature is a *post festum* teleology. Natural beings *qua* natural do not operate under the guidance of a *Vorstellung*. Even Aristotle, who saw a very real teleology in nature, did

¹⁰⁵ G 243; translation modified.

¹⁰⁶ See, e.g., *op. cit.*, p.116.

¹⁰⁷ That *tekhnē* has produced a human species-life should not, I think, be taken to mean that labor is “the both empirical and transcendental accomplishment of a species-subject that produces itself in history,” as Habermas takes it (*op. cit.*, p. 31). What I quarrel with is the notion that technically constituted humanity is, in any sense, a self-producing subject. As we’ll see in the next chapter, it is not humanity but *capital* that has a claim to such a status.

not attribute that teleology to the life experienced by natural beings. In Aristotle's formulation, nature is "a sort of origin and cause of being moved and being at rest in those beings in which it belongs."¹⁰⁸ As such, it is responsible for the way a natural being just is at motion and at rest; it is an "implanted urge to change."¹⁰⁹ Nature is an unsettling urge—whether to procreate or to grow, to fight or to sleep, to fly south for the winter or to live with others—not a plan. Of course, this does not prevent us from constantly interpreting the migrations of geese and the mating habits of elk as if they were technical activities.¹¹⁰ Likewise, we sometimes think of art as if it were a matter of technique, and, faced with art that doesn't wear technique on its sleeve, complain that "a child could do that." Marx goes further; "Milton produced *Paradise Lost* as a silkworm produces silk, as the activation of *his own* nature."¹¹¹ Art retains the quality of nature, of being an unsettling urge; like natural life, it just happens.

The life projected by the labor process, on the other hand, never "just happens." It is a known quantity, comprising a definite set of needs, all of which are familiar. We've already seen that, as far as Marx is concerned, human life is not actually like this, but here we are only concerned with life as it appears from the perspective of labor. From that perspective, life appears as something that can be anticipated, planned for, headed off, managed. The needs that labor seeks to fulfill are needs that have already been experienced; therefore, the life that labor seeks to make possible is a life that has already happened. *Tekhnē* is activity that strives to reproduce life, to make it possible for life to continue in exactly the same way that it has gone up to now.

¹⁰⁸ *Physics*, 192b21.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 192b19.

¹¹⁰ Luckily, the geese and elk are completely indifferent to our projections.

¹¹¹ RIPP, C1 1044

The labor process is therefore fundamentally conservative in its intentions. Despite its apparent concern with creating and transforming, it only seeks to make the alien over into the familiar, to appropriate what is strange and render it suitable for the continuation of life as we have known it. This may seem like an odd, or even wildly speculative claim from the perspectives of everyday experience and Marx scholarship alike. Don't we invent and develop our techniques precisely in order to change the world? Yes, but the change in question always has a negative character; we change the world in order to prevent it from changing on its own. We labor on the world in order to stabilize it, to render it predictable and comfortable, to get it under control.

And Marx repeatedly stresses this very point, for it is simply an elaboration of the process of *appropriation* that is a fundamental characteristic of the labor process, according to Marx. As he write in the *Grundrisse*, "All production is appropriation of nature."¹¹² As appropriation, labor makes the world ours, it overcomes nature's strangeness, its alien quality, to domesticate it as human property.¹¹³ As Elaine Scarry puts it in her work on human making, "it is part of the work of creating *to deprive the external world of the privilege of being inanimate*—of, in other words, its privilege of being irresponsible to its sentient inhabitants on the basis that it is itself nonsentient."¹¹⁴ Here "sentient" really means "human," and "inanimate" means "non-human." The labor process is the appropriation of the world to humanity, such that Marx's early romantic supposition about what it would be to produce "as human beings" is—on the basis of his own developed writings on labor—always already true

¹¹² G 87

¹¹³ "An appropriation which does not make something into property is a *contradictio in subjecto*" (G 88).

¹¹⁴ *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), p. 285.

about the perspective of labor: “Our productions would be so many mirrors, from which our essence [*Wesen*] shone back at us.”¹¹⁵

C. Towards a natural history of history

In the whole conception of history up to the present [...] the relation of man to nature is excluded from history, and hence the antithesis of nature and history is created.

The German Ideology
“1. Feuerbach” (Manuscript, 1845)¹¹⁶

1. Externality and Dysfunction

Of course, none of the above considerations changes the fact that we experience *tekhnē* as something that overwhelms us with the rapidity of its development. In its results, technology seems to be the tumult that renders us moderns homeless, bereft of the sheltering enclosure of traditions, of any meaningful constancy. Everything solid melts into air, and it seems that technology is the solvent. If, contra Arendt, “labor” and “work” are, in their intentions, equally concerned with mere reproduction, yet, as Arendt also notes, and our experience massively testifies, *tekhnē* is, in its effects, progressive, not conservative. But if the labor process’ own logic cannot account for the novelty of the produced situation, if labor is always caught by surprise when its own creations destabilize rather than stabilize life, what can account for this fact?

As Arendt notes, the things we make accrete, forming a world of artifacts that grows and changes.¹¹⁷ But *why*, precisely, do the products of labor accrete? This may seem like a naïve question, but it forces us to attend to the fact that the labor process, besides being a process of *appropriation*, is equally, for Marx, a process of *objectification*. This characterization of labor begins in 1844; “The product of labor is

¹¹⁵ “Notes on James Mill”, EW 278; translation modified.

¹¹⁶ MECW 5, p. 55.

¹¹⁷ Op. cit., pp 136ff, but also passim.

labor embodied and made material in an object, it is the objectification of labor.”¹¹⁸ It does not disappear with Marx’s youth, either, but continues right up through *Capital*.¹¹⁹ Labor can only appropriate the material of the world by externalizing our ideas about how that material ought to be formed. The actualization of our *Vorstellungen* is their placement outside of us, their embodiment in external objects.

Marx takes this explicit recognition from Hegel, but is critical of the way that Hegel does not fully embrace the objectification process. For Hegel, self-consciousness can never be satisfied in making precisely because the object is external, does not return into the inner sanctum of consciousness from which the *Vorstellung* went forth. This is an essential symptom of Hegel’s idealism, according to Marx, for “consciousness as mere consciousness is offended not by estranged objectivity, but by *objectivity as such*.”¹²⁰ Marx, by way of contrast, wants to affirm the externality of the product “as self-externalizing sensuousness accessible to light and to sensuous man,” and this means that objectification cannot “be taken in the sense of alienation, a flaw, a weakness, something which ought not to be.”¹²¹ Years later, he criticizes political economists for the same conflation of objectification—a necessary and affirmative condition for making—and alienation—an objectionable and remedial condition of making under capitalism. “The bourgeois economists are so cooped up within the notions belonging to a specific historic stage of social development that the necessity of the *objectification* of the powers of social labor appears to them as inseparable from

¹¹⁸ EPM, EW 324

¹¹⁹ Any one citation from *Capital* (or the *Grundrisse*, for that matter) would actually risk masking the ubiquity of the formulation. George Kline’s article, “The Myth of Marx’s Materialism” (in H. Dahm, T.J. Blakely, and G.L. Kline, eds., *Philosophical Sovietology*, [Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publ. Co., 1988], pp. 158-203.)—despite a number of serious errors in interpretation—includes an illuminating appendix (pp. 183-96) that provides an extensive survey of the use of *vergegenständlich* and related words in *Capital I*.

¹²⁰ EPM, EW 392

¹²¹ EPM, EW 399; on this point, my presentation largely agrees with Habermas’ (op. cit., pp. 32f).

the necessity of their *alienation vis-à-vis* living labor.”¹²² Whereas Hegel condemns objectification as if it were already alienation, the political economists sanctify alienation as if it were only objectification.

Obviously, the necessity of external objectification introduces into *tekhnē* the inescapable specter of frustration and failure, of dysfunctionality.¹²³ It means, for example, that, as a condition of the thing’s very usability, the actual use of the object of *tekhnē* cannot be assured. Because our needs require material objects for their satisfaction, those objects of use can fall out of use, can be taken from us in a million ways. There can be no guarantee that the object I make will be used according to my *Vorstellung*, even if I make it only for my own use. Purposiveness and use imply a separation between subject and object that is irreducible.¹²⁴

But in addition to this essential possibility of dysfunctionality, which we constantly strive to economize, objectification also undergirds the anarchic development of labor. Rather than obediently reproducing life, *tekhnē* is constantly throwing life into a new situation, forcing it to change and adapt to a world that is more and more populated by materialized *Vorstellungen*. Partly, this is simply due to the fact that *tekhnē* emanates from many sources, that your externalized intentions constitute a new and unexpected material fact for me, and so forth. But even if there

¹²² G 832

¹²³ The Frankfurt School of critical theory has done much to draw attention to the dysfunctionality of technical or instrumental activity. However, it seems to me that its leading representatives never got clear on *why* technical thinking fails. Thus, when Horkheimer, the supposed critic of instrumental rationality, attempts to explicate a non-instrumentalist materialism, he writes; “the reality which the materialist seeks to master for himself is the opposite of divine, and his effort is to direct it according to his will, rather than direct himself according to it” (“Materialism and Metaphysics,” *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, tr. Matthew J. O’Connell, *et al.*, (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), p. 19). This seems to me to be precisely the blindness to externality that pervades *tekhnē*. At the same time, Horkheimer *also* claims that materialism “maintains the irreducible tension between concept and object, and thus has a critical weapon of defense against the belief in the infinity of the mind” (*ibid.*, p. 28). He obviously sees no tension between these two statements of materialist belief and practice.

¹²⁴ This dysfunctionality of purposiveness can be seen in Aristotle’s discussion of natural slavery. Seeing purposiveness in the works of nature, he grants that even nature does not always attain its aim, precisely because of the materiality through which its aims are realized. Thus, for example, natural slaves cannot be recognized by their bodies, despite nature’s clear intent (*Politics* I.5 1254b25-32 and I.6 1255b1-3).

were only one technical being, one worker in an otherwise natural world, previously produced objects would still rebound upon the life-powers that initially defined the production process, establishing a feedback loop. As Elaine Scarry puts it, “In the attempt to understand making, attention cannot stop at the object (the coat, the poem), for *the object is only a fulcrum or lever across which the force of creation moves back onto the human site* and remakes the makers.”¹²⁵ In Marx’s own words, “Through this movement [the labor process] [man] acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature.”¹²⁶

The text where Marx is most explicit about the anarchic development of the labor process is *The German Ideology*. A long quote is necessary:

We must, among the presuppositionless Germans, begin by stating the first presupposition of all human existence, and thus also of all history, namely, the presupposition that humans must be in a position to live in order to be able to ‘make history’. But to life belongs, before everything, food and drink, housing, clothing and several other things. *The first historical act* is thus the production of the means of satisfaction of these needs, the production of material life itself, and indeed, it is a historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which still today, as for thousands of years, must be performed daily and hourly in order that humans may simply hold onto life. [...] The second [presupposition] is that even the first satisfied need, the action of satisfaction and the already acquired instrument of satisfaction, leads to new needs—and this production of new needs is *the first historical act*.¹²⁷

Human history, for Marx, is the history of the production of needs, and thus, of human powers. But this production of human life as historical, as ever changing, is an inadvertent but essential effect of the reproduction of life by means of *tekhnē*. The satisfaction of the needs of our life by labor and the alteration of that life, and thus its

¹²⁵ Scarry, op. cit., p. 307.

¹²⁶ C1 283, translation modified.

¹²⁷ MEW 3, p. 28, my emphasis.

needs, are so far identical that Marx calls them both “the first historical act.” This is not a slip of the pen, I maintain, but an essential point of his thinking.¹²⁸

This identity could certainly be articulated and elaborated upon in many directions. For one, the very fact that the food supply, for example, has been stabilized to an extent through agriculture means that the need for food is qualitatively altered. Farmers no longer need to cultivate and pass on a massive body of knowledge about the edibility, toxicity, etc., of the local flora; rather, they must attend to the growing conditions, diseases, etc., of a handful of crops. The sort of knowledge invested in, and the whole relationship to food is thereby radically changed. Raised to the power of all our life functions, this becomes Scarry’s point; “Sense organs, skin, and body tissue have themselves been recreated to experience themselves in terms of their own objectification.”¹²⁹ Additionally, the product of labor, although it is a response to one set of circumstances, will surely end up existing in a very different setting, and its interaction with that new setting will be novel, if for no other reason, because, as Marx puts it, “The need which consumption feels for the object is created by the perception of it.”¹³⁰

According to Aristotle, *tekhnē* is defined as such by the fact that the *arkhē*—the beginning and the ruler—of the activity is the form that is present in the mind of the artisan. As Marx shows, however, the sovereignty of this *arkhē* is limited at best. The product is *unruly*, it does not obey its *arkhē*. What is actually brought forth by labor is an-archic. Labor as *tekhnē* cannot itself recognize this anarchy, this history that it produces. At each moment, it responds to the world as a given material that it must

¹²⁸ Elster, failing to grasp this point, places a “(sic)” after the second “first” in his citation of this passage (op. cit., p. 71f).

¹²⁹ Scarry, op. cit., p. 255.

¹³⁰ G 92

try to appropriate. It can only repeat its dance.¹³¹ I believe this aspect of the labor process to be what Charles Scott refers to when he writes; “Technology is a way of bringing things forth that is oblivious to its bringing things forth. In its absorption with effectiveness, in achieving goals, a technological way of being is thoroughly out of touch with its own nontechnical dimension.”¹³² This nontechnical dimension of labor—what I would rather call the anarchism of *tekhnē* itself—is, for Marx, the production of history.¹³³ In the final subsections of this chapter, I want briefly to examine the intimate link between this human history rooted in labor, on the one hand, and nature, on the other, a link that Marx asserts numerous times but does not explicate.

2. *The Natural Origins of Labor*

Marx does not attempt to explain the origin of labor. He never speculates as to what causes may have given rise to *tekhnē* in the first place, except to say that it is “conditioned by [humans’] bodily organization.”¹³⁴ There is nothing in Marx’s corpus that corresponds to Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. However, there are numerous texts, harmonious with this claim about the human body, that gesture towards the origin of *tekhnē* in nature. Marx’s early claims about the unity of

¹³¹ This realization is implicit in Habermas’ statement; “No matter how far our power of technical control over nature is extended, nature retains a substantial core that does not reveal itself to us” (op. cit., p. 33). That Habermas nonetheless does *not* realize it will become clear below.

¹³² *On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Ethics and Politics*, (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press, 1996), p. 166.

¹³³ It is not uncommon for Marx to be read in exactly the opposite way, as saying that the historicity of our production is precisely what we can and do understand. Thus, Schlomo Avineri claims that Marx “always argues that the world is open to rational cognition because it is ultimately shaped by man himself and man can reach an adequate understanding of his historical activity (*The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 75). Despite Avineri’s assurance that Marx “always” says this, he cites no text whatsoever to support this reading. Similar readings can be found throughout the humanist Marxist literature of the middle years of the last century. The attribution of this classically humanist position to Marx can, to my knowledge, only base itself on Marx’s call for a history of technology in *Capital I*, where he appeals to Vico’s dictum that “human history differs from natural history in that we have made the former, but not the latter” (C1 493n4). But it is one thing to say this about the history already behind us; it is something else entirely to say, as Avineri does, that this transparency applies to our historical future as well.

¹³⁴ MEW 3, p.21.

knowledge rest on this basic continuity between nature and the human history brought forth by labor; “History itself is a *real* part of *natural history* and of nature’s becoming man.”¹³⁵ This continuity is further articulated in the later writings, where Marx is more particular about the role that nature plays in labor.

For starters, there is his citation in *Capital* of William Petty’s remark; “labor is the father of material wealth, the earth is its mother.”¹³⁶ This amounts to a relation of material dependence of labor upon nature, which relation Marx spells out in some detail in “The Labor Process.” Nature supplies every object and means of labor. The earth is “the universal object of human labor,”¹³⁷ humanity’s “original arsenal of means of labor,”¹³⁸ and “the *locus standi* and a ‘field of employment’ for [the worker’s] particular process.”¹³⁹ This relation of material dependence tells us nothing about the natural origin of labor, however, for it presupposes labor as an already constituted process that relates to nature as form to matter. In this sense, labor is the origin and cause of labor, in three out of four permutations of Aristotelian causation. Labor is the beginning of motion, the form or shape, and the *telos*. This classical determination is also the sense of Marx’s claim that “[n]ature is man’s *inorganic body*,”¹⁴⁰ i.e., that natural objects must be “appropriated as [labor’s] body,”¹⁴¹ “annexe[d] to [man’s] own bodily organs”¹⁴² in order for labor to take place.

However, when he repeats the same notion in his “Critique of the Gotha Program,” Marx adds a massively important complication; “Nature is just as much the

¹³⁵ EPM, EW 355. The text continues; “Natural science will in time subsume the science of man just as the science of man will subsume natural science: there will be *one* science. [...] Nature, as it comes into being in human history—in the act of creation of human society—is the *true* nature of man; hence nature as it comes into being through industry, though in an estranged form, is true *anthropological* nature.”

¹³⁶ C1 134

¹³⁷ C1 284, translation modified.

¹³⁸ C1 285, translation modified.

¹³⁹ C1 287, translation modified. Compare EPM; “Man’s first object—man—is nature” (EW 355).

¹⁴⁰ EPM, EW 328

¹⁴¹ C1 289, translation modified.

¹⁴² C1 285

source of use-values [...] as labor, *which is itself only the expression of a natural power*, human labor-power.¹⁴³ If labor and nature appear first as equal conjugal partners in the production of wealth—with the Aristotelian qualification that labor is the masculine, formative partner to nature’s material femininity—it is equally the case that the mother begat the father.

In one way, this is not really a significant difference, for it is merely an extension of the formal causality into nature itself. As Marx says, labor imitates nature; “When humanity engages in production, it can only proceed as nature itself does, i.e., it can only change the form of the materials.”¹⁴⁴ But, as in the “Critique of the Gotha Program,” Marx also emphasizes a more radical level of dependence, where labor appears to be *nothing but* nature itself. In labor, humanity “confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature. It sets in motion the natural forces that belong to its own body, its arms, legs, head, and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form useful to its own life.”¹⁴⁵ In other words, labor is just one force of nature—human being—acting on other forces of nature. Marx is here gesturing toward a “materialism” of labor that avoids the pseudo-materialism of reducing all causality to the efficient cause, as if this were any less formal than the final cause. Instead, Marx would have all of the permutations of form arise out of the self-oppositional forces of the material cause itself. “To say that man’s physical and mental life is linked to nature simply means that nature is linked to itself, for man is

¹⁴³ LPW 208; my emphasis.

¹⁴⁴ C1 133, translation modified.

¹⁴⁵ C1 283, translation modified.

part of nature.”¹⁴⁶ From “the identity of nature and man”¹⁴⁷ it follows that labor is nature at work on itself.¹⁴⁸

Since there is no room for an external cause in the scheme so far outlined, nature itself must have given rise to labor’s entry into history. This is the gist of Marx’s references to spontaneous generation in the “1844 Manuscripts” (“*Generatio aequivoca* is the only practical refutation of the theory of creation”¹⁴⁹) and *The German Ideology* (“the original men produced by *generatio aequivoca*”¹⁵⁰). It is also expressed in the language of political economy by James Mill, quoted in a footnote to *Capital*; “The earth’s spontaneous productions being in small quantity, quite independent of man, appear, as it were, to be furnished by Nature, in the same way as a small sum is given to a young man, in order to put him in a way of industry, and of making his fortune.”¹⁵¹ Non-human nature does not labor, and yet, labor unfolds from the non-labor of nature. Nature does not produce according to *Vorstellungen*, and yet it produces *Vorstellungen* and produces production according to them.

This coming to be of intentionality out of non-intentionality, of *tekhnē* out of *phusis*, of form out of matter, is perhaps impossible to grasp in the form of a concept; certainly, most who try seem, like Marx, to resort to contradictory statements or Zen *koan*-like verbal puzzles. Some, like biologist Richard Dawkins, simply displace intentionality into the non-intentional world, turning genes into selfish little technicians, operating the great fleshy machines they have built. Others, like Kant, take our inability to grasp the occurrence of purposiveness within purposelessness to be a condition of thought itself. It matters less, for current purposes, what the proper

¹⁴⁶ EPM, EW 328

¹⁴⁷ GI, MECW 5, p. 44n.

¹⁴⁸ Compare Habermas; “Marx [...] does not view nature under the category of another subject, but conversely the subject under the category of another nature” (op. cit., p. 32).

¹⁴⁹ EPM, EW 356

¹⁵⁰ GI, WEWCW 5, p. 40.

¹⁵¹ C1 284n1

solution to the difficulty is, than that the difficulty itself is not one that can be simply pushed back to the temporal origin of human (either species or individual) development. As a consequence of Marx's identity thesis, we must recognize that labor is constantly, at every moment, arising out of nature. Nature is not confined to the distant reaches of time or space untouched by *tekhnē*; the computer I'm typing on is just as much a part of nature as Marx's "Australian coral islands" or Feuerbach's cherry trees.¹⁵² My work of writing is just as much an eruption of *tekhnē* out of nature as was the first latrine garden.¹⁵³

3. *Promethean Anarchy*

It would be quite a monumental mystification, however, to go from this recognition that every element of labor is natural to the conclusion that, therefore, there is no difference between labor and nature, or between the products of labor and the products of nature. The expansion and intensification of *tekhnē* cannot be reduced romantically to a natural process. In proceeding as nature does, in using only natural forces and materials, labor also acts quite spectacularly against nature. Marx stresses this repeatedly, referring to the growth of *tekhnē* as "human mastery over the forces of nature, those of so-called nature as well as of humanity's own nature"¹⁵⁴ In labor,

¹⁵² GI, MECW 5, pp. 39f.

¹⁵³ I believe a similar recognition lies behind Aristotle's claim at *Physics* 193a3 that "it is laughable to attempt to show that *phusis* is." Although the *tekhnē* of the computer seems more obvious, it is always derivative, and thus always contains a trace of that from which it derives. In seeing *tekhnē*, we always already see *phusis* first—even when we need to be led back to that seeing from *tekhnē*. Therefore, Aristotle maintains that nature is known through itself, while *tekhnē* is known not through itself.

¹⁵⁴ G 488. One of the standard readings of this line—my disagreements with which are already becoming clear—is articulated by Andrzej Walicki thusly: Marx "understood self-control as primarily 'the determination and control of one's self-objectification.' He meant by this, above all, the establishment of rational, conscious control over economic forces, conscious mastery over human collective fate, the replacement of 'blind, natural' necessities by free, teleological activity consonant with [the] human essence" (*Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom: The Rise and Fall of the Communist Utopia*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 19). Walicki claims to take the first embedded quote from George Brenkert, but when one turns to Brenkert's book, one comes away with a very different notion of freedom, one much closer to my own reading. Brenkert writes; "Self-determination, then, occurs when a

humanity “subjects the play of [nature’s] forces to its own dominion.”¹⁵⁵ This dominion of the human over the natural is also apparently, as earlier parts of this chapter have shown, the dominion of the human species-being over individual human bodies,¹⁵⁶ and the dominion of ideas over activity. All of these formulae are consequent upon the definition of labor as the appropriation of material to a *Vorstellung*.

Such technological mastery of the world is frequently referred to as Prometheism, and Marx is just as frequently held up as a prominent Promethean.¹⁵⁷ After all, he seems to embrace both the human technological dominion of nature and the rejection of any divine rule.¹⁵⁸ This attribution gains textual reinforcement from Marx’s dissertation, where he claims that “Prometheus is the most eminent saint and martyr in the philosophical calendar.”¹⁵⁹ However, there are some troublesome details of the actual myth of Prometheus that get overlooked in its “Promethean” reading. The central event of the myth, after all, is the escape of the gods’ creations from their control. Fire, the arts of Hephaestus, and Prometheus himself rebel against Zeus, the

person essentially directs and controls the form his self-objectification takes.” Note the difference between controlling one’s self-objectification (Walicki) and controlling the *form* of that objectification (Brenkert). Brenkert goes on to directly contravene Walicki’s notion of the domination of nature; “Marx does *not* insist that some ‘total mastery of nature’ is necessary for freedom, or self-determination” (*Marx’s Ethics of Freedom*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), pp. 92, 98). I will return to these issues directly below, and again in Chapter Five.

¹⁵⁵ C1 283; translation modified. Where I have inserted “nature’s” in place of Marx’s “its”, the actual antecedent is ambiguous; “it” could also refer to humanity’s “own nature”. Nonetheless, since human nature is as natural as any other part of nature, the ambiguity doesn’t seem to be of much moment.

¹⁵⁶ Compare this striking passage from TSV; “although the first development of the capacities of the *human* species takes place at the cost of the majority of human individuals and whole human classes, in the end it breaks through this contradiction and coincides with the development of the individual; the higher development of individuality is thus only achieved by a historical process during which individuals are sacrificed, for the interests of the species in the human kingdom, as in the animal and plant kingdoms, always assert themselves at the costs of the interests of the individuals, because these interests of the species coincide with the interests of *certain individuals*, and it is this coincidence which constitutes the strength of these privileged individuals” (MECW 31, pp. 347f).

¹⁵⁷ For example, Gavin Kitching claims that, “at the center of [Marx’s] philosophical conception of human beings as Promethean creators is the concept of labor power as self-generating activity” (*Karl Marx and the Philosophy of Praxis*, (London & New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 110).

¹⁵⁸ In Hyppolite, this reading goes beyond getting rid of the gods to installing ourselves as gods in their place. Thus, he writes that communism “is the Idea in actuality, the divinization of man, *authentic man*, fully aware that he is the one who *makes his own history*” (*Studies on Marx and Hegel*, tr. John O’Neill, (New York & London: Basic Books, 1969), p. 104).

¹⁵⁹ MECW 1, p. 31.

father of the gods. And it is precisely this aspect of rebellion that Marx enshrines in his dissertation.¹⁶⁰ Prometheus does not deny the gods' existence or their power to create; he rather affirms that existence and power in order to also affirm the necessity that their own creations will rebel against them. But if even the gods' creations escape their control and turn against them, why would nature or "man" have better luck?

All creation—natural or human—is, in the broadly Aristotelian strain of ontology we have been dealing with, the communication of a form to some new matter. On the one hand, this is the appropriation of the matter to the form; on the other, it is the objectification or externalization of the form into the matter. In the natural version of this process, as represented in reproduction, the form is not present beforehand as a *Vorstellung*—as it is in labor—but is simply the embodied form of the parent, distilled into self-replicating protein sequences. In other words, natural forms are stable or self-propagating, but not on purpose. The child has the same form as the parents, but not because the parents—the relevant embodiments of nature—anticipate the functioning of the offspring; nature does not anticipate at all.

Because it does not anticipate, nature is not perturbed by the mutations and other destabilizations that inevitably and regularly crop up. Such mutations are inevitable because natural production is just as much a process of objectification as is labor; the form has to go outside itself in order to replicate itself, and matter can be recalcitrant and unpredictable. Indeed, for Hegel, this necessity for natural forms to externalize themselves was so prominent that he called externality the essence of nature. Marx takes up this point in the "1844 Manuscripts" in order to differentiate himself from Hegel. "The abstract thinker recognizes that *sensuousness* is the essence

¹⁶⁰ "Philosophy makes no secret of it. The confession of Prometheus: 'haplō logō, tous pantas ekhthairō theous', ['I say simply, I am an enemy of all the gods'] is its own confession" (MECW 1, p. 30; translation modified).

of nature, *externality* in opposition to thought which moves *within itself*. But at the same time he expresses this opposition in such a way that this *externality of nature*, its *opposition* to thought, is its *defect*, that, insofar as it is differentiated from abstraction, it is a defective essence.”¹⁶¹ Natural production embraces its externality; it doesn’t care that its creations live their own lives, mutating into immense variation.

Nonetheless, one of these mutations—*tekhnē*—*does* care. Labor strives to ensure that its productions are simply reproductions of the *vorstellende* form, that they function in the intended manner. Nature has thus produced a power both far more conservative and far more radical than itself. Labor, reducible as it is to natural forces acting on natural materials, is the auto-deconstruction of nature itself. Its mode of existence is to assimilate nature, its mother, to itself by imposing its concern, its anticipation, on an uncaring nature. But labor can do so only by way of *externalization*, the same aspect of natural production that gives rise to mutations, including *tekhnē* itself. It is thus caught in a state of perpetual dissatisfaction; the more it creates, the more its creations run amok, frustrating its plans.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ EPM, EW 400; translation modified.

¹⁶² This is where it becomes clear that Habermas, despite grasping so much of Marx’s critique of Hegel, does not really understand that to which he himself has drawn attention. Thus, despite his insight that technical labor “cannot eradicate the autonomy of nature and the remainder of complete otherness that is lodged in its facticity” (op. cit., p. 33), he goes on to accuse Marx of going astray by identifying *Aufheben* “with the appropriation of essential powers that have been externalized in working on material” (44f). But if the complete otherness of nature cannot be eliminated, then there can never be an appropriation of the external that is not itself a further externalization. When he goes on to claim that “Marx reduces the process of reflection to the level of instrumental action” (44), Habermas admits that it is *he* who has lapsed into a positivist understanding of labor and of nature, for it is positivism that acts as if the instrumentality of nature leaves no “remainder of complete otherness.” Indeed, as Axel Honneth points out, for Habermas, “positivism *first* lays itself open to criticism when it is extended to social reality” (op. cit., p. 41; my emphasis). In other words, Habermas accepts positivism, so long as it knows its place. This position—positivism within the limits of nature alone—is equally characteristic of Marcuse, as revealed in his claim that, “The liberating force of technology—the instrumentalization of things—turns into a fetter of liberation; the instrumentalization of man” (*One Dimensional Man*, (London: Sphere Books, 1968), p. 131). From the standpoint of Marx’s texts, this all seems like a shell game, in which Marx’s non-positivist diagnosis of *tekhnē* is surreptitiously replaced by a positivist endorsement of *tekhnē* vis-à-vis nature, by means of which a fictitious positivism is then attributed to all of Marx’s writings. All of which makes me want to throw up my hands and scream; “The was *no positivism in here* before you critical theorists showed up, so keep your positivism to yourselves!” I’ll return to the Frankfurt School’s relation to Marx in Chapter Four.

There is a passage from Andrew Ure's *Philosophy of Manufacture*, cited by Engels, and certainly known also to Marx, that, read within this context of Marx's writings, wonderfully reveals the "Promethean" attitude of labor in all its complex tensions. Ure relates the heroic tale of the invention of the automatic mule. Conflict between mule-spinners and manufacturers over wages led the manufacturers to seek a remedy from a machine-shop owner.

He produced, in the course of a few months, a machine apparently instinct with the thought, feeling and tact of the experienced workman—which even in its infancy displayed a new principle of regulation, ready in its mature state to fulfill the functions of a finished spinner. Thus the Iron Man, as the operatives fitly call it, sprang out of the hands of our modern Prometheus at the bidding of Minerva—a creation destined to restore order among the industrious classes, and to confirm to Great Britain the empire of art.¹⁶³

Here the intention of *tekhnē* to restore order through the externalization of human functions is openly stated. The empire of art is established in the Iron Man. But, as we've seen, because the establishment of this intention is only possible through externalization, the Iron Man is liable to unanticipated uses. Marx shows us that the introduction of the Iron Man, in all its various guises, actually does the opposite of restore order among the industrious classes. The march of the Iron Man over the face of the globe brings, close on its heels, greater and greater disorder, the "continual transformation of production, the uninterrupted convulsion of all social conditions, a perpetual motion and uncertainty."¹⁶⁴ The nascent industrialist, Ure's Prometheus, "cannot exist without continually revolutionizing the means of production, hence the relations of production, and therefore social relations as a whole."¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Quoted in Engels, *The Condition of the Working-Class in England*, MECW 4, p. 511.

¹⁶⁴ "Manifesto", LPW 4

¹⁶⁵ "Manifesto", LPW 4; translation modified.

Returning to a much earlier iteration of the Prometheus myth, a surprising continuity emerges. In the *Protagorus*, Plato has the titular sophist recite the story. According to Protagorus, it is Prometheus' brother Epimetheus ("hind-sight") who acts technically, giving out powers to all terrestrial creatures with an eye to preservation. That is, Epimetheus acts in an effort to make the mortals as near to immortal as possible, with the experienced immortality of the gods set in his mind as the model. But at the end of his effort to appropriate mortality to the divine order, humans remained unequipped. Prometheus, "in perplexity," "stole from Hephaestus and Athena wisdom in the arts, along with fire—for without fire there was no means for anyone to possess or use art itself—and so gave them to man."¹⁶⁶ If one jumps ahead to Aristotle's discussion of *tekhnē* in the *Metaphysics*, one finds that the action of the master technician, in whose soul the form of the product resides, is mediated by the labor of the manual workers, who act without knowing, "as fire burns."¹⁶⁷ Leaping ahead again, Marx calls labor "the living, form-giving fire; it is the transitoriness of things, their temporality, as their formation by living time."¹⁶⁸

In each case, fire is necessary for the projections of technical knowledge to seize hold of the external world and shape it in accordance with the known form. But fire is a dangerous and unpredictable element. It is essentially the passing away of what has form. It is the entropic dispersal that subtends and exceeds every gathering into order. Fire conditions the possibility of *tekhnē*, but it also marks the eternal necessity that the technical project must fail to achieve its aim, must produce more disorder than order. Technical production requires what it cannot acknowledge, and what it cannot

¹⁶⁶ 321c-d.

¹⁶⁷ 981b1-7.

¹⁶⁸ G 361

acknowledge constitutes its productivity as such, its bringing forth into the world, not the divine order, but the historical disorder.

This chapter has been an investigation of the viewpoint of concrete labor, as Marx identifies it, an investigation of both what can be and what cannot be seen from that viewpoint. I believe I has shown, among other things, that Marx's writings do not themselves occupy, endorse, or represent that viewpoint, so much as they scrutinize it from outside, probing the limits of its field of vision. These limits show themselves in the way the anarchic history of humanity arises from labor's "structure of activity"¹⁶⁹ quite against its wishes. I want now to turn from the matrix of that history to its result, the world of labor in its current configuration. This entails returning to our point of departure, in Chapter Seven of *Capital*. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Marx's discussion of labor in Chapter Seven is divided into two parts. The treatment of the concrete labor process, in the first part, has been my focal point up to now. In the next chapter, I will turn to the second part of Marx's discussion, the labor process under capitalism, which Marx calls the valorization process.

¹⁶⁹ Scarry, op. cit., p. 257.

Two

Abstract Labor: The Production of Capital

Labor as the foundation of value is not any particular labor, with particular qualities.

“Theories of Surplus Value”
“Disintegration of the Ricardian School” (Manuscript, 1863)¹

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx writes; “It is easy to understand how labor can increase use-value; the difficulty is, how it can create exchange-values greater than those with which it began.”² Labor’s creation of use-values was the subject of the previous chapter. Whatever difficulties this creation ends up presenting, Marx is right that they are not difficulties of understanding how it is that labor makes material into a useful thing. *Tekhnē* makes sense to us; so much so that its plan-execute-achieve logic is the very paradigm of agency. That Marx is also correct in the conjoined judgment may be vouched by the fact that most economists since Marx—including many “Marxist” economists—have denied that labor produces value at all, or have not even bothered to deny it because they have considered it to be such an absurd proposition. It is a self-proclaimed Marxist who declared that “the errors in the labor theory of value are Ptolemaic.”³

Why should labor’s production of value be so difficult to grasp that many learned economists would deny that there is anything there to grasp at all? Why has this aspect of Marx’s writings left a legacy of so much hand-wringing and head-scratching? While no one factor can account for all of the problems here, I believe a

¹ MECW 32, pp. 325f.

² G 317f

³ John Roemer, “Should Marxists Be Interested in Exploitation?” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 14:1, Winter 1985, p. 65. This essay is also reprinted in John Roemer, ed., *Foundations of Analytical Marxism*, vol. 1, The International Library of Critical Writings in Economics, vol. 36, ed. Mark Blaug, (Aldershot, UK: Elgar Publishing Ltd., 1994).

significant amount of trouble has been caused by a general dearth of attention to the fundamental conceptual difference between the labor that produces useful things and the labor that produces value. The first is the concrete labor that occupied the previous chapter; the second is “equal human labor, the expenditure of identical human labor-power,” i.e., *abstract labor*.⁴ While many writers have been drawn to Marx’s comments about the concrete labor process, there are only a handful of works that focus specifically on abstract labor in its difference from concrete labor.⁵ This is despite Marx’s stated opinion that the distinction is “crucial to an understanding of political economy,”⁶ and is one of “the best points” of *Capital*.⁷

An inquiry into abstract labor is an inquiry into the productivity of capital. At bottom, the difficulties that beset attempts to understand how abstract labor produces value resolve themselves into the difficulty of understanding how capital—which is not identical with any individual or group—can be the most formidable agent of modernity, with its own aims and its own means of achieving them. This collective actor—this “animated monster”⁸—has displaced (and continues to displace) the Promethean technician from the stage of history’s production. In order to understand capital’s productivity—its logic, its genealogy and its trajectory—I will trace Marx’s own discussion, in *Capital*, of the abstraction of labor and of its subsumption under the capital-form.

⁴ C1 129

⁵ These few are: V. Afanasyev, A. Galchinski, and V. Lantsov, *Karl Marx’s Great Discovery: The Dual-Nature-of-Labour Doctrine: Its Methodological Role*, tr. Yuri Sdobnikov, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1986); Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993); I. I. Rubin, *Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value*, (Detroit: Black and Red, 1972); Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit: Zur Theorie des gesellschaftlichen Synthesis*, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970); and the various works of Christopher Arthur, Patrick Murray, and Geert Reuten.

⁶ C1 132

⁷ Marx to Engels, August 27, 1867.

⁸ C1 302

The first step on this path (Part A) is to differentiate between two sorts of abstraction, mental and social abstraction. Abstract labor is not just an abstraction of thought, but a social abstraction, a feature of how we relate to one another. Establishing this will be tantamount to explaining how it is that abstract labor produces exchangeable value. On Marx's own account, however, this is far from sufficient, for exchangeable value is only a superficial appearance of capital; understanding the production and exchange of commodities is still far short of understanding the production of capital. In order to make the leap from exchange-value to capital, it will be necessary to again differentiate two modes of social abstraction. From the social abstraction of the marketplace, we must proceed (in Part B) to the social abstractions proper to capitalist production. The social abstractions inherent in production are theorized by Marx as the subsumption of labor under capital, and it is here that we will encounter capital as a novel form of productivity, with a very different logic from the technical logic of concrete labor.

This logic will be our exclusive concern in the final part of this chapter. Capital does not anticipate purposes as *tekhnē* does; it is precisely this open-endedness that allows capital to subordinate labor, for it affords capital a flexibility and adaptability that concrete labor lacks. Moreover, capital's abstraction from any particular purpose overcomes the contradictions inherent in labor's attempt to deny externality, examined in the previous chapter. Therefore, capital's productivity seems to more successfully acknowledge its own materiality. However, Marx is quite clear that capital also fails in its own way to come to terms with matter, for it economizes everything *except* its own material basis—the human laborers and the earth—which it squanders heedlessly. This dead end in the logic of capital points toward the need for a third form of

productivity, beyond both labor and capital. Marx's attempt to answer this need will occupy the remainder of this dissertation.

A. The two-fold form of labor

It is not sufficient to reduce the commodity to 'labor';
labor must be broken down into its two-fold form...

"Results of the Immediate Process of Production"
(Manuscript, 1863/66)⁹

1. The Power of Abstraction

As Geert Reuten has noted, "interpreting the types of abstractions that Marx uses is crucial to the examination of his value theory."¹⁰ The first task, therefore, is to get clear on Marx's own uses of abstraction. Marx uses the term "abstraction," primarily, to name the essential property of concepts, or the power whereby thinking produces such concepts. Thought, as compared to concrete reality, is always abstract. The particularity that characterizes everything material is precisely what is disregarded by thought, in order that the latter may grasp something common. We are on classical footing here; within the broadly Aristotelian ontology that Marx shares, thought grasps form without matter. In this vein, Marx writes that socially uniform labor "is an abstraction, like all human thought, and social relations only exist among human beings to the extent that they think, and possess this power of abstraction from sensuous individuality and contingency."¹¹ Therefore, as the Preface to *Capital* states, in the study of social forms, the "power of abstraction must replace" the

⁹ C1 992

¹⁰ "The Difficult Labor of a Theory of Social Value: Metaphors and Systematic Dialectics at the Beginning of Marx's *Capital*", in *Marx's Method in Capital: A Reexamination*, ed. Fred Moseley, (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993), p. 90.

¹¹ MECW 30, p. 232.

mechanical and chemical implements used in physical investigations.¹² This power of abstraction is again simply the power of thought to disregard “individuality and contingency,” i.e., matter.¹³

However, the power of thought to abstract does not guarantee that thought will abstract properly. Rather than disregard the inessential or the contingent, thought might disregard the essential or the necessary. When it does so, it is just as much a power of abstraction, even if it abstracts from what it ought not. This circumstance gives rise to the ambiguity whereby Marx uses “abstraction” to name both the virtue of the power of thought and the abuse of the same power.¹⁴ Readers of Marx are probably most familiar with the latter, for there are numerous well-known texts where Marx castigates economists and critical critics for their abstractness.¹⁵ But he also clearly thought of the abstractness of his own presentation of value, e.g., as a virtue.¹⁶ Thus, he criticizes Ricardo precisely for “a lack of the power of abstraction.”¹⁷ He criticizes others more harshly; the text I quoted above—about the abstraction characteristic of all human thought and social relations—continues:

The kind of political economist who attacks the determination of value by labor time on the grounds that the work performed by 2 individuals during the same time is not absolutely equal [...] doesn't even yet know what distinguishes human social relations from relations among

¹² C1 90, translation modified.

¹³ Compare Althusser's “Introduction to *Capital* Volume One”: “These concepts are concepts, i.e. *abstract* notions. First difficulty of the theory: to get used to the practice of *abstraction*. This apprenticeship, for it really is an apprenticeship (comparable to the apprenticeship in any other practice, e.g. as a locksmith), is primarily provided, in our education system, by mathematics and philosophy” (*Lenin and Philosophy*, pp. 75f).

¹⁴ What follows is in direct disagreement with Althusser's claim that, in response to the questions: “Is every abstraction as such the scientific concept of its object? Surely there are ideological abstractions and scientific abstractions, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ abstractions?” Marx's texts only give us: “Silence” (*Reading Capital*, pp. 88f).

¹⁵ See, e.g., EPM, where political economy “grasps the *material* process of private property [...] in general, abstract formulae” (EW 322), and “regards labor abstractly as a thing” (EW 293).

¹⁶ A judgment that many take issue with. Anthony Brewer's *A Guide to Marx's Capital*, for example, opens with an apology for both the difficulty of Marx's Hegelian style of writing and the “more substantial problem” that “the early parts of *Capital* seem very abstract” (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984), p. 21.

¹⁷ MEGA² II.3.3, p. 840.

animals. He is a beast.¹⁸

Hence, one can see that abstraction, as a power of thought, can be used well or ill, and the latter either through misapplication or insufficient application. Some—e.g., empiricists—abstract from the wrong things. This gives rise to empty or sterile abstractions, abstractions that don't reveal what's actually going on. Others—e.g., Ricardo—are insufficiently abstract.¹⁹ Obviously, these two failings are hard to sort out in many cases, but the real issue is not how to differentiate improper from insufficient abstraction, but rather, how to differentiate proper from improper and sufficient from insufficient abstraction. In other words, whence comes the *measure* of our mental abstractions?

The answer can only reside in the opening up of the real. A concept is properly abstract when it reveals that the world itself disregards precisely what the concept disregards. That our concepts might actually make our world intelligible requires that our world itself, in its processes and internal relations, disregard or abstract from certain aspects or elements of itself. Since the world in question here is the social world of modernity, we can say that Marx's conceptual abstractions claim, as their warrant, processes of *social abstraction*, i.e., processes wherein certain social mechanisms or relations, in the course of their functioning, disregard or ignore some aspects of the concrete totality and attend only to some others.²⁰ That this reference to

¹⁸ MECW 30, p. 232.

¹⁹ For further discussion of the virtues and vices of thought abstraction, see Murray, *Marx's Theory of Scientific Knowledge*, op. cit., Ch. 10, pp. 121-9. Murray's language differs from mine, but his discussion is helpful.

²⁰ Murray calls this "practical abstraction;" Reuten uses "abstraction in practice" or "actual abstraction" (see "The Interconnection of Systematic Dialectics and Historical Materialism," *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory*, 7, Winter 2000, pp.137-66). Aboo Aumeeruddy and Ramon Tortajada differentiate "real abstraction" from "thought or reasoned abstraction," though they are not as careful with the distinction as either Reuten or Murray (see "Reading Marx on Value: A Note on the Basic Texts," in *Value: The Representation of Labour in Capitalism*, ed. Diane Elson, (London & Atlantic Highlands, NJ: CSE Books & Humanities Press, 1979), pp. 5ff). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri also use "real abstraction" in their latest book (*Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, (New York: Penguin,

social abstraction exists in Marx can be indicated by his statement in the *Grundrisse* that “individuals are now ruled by abstractions,” but that these abstractions are “nothing more than the theoretical expression of those material relations which are their master.”²¹ The abstractions are the abstractions “of the social relations of production,” as Marx puts it in *The Poverty of Philosophy*.²² Abstraction belongs to the social relations, is proper to them.²³

2. Locating the Abstraction of Labor

This recognition that abstraction can take place in social life itself is crucial for any understanding of what Marx means by “abstract labor,” and how abstract labor differs from concrete labor. Unfortunately, the notion that conceptual abstractions might merely express effective social abstractions is foreign to the empiricist methodology of the mainstream of contemporary social science. Within empiricism, the only question is whether our abstractions help us predict concrete phenomena; to

2004)). My own reasons for preferring “social abstraction” ought to become clear in the course of what follows.

²¹ G 164; translation modified. Compare Murray, “Enlightenment Roots of Habermas’ Critique of Marx,” *op. cit.*, p. 13; “Marx and Hegel agree that in modern society people come to be dominated by their own abstractions [...]. But Marx’s insight cuts deeper than correlation. On Marx’s diagnosis the dominance of abstractions in bourgeois society is the necessary expression of the cleft in the capital-relation, that is, the dominance of the capitalist class over the class of wage-laborers.”

²² PP 119; my emphasis.

²³ Humanity, as is was elaborated in the last chapter, might provide an example of this sort of social abstraction. In the “Theses on Feuerbach”, Marx had argued that “the human essence is no abstraction inherent in the single individual. In its actuality, it is the ensemble of social relations” (MECW 5, p. 7; translation modified). This statement preserves his early, entirely pejorative use of “abstraction,” but it expresses the same notion as the passage from the *Grundrisse* cited in Chapter One, wherein Marx argues that the fact of production for exchange demonstrates that each individual involved “reaches beyond their own particular need, etc., as a *human being*, and that they relate to one another as human beings; that their common species-being is recognized by all” (G 243; translation modified). As the previous chapter elaborated, humanity comes into being through the relations established by technical production; humanity is actually nothing other than those relations. The *idea* of humanity, of a human nature or essence, is epistemically and ontologically posterior to and dependent upon the ensemble of social relations. Where I do not produce for you, and you do not produce for me, or where our needs have not otherwise been brought into communication, the notion that we are nonetheless united by our common humanity is nothing more than an “abstraction,” a fiction, an idea that reveals nothing and obscures much. On the other hand, when our needs and functions are completely intertwined in the material products of our labor, the idea of our common humanity, though it is still abstract insofar as it is an idea, is nonetheless an abstraction proper to the effective abstractness of the social relations. It discloses the effective relations among us.

claim that social processes themselves abstract from—that is, disregard—aspects of the concrete is, on the empiricist account, to unreasonably ontologize what can only be an epistemological question. Empiricist lenses, therefore, cannot but find confusion everywhere in Marx's discussion of abstract labor.²⁴ And, indeed, certain difficulties in understanding abstract labor can serve as a reliable litmus test for empiricist tendencies in Marxologists. I think it will be worthwhile to deal with one of these difficulties now, before embarking on a positive elaboration of abstract labor in the next section.

Marx famously claims that the magnitude of the value of any commodity is determined solely by the amount of abstract labor necessary for its production.²⁵ G. A. Cohen has argued that Marxist discussions of this labor theory of value are fundamentally confused because the “Marxist position” on labor's value-formative power is actually a mish-mash of two contradictory positions: the “strict doctrine” (the Ricardian labor theory of value), and the “popular doctrine” (“labor creates all value”).²⁶ According to Cohen, the sense of “labor creates all value” is that the magnitude of a commodity's value is determined by the quantity of labor spent on it, or “embodied’ in it,” to cite the locution from Marx that Cohen treats as the origin of the popular doctrine.²⁷ The labor theory of value, on the other hand, says that the magnitude of a commodity's value is determined by “the socially necessary labor-time required for its reproduction;”²⁸ that is, not by the labor-time *actually* spent on it when

²⁴ See James Farr, “Marx's Laws,” *Political Studies*, 34, 1986, pp. 202-22, for Marx's rejection of the empiricist notion of causality.

²⁵ See C1 128f.

²⁶ “The Labor Theory of Value and the Concept of Exploitation,” in *History, Labour, and Freedom: Themes from Marx*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988). An earlier version of this essay appeared in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 8:4, Summer 1979, pp. 338-60, and is reproduced in John Roemer, ed., *Foundations of Analytical Marxism*, vol. 1, *The International Library of Critical Writings in Economics*, ed. Mark Blaug, (Aldershot, UK: Elgar Publishing Ltd., 1994).

²⁷ See Cohen, *op. cit.*, pp 215f.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 216. Cohen is quoting Marx; see C3 238.

it was created, but by the labor-time necessary to produce it now, when it is being evaluated in the market. Value is the measure of anticipated labor, not actually performed labor.²⁹ Therefore, the labor theory of value contradicts the claim that labor creates value. The labor theory of value, according to Cohen, attempts to explain—that is, predict—the magnitude of value, but it does not posit any “creator of value.”³⁰

Cohen’s diagnosis of confusion only makes sense, however, if both “doctrines” are understood along empiricist lines. The strict doctrine, accordingly, predicts the equilibrium prices of commodities on the basis of the labor-time necessary, given current norms of productivity, to reproduce the commodities in question. The popular doctrine, on the other hand, claims that the same equilibrium prices measure the labor-time actually spent on the production of the commodities. Neither “doctrine,” so construed, succeeds very well in predicting equilibrium prices, and neither “doctrine” has anything to do with any social abstraction of labor, whatever that might be.

Thus, considering first the popular doctrine, Cohen takes Marx’s phrases—“embodied or congealed labor,” “definite quantities of congealed labor time,” “the amount of labor time incorporated in products,” “the value-creating substance,” etc.—to be concrete descriptors of part of the process of production.³¹ At the same time that an auto-worker is fastening bolts with a power-wrench, according to Cohen’s construal of the popular doctrine, she is also incrementally creating the value of the car she

²⁹ Despite all my differences with Cohen, I believe this is an absolutely fundamental insight, to which I will return below. It refutes the argument, going back to Böhm-Bawerk, that Marx’s theory of value cannot account for the exchange of the “gifts of nature,” on which no labor has been expended (*Karl Marx and the Close of his System: A Critique*, ed. Paul Sweezy, (London: Merlin Books, 1975), p. 73). The question of value, however, is not: How much actual labor did it take to make this thing? Rather, it is: How much labor would it take to replace this thing? Much traditional Marxism fails just as badly as Böhm-Bawerk to see the distinction; see, for example, the circuitous attempts to refute Böhm-Bawerk on other grounds in Geoffrey Kay’s, “Why Labour is the Starting Point of Capital,” in *Value: The Representation of Labour in Capitalism*, ed. Diane Elson, (London & Atlantic Highlands, NJ: CSE Books & Humanities Press, 1979), pp. 48ff.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

³¹ All of these phrases are taken from Cohen, *ibid.*, pp. 215-222; all of them are taken by him directly from C1.

works on. Her labor flows into the car at a determinate rate, and remains there, as value. To Cohen, Marx's language of materialization, etc., signifies "the amount of labor which is *actually* spent on a *particular* product."³²

But, as a translation of Marx, this is far off the mark. The product of labor that is exchanged is very different from the product of labor that is used. As Marx writes, "It is no longer a table or a house or yarn or any other useful thing. All its sensuous characteristics are extinguished. Nor is it any longer the product of the joiner's labor or the builder's labor or the spinner's labor or of any other determinate productive labor."³³ The product, insofar as it has exchange-value, is not, as Cohen would have it, a "particular product" at all, and is not the product of any particular or actual labor. In his manuscripts for *Capital*, he is especially blunt; "If we compare the valorization process with the labor process, the distinction is strikingly apparent between *actual labor*, which produces use value, and *the form of this labor* which appears as the element of the exchange value, as the activity that creates exchange value."³⁴ By trying to translate the abstract form of labor into an empirical phenomenon, Cohen simply does away with it, replacing it with actual, concrete labor.³⁵

The "strict doctrine" fares no better on an empiricist reading. Jon Elster has argued that the attempt to calculate values on the basis of necessary labor-time becomes impossible as soon as one recognizes that different people's labor-times are not interchangeable, that natural talents and specialized education make any

³² Ibid. p. 217, but also *passim*; my emphasis.

³³ C1 128, translation modified.

³⁴ MECW 30, p. 90; my emphasis.

³⁵ Terrell Carver similarly runs abstract and concrete labor together when he writes; "While human labor (as a form of energy) can be expended on material things over time to produce changes in their properties, a theory that labor is 'materialized' in the 'material bodies' of commodities in some way [...] seems to me to confuse energy with matter or with its properties" (*Postmodern Marx*, op. cit., p. 79). Concrete labor changes the properties of material things. Exchangeable commodities represent "materialized" abstract labor. But abstract labor (Carver's form of energy) does *not* change the properties of things. Naturalism must not be allowed to seep into the analysis of value, for there is nothing natural about the exchangeability of things.

comparison of labor-times meaningless. When Marx disregards the specifics of labor, he produces an abstraction that cannot be operationalized.³⁶ Worse than being merely a poor predictor of equilibrium prices, labor-time cannot even be measured in such a way as to test whether or not it predicts exchange-values.³⁷ As with Cohen's criticism, this argument rests on a conviction that, in abstract labor, Marx has constructed a poor concept, a metaphysical conceit. Both Cohen and Elster refuse to follow Marx down this path. Cohen attempts to translate abstract labor back into an empirical concept; Elster just denies that such a translation is possible.

I agree with Elster that the translation is not possible, but I further deny that it is necessary or desirable. Abstract labor is not abstract because it is a concept, but because it is a social process of abstraction.³⁸ In fact, it is *concrete* labor that is a purely conceptual abstraction. Perhaps in order to minimize confusion, Marx removed the phrase, "in its abstract moments," from his initial characterization of the labor process in the second edition of *Capital*,³⁹ but, later in Chapter Seven, he calls his analysis of concrete labor a presentation of "its simple and abstract moments,"⁴⁰ and his manuscripts from the 1860s characterize the perspective of concrete labor as "totally abstract."⁴¹ Noting this fact, Patrick Murray writes; "Marx develops two concepts of labor in *Capital*: an *abstract concept* of labor and a concept of *abstract*

³⁶ *Making Sense of Marx*, op. cit., pp. 130f.

³⁷ Compare this to Gavin Kitching's obvious incredulity at the fact that "*in the real world it is impossible to measure 'values' in Marx's sense*" (*Karl Marx and the Philosophy of Praxis*, (London & New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 90; his emphasis). This *is* meant as a criticism.

³⁸ A similar claim is made by those, such as James Farr and Scott Meikle, who see in Marx an Aristotelian essentialist. Thus, Farr writes that labor-power and surplus value are "essences, those 'true and intrinsic' powers and social relations, which were not observable as such" (op. cit., p. 205). I agree that Marx takes much from Aristotle, but I tend to part ways with these commentators on their readings of Aristotle. "Essence", for example, is a horribly confusing word, which does little to explicate Aristotle's notion of form, and only muddies the water more when it is thrown around in Marxology without extreme care (it is as tendentious a translation of the German *Wesen* as it is of the Greek *to ti ēn einai*).

³⁹ See Chapter One, p. 2n8.

⁴⁰ C1 290

⁴¹ MECW 30, p. 97f; see also G 304.

labor."⁴² Taking into account the fact that "abstract labor" is *also* itself an abstraction, "like all human thought," I would simply modify Murray's dichotomization thus: Marx has an abstract concept of labor and an abstract concept of abstract labor. This redundancy draws particular attention to the fact that the "abstract" modifying "concept" cannot be the same as the "abstract" modifying "labor." At the conceptual level—that is, as ideas—abstract and concrete labor are abstract in the same way and to the same degree;⁴³ they can only be differentiated at some other level.

Abstract labor must therefore be understood to be a social abstraction. As a concept it originated with Marx, but before it was a concept, abstract labor was a social fact, an abstraction made by society itself.⁴⁴ This has been recognized by the Marxist tradition—Lukács, Althusser, and Rubin are prominent examples—but the mechanisms whereby society abstracts from the concrete particularity of labor have not been clearly delineated, largely because this was not taken as a problem, but as a given.⁴⁵ Diane Elson's claim, made in 1979, remains true today; "debate over Marx's

⁴² "Enlightenment Roots of Habermas' Critique of Marx," *The Modern Schoolman*, 57, 1979, p. 9; Murray also makes a similar statement in *Marx's Theory of Scientific Knowledge*, (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1988), p. 128.

⁴³ Given the fact that concrete labor is not specific to any historical moment, while abstract labor is properly confined to capitalist production, one can even make the case—as Murray does—that concrete labor is more abstract, conceptually, than is abstract labor, that the former is an abstract abstraction, while the latter is a determinate abstraction.

⁴⁴ I couldn't disagree with Kitching more than when he throws up his hands: "No, none of this is going to help me to perceive this value process. Why? *Because it is not a physical or material process at all*, which can be perceived through the senses. What 'it' is (if 'it' is anything) is a process going on *in Marx's mind*" (op. cit., p. 108).

⁴⁵ Althusser, for example, recognized the fact of social abstraction, but he did not seem to see it as a problem. Both his recognition of the fact, and his failure to see the need for explication can be judged by the following caution from his "Introduction to *Capital* Volume One": "Beware: scientific abstraction is not at all 'abstract', quite the contrary. E.g., when Marx speaks of the total social capital, no one can 'touch it with his hands'; when Marx speaks of the 'total surplus-value', no one can touch it with his hands or count it: and yet these two abstract concepts designate actually existing realities. What makes abstraction scientific is precisely the fact that it designates a concrete reality which certainly exists but which it is impossible to 'touch with one's hands' or 'see with one's eyes'. Every abstract concept therefore provides knowledge of a reality whose existence it reveals: an 'abstract concept' then means a formula which is apparently abstract but really terribly concrete, because of the object it designates. The object is terribly concrete in that it is infinitely more concrete, more effective than the objects one can 'touch with one's hands' or 'see with one's eyes'—and yet one cannot touch it with one's hands or see it with one's eyes. Thus the concept of exchange value, the concept of the total social capital, the concept of socially

theory of value has been hampered by a mutual incomprehension on matters of method.”⁴⁶ I hope to clear up some of this incomprehension by elaborating the actual mechanisms of social abstraction. In order to do so, I will turn to the early pages of *Capital*, where Marx introduces abstract labor. The context of this introduction will provide the materials for a reconstruction of the social abstraction of labor, as it takes place in commodity exchange, but it will also reveal the limits of this abstraction. These limits point beyond exchange relations to the capitalist production process, to which we will turn in Part B.

3. *The Abstraction of the Marketplace*

Marx begins *Capital* by analyzing the commodity—the “cell-form” or “elementary form” of bourgeois wealth⁴⁷—into two aspects; every commodity is both a useful object (use-value), and an object of exchange (exchange-value). Marx makes clear that this latter aspect—the exchangeability of commodities—is possible only by means of an “abstraction from their use-values.”⁴⁸ This abstraction must take place in actual social intercourse, not just in the heads of economists. How, then, does exchange abstract from use-values?

Marx writes:

A certain commodity, a quarter of wheat, e.g., is exchanged with x blacking, or with y silk, or with z gold, etc., in short with other commodities in various proportions. The wheat thus has many exchange-values instead of only one. But the x blacking, and y silk, and z gold, etc., are replaceable by one another or are equally great exchange-values.

necessary labor, etc. *All this is easy to explain*” (op. cit., p. 76; my emphasis). No one outside the Marxist tradition has agreed about the ease of explanation Althusser claims so blithely.

⁴⁶ Introduction, *Value: The Representation of Labour in Capitalism*, (London & Atlantic Highlands, NJ: CSE Books & Humanities Press, 1979), p. ii.

⁴⁷ C1 90, 125

⁴⁸ C1 127f

It therefore follows, firstly: The current exchange-values of these commodities express an equality.⁴⁹

This equality or commensurability is what Marx wants to explore, for it is the presupposition of our “propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another.”⁵⁰ In order for there to be markets, diverse commodities with diverse use-values must be treated as commensurable. But *qua* use-values, they are *incommensurable*, for every use-value is defined by its specific function.⁵¹ Food is made for eating; books are made for reading. How is it possible, then, for eating and reading, which are not interchangeable, to be exchanged for one another in the commodity-forms of a meal and a book? I cannot eat books, or read my dinner. Therefore, two commodities can only appear as exchangeable insofar as their particular use-values are bracketed; exchange disregards use-value. Thus, wherever the concrete usefulness of a particular object cannot be ignored (e.g., the ox that provides the sole means of plowing my field, or the locket that is the only physical reminder of my mother), neither can that object be fairly appraised and exchanged. Such irreplaceable objects are “invaluable,” or “priceless.” Any price attached to a singularity is arbitrary. Value only pertains to objects that are part of a class and, hence, replaceable.⁵²

Because of this, so long as the investigator of social life focuses on use-value, the commensuration that conditions actual practices of exchange remains invisible.

⁴⁹ C1 p. 127; translation modified.

⁵⁰ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 1.1.2, p. 17.

⁵¹ Compare Aumeeruddy and Tortajada, *op. cit.*, p. 6: “From the point of view of their use-values—the physical characteristics of the products—commodities are of course different, hence non-equivalent, and it is precisely this difference which is the motive force of exchange. But in the course of exchange, the use-value of the commodities is abstracted from, and only the social capacity of the commodities to be exchanged is recognized.” My reservation with this otherwise admirable statement is that it conflates incommensurability with mere difference of physical characteristics. What is lacking is a clear conception of concrete function.

⁵² C1 129f.

Marxologists under the sway of the utility theories of Twentieth Century economics confuse matters greatly when they think that Marx's dismissal of use-value is a dismissal of "utility."⁵³ Thus, for Cohen, Marx's denial that use-value can be a factor in the determination of exchange-value is "obscure and indefensible."⁵⁴ Likewise, Elster claims "the common 'something' [according to which commodities are measured against one another] could be the potential for human want satisfaction, or utility or use-value."⁵⁵ Or, as he writes elsewhere, objects "have value because they are valued, that is because of their capacity to satisfy human wants."⁵⁶ Claiming that commodities are exchanged in ratios determined by their relative utilities begs the question, however. The conflation of "use-value" and "utility" conceals the fact that "utility" is not at all synonymous with "use-value," but is actually a linguistically confusing rechristening of "value."⁵⁷ It is precisely the situation wherein incommensurable uses appear to be commensurable—e.g., as quanta of utility in general—that must be explained, and this situation cannot be explained by reference to itself. Already in his 1861 manuscripts, Marx complained about economists who "have no difficulty in

⁵³ This criticism also stretches all the way back to Böhm-Bawerk. Once again, Geoffrey Kay can be cited as an example of the way in which traditional Marxism missed the boat in responding to this criticism, for he agrees with the critic that Marx dismisses utility when he dismisses use-value (op. cit., p. 53).

⁵⁴ "The Labor Theory of Value and the Concept of Exploitation," op. cit., p. 221.

⁵⁵ *Making Sense of Marx*, op. cit., p. 140. It is worth noting that, although Elster seems to think he's quoting Marx, there is no "something" in Marx's text; Marx refers to a *Gemeinsamheit* (commonality) underlying exchange-values, but it is his translators who turn this into "a common something" or "a common element."

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁵⁷ This claim that utility and value are much more closely related concepts than are use-value and utility can be substantiated by reference Aristotle or Smith. For Aristotle, the question is: What allows a farmer and a cobbler, e.g., to come together in justice? There must be some reciprocation, and justice implies a ratio (*logos*), where the farmer and cobbler are the extreme terms. Their products are clearly what they exchange, but food and shoes need some middle term to unite them as much as their makers do. Aristotle recognizes that money *represents* this middle term, but is not itself what he seeks (after all, exchange can take place without money). He proposes "need" as the middle term, but also admits that, "in truth," it does not succeed in uniting things so different. Later, in VIII.13, he returns to the question from a different angle, and says that "the help to the receiver is the measure." Discussing these passages in class, my business ethics students immediately and spontaneously translated this "help to the receiver" into "saved trouble," "usefulness," and—"labor!" The proper measure of exchange-value, the middle term that makes fair exchange possible, is the energy over time that the exchange saves. Chapter Five of Smith's *Wealth of Nations* makes the same argument. On this point, Aristotle, Smith, and Marx are in substantial agreement.

overlooking the fact that no 2 use values are absolutely identical (no 2 leaves, *Leibniz*) and even less difficulty in judging use values, which have no common measure whatever, as exchange values *according to their degree of utility*.”⁵⁸

Once one recognizes that the practice of exchange must abstract from use-value, it is only a short step to the realization that this abstraction is also, indirectly, an abstraction from the useful character of the labor that made the commodity. When I go shopping, I don't treat the shoes I'm about to buy as the products of an utterly unique activity.⁵⁹ Rather, I treat them as being worth—exchangeable for—a certain amount of my own time and effort.⁶⁰ Nor does anyone imagine that the shoes were made with the particularity of my needs in mind. Rather, the shoes were made to be sold. As Murray puts it; “Commodity-producing labor addresses human needs only through the cash nexus.”⁶¹ But the “cash nexus” is just a Technicolor version of the exchange nexus generally, and wherever the market is dominant, the particularity of function that rules over concrete labor is suspended, and the most diverse labors mingle and change places, just as people of diverse social standing do at *Carneval*.

⁵⁸ MECW 30, p. 232. Murray makes an illuminating comparison between Marx's argument here and Descartes' discussion of the piece of wax; the deduction of value is precisely parallel to the deduction of extension. See Murray, “Enlightenment Roots of Habermas' Critique of Marx,” op. cit., p. 14; and *Marx's Theory of Scientific Knowledge*, op. cit., p. 149. The difference is that Descartes' abstraction is a purely intellectual one, whereas Marx's is an abstraction carried out in our social practices.

⁵⁹ Keeping in mind the association of singularity and matter, compare Rubin, op. cit., p. 175; “Marx never tired of repeating that value is a social phenomenon, [...] and does not include a single atom of matter. From this it follows that abstract labor, which creates value, must be understood as a social category in which we cannot find a single atom of matter.”

⁶⁰ This time and effort—along with everyone else's—is conveniently represented for me by the money in my pocket. As that eminently capitalist cliché puts it, “Time is money” (a Benjamin Franklin coinage). This means also that money is time. If I would have to work for two months to earn enough money for the shoes, then my felt need for them would have to be pretty acute and intense for me to buy them. If I know I can merely walk around the corner and get the same shoes at another store for half the price, I'm very unlikely to buy them here and now. Regardless of the outcome of my calculations, I am treating the shoes as the products of activity fundamentally equivalent with my own activity, activity that is only differentiated by its duration and its intensity.

⁶¹ “Marx's 'Truly Social' Labour Theory of Value: Part II, How Is Labor that Is Under the Sway of Capital Actually Abstract?” *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory*, 7, Winter 2000, p. 110.

Marx expresses this suspension of concrete function by writing that commodities, as exchanged, are the “ghostly” products of ghostly labor,⁶² performed in *actu* by no one in particular, but in *potentia* by anyone, and especially by ourselves. At this stage in Marx’s presentation—though, as we will see, *not* in his fully developed picture of capitalism—abstract labor underlies value in the same way that it does for Adam Smith. In Smith’s phrase, labor is the source of value because every thing is really worth “the toil and trouble of acquiring it.”⁶³ If I feel a need for warm foot-coverings, and the \$30 price for shoes at the corner store represents less of a sacrifice of effort over time than would procuring a similar use-value somewhere else, then I’ll buy them.⁶⁴ The outcome of such a calculation depends upon the division of labor and over-all productivity of the society in which I live, for these factors will determine whether or not other similar use-values will be available to me. Thus, my decision as to whether the shoes are worth my \$30 is not simply a matter of measuring the price of the shoes against my own particular labor (either how long I’d have to work to recoup the \$30, or my ability to make the shoes myself). Rather, I measure the price against the effective productivity of social labor. I treat my own effort as part of a social pool of effort, and ask of the shoes whether they represent a portion of this pool equal to the portion represented by my \$30. Or, as Marx wrote in the 1861 manuscript, “the

⁶² C1 128; translation modified.

⁶³ “The real price of everything, what everything really costs to the man who wants to acquire it, is the toil and trouble of acquiring it. What everything is really worth to the man who has acquired it, and who wants to dispose of it or exchange it for something else, is the toil and trouble which it can save to himself, and which it can impose upon other people” (*Wealth of Nations*, op. cit., 1.1.5, p. 26).

⁶⁴ “What sort of society would actually be thoroughly indifferent to the specificity of use-values and therewith to the specificity of the labor needed to produce required use-values? The ‘Whatever!’ world of generalized commodity circulation is such a society, the only one” (Murray, “Marx’s ‘Truly Social’ Labour Theory of Value: Part I, Abstract Labour in Marxian Value Theory,” *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory*, 6, Summer 2000, p. 44).

basis of *value* is the fact that human beings relate to one another's labor as equal, as general, and *in this form* social, labor."⁶⁵

Marx's qualification of "social" in this sentence requires some attention. Many of the difficulties inherent in the first parts of *Capital* are generated by the circumstance that capitalist society is a market society. Commerce can be very widespread in non-capitalist societies, as well, but capitalism cannot exist in non-market societies; capital presupposes commodities. In order for Marx to arrive at the specific mechanisms of capitalism, therefore, he must first deal with the antecedent mechanisms of commodity exchange. The trouble is that commodity exchange throws up a screen in front of capitalism, a screen of things. Because Marx begins by dealing with the market, the abstraction of labor is initially mediated through the abstraction of use-value. When we buy and sell things, we do not *directly* exchange our social labor. Instead, this labor—Smith's "co-operation and assistance of great multitudes" and "common stock"⁶⁶—must be represented in something else, in commodities. Commodities are the containers in which we exchange our efforts and energy with the efforts and energy of everyone else.⁶⁷ Therefore, while we do actually disregard the

⁶⁵ MECW 30, p. 232; my emphasis. The necessity of this abstraction can be illustrated by imagining that the seller denied it. Imagine that the shoe store clerk responded to my fistful of dollars by saying, "The artisan who made these shoes has thirty years experience, and her skills are so refined and specialized that no one can replicate her work. Furthermore, there is no way that you could possibly compensate for the lack of these shoes in your life. So what makes you think that your money, which you have earned doing something any trained monkey could do, is good enough to buy these shoes?" Of course the example is absurd; no store clerk would ever say such a thing. Another capitalist cliché: "My money is as good as the next person's." Compare Murray: "'Practically abstract' labor is socially validated in a way that shows society's *actual* indifference toward labor's specific character, that is, toward labor's specific ways of transforming nature and toward the specific use-value characteristics of its end product" (op. cit., p. 43).

⁶⁶ *Wealth of Nations*, op. cit., 1.1.2, pp. 18, 21.

⁶⁷ I believe this answers Terrell Carver's concerns about Marx's "objective view of value," for it seems to me to meet the condition Carver lays out for the acceptability of Marx's thesis that labor is objectified in value: "the thesis is only acceptable if there are good reasons for believing that the participants in a capitalist economy generally avowed that value is itself a substance, or that it represents something substantial, or if they could be shown in general to have presupposed such views in their social action" (op. cit., p. 80). I am claiming precisely that all participants in commercial exchange *must* presuppose the actual equivalence of the exchanged commodities, and that this amounts to a presupposition that the efforts of everyone in a society constitute a qualitatively identical totality of social labor, parceled out

particularity of our labor—setting it as commensurable with the labor of all our fellows—we do so only at one remove, only insofar as they are already embodied in products.

This is the “secret” of commodity fetishism. But knowing the secret doesn’t make the mediation of commodities disappear. Because capitalism presupposes commodity exchange, commerce mediates all the processes of capitalism (except—and this is a crucial exception—the division of labor within the firm). That’s why Marx has to deal with it right away, instead of starting with the labor process, as he had planned to do at the time he was working on the *Grundrisse*.⁶⁸ In capitalism, labor-power is a commodity like any other, and the relations between employer and employee are mediated by money, the most developed form of the commodity’s exchange-value. The “thingly veil” remains in place.⁶⁹ Nonetheless, there is a qualitative difference between the commodity-mediated abstraction of labor definitive of the market and the (money-)commodity-mediated abstraction of labor peculiar to capitalism. Moreover, there is also a further abstraction of labor that develops within this latter; and this final abstraction is *not* directly mediated by commodities, for it is connected to the division of labor within the firm.⁷⁰ It is this third abstraction that, for Marx, foreshadows communism, and it is also the abstraction with the greatest

amongst the goods for sale. Carver refuses to follow Smith, Marx, and Ricardo in their reduction of all skilled labor to simple labor, and even questions the identity of “labor” as such (81). But at this point in the argument, Marx has no need to say that all our various activities have some real essential commonality, and that this commonality is the simple exertion of bodily energy. All that is required to get on board with Marx is the recognition that the social practice of exchange disregards every dissimilarity among our various activities, and that we exchange our goods and services as *if* there were a substantial value measured by an identical abstract labor exerted by all of us.

⁶⁸ In addition to the fact that the 1857 “Introduction” begins with production, Marx writes that “the relation of labor to its objectivity [...] is to be analyzed already in the first chapter, which has to precede exchange value and treat of production in general” (G 298; compare also G 320).

⁶⁹ CPE 34; translation modified.

⁷⁰ As Patrick Murray rightly points out, “The ‘free market’ is not an independent phenomenon [...]. Consequently, any thought that the market *alone* makes labor ‘practically abstract’ misconceives the status of generalized commodity circulation in relation to the production process as a whole” (“Marx’s ‘Truly Social’ Labour Theory of Value: Part I,” *op. cit.*, p. 41).

ontological “density,” since it directly alters the material-technological basis of capital relations. The middle section of this chapter will be devoted to tracing out these two intensifications of labor abstraction in turn. This will set the stage for a consideration, in the final section, of capital’s distinctive mode of productivity, which is built on abstract labor.

B. The exploitation of labor

Only by its alienation does individual labor manifest itself
as its opposite [abstract labor].

“Theories of Surplus Value”
“Disintegration of the Ricardian School” (Manuscript, 1863)⁷¹

Just as I ended my consideration of concrete labor with the myth of Prometheus, I’d like to begin my consideration of abstract labor with a modern myth. In Johnny Cash’s version of “The Ballad of John Henry,” John’s father, before being hauled off to jail, admonishes his son to learn all the skills of a railroad worker, ending with this promise; “And take that hammer; it’ll do anything you tell it to.” Yet, when John goes to the foreman of the railroad crew and enumerates the skills he has dutifully learned, he responds to the foreman’s question, “Can you swing that hammer?” by saying, “I’ll do anything you hire me to.”⁷²

John’s father thought that he was bequeathing to his son the means by which John could earn a living, provide for his brothers and sisters, and do whatever he wanted. The hammer, and John’s skill in using it, were supposed to be the vehicles of the worker’s desires. The hammer was supposed to obey him. Instead, John, with his hammer and his skill, ends up serving only the desires of his boss. John himself

⁷¹ MECW 32, pp. 323.

⁷² Johnny Cash, “The Ballad of John Henry,” *At Folsom Prison*, 1968.

becomes the tool for the realization of the boss' desires, and, in the end, he works himself to death to prove that he can be a more effective instrument than the steam-drill brought in to replace him. The promised instrumentality of the hammer is transmuted into the instrumentality of the worker.

The song provides a marvelous image of the transition from *tekhnē* to capital, that is, of the way in which labor functions within capital. Employed by capital, labor has an end different from the one it has independent of capital. Labor comes to be abstract under capitalism because labor is subordinated to the end of capital. Therefore, we must inquire as to what this end is, and how it makes labor abstract.

1. The Valorization Process

According to Marx, these are the aims of the capitalist:⁷³

Our capitalist has concern for two things: in the first place, he wants to produce a use-value which has exchange-value, i.e. an article destined to be sold, a commodity; and secondly he wants to produce a commodity greater in value than the sum of the values of the commodities used to produce it [...]. His aim is to produce not only a use-value, but a commodity; not only use-value, but value; and not only value, but also surplus-value.⁷⁴

“Our capitalist” is only incidentally interested in producing a functional object that satisfies some human life requirement. The labor process is a presupposition of the valorization process, just as use-value is a presupposition of value.⁷⁵ Producing useful things is a necessary condition for producing commodities, and thus a necessary condition for making a profit, but, nonetheless, a use-value is not an exchange-value, nor a surplus-value, and it is these latter that the capitalist aims to

⁷³ I am following Marx by vacillating between referring to “capital” and referring to “the capitalist.” I will discuss the relationship between the two in Part C below.

⁷⁴ C1 293, translation modified.

⁷⁵ “Which use-value bears it is all the same to value, but a use-value must bear it” (C1 295, translation modified).

produce. “Within capitalist production, the relationship between the labor process and the valorization process is that the latter appears as the purpose, the former merely as the means.”⁷⁶ The aim of capital is to produce surplus-value.⁷⁷ We have already seen what value is—the presentation of abstract labor in exchange—so the question is: How can a capital produce a surplus of value?

There are a few background assumptions built into this question, but I think these are, when stated, quite uncontroversial. First, I think we can grant that the modern world is valorized to a greater extent than ever before, i.e., that the world we live in is more valuable in money terms than at any point in previous history. Furthermore, we can grant that this valorization has come about largely through the spread of capital. Finally, every capitalist operates on the premise that this valorization has not reached its limit, that the world can be “richer” than it is, and that this further valorization will also come about through the expansion of capital. Thus, the fact of valorization—that it has occurred and continues to occur—is not in doubt. Capitalism is inextricably linked with early modern efforts to reconcile the common weal with the pursuit of individual interests; it has always promised to make the nation or the world rich by making individuals rich. Mandeville was the great prophet of this development; “That what we call Evil in this World, Moral as well as Natural, is the grand Principle that makes us Sociable Creatures, the solid Basis, the *Life and Support of all Trades and Employments* without exception; there we must look for the true origin of all Arts and Sciences; and the moment Evil ceases, the Society must be spoiled, if not totally destroyed.”⁷⁸ This was written seventy years before Smith’s famous encomium to the self-interest of the butcher, the brewer, and the baker.

⁷⁶ MECW 30, p. 96.

⁷⁷ “The goal-determining activity of capital can only be that of growing wealthier, i.e., of magnification, of increasing itself” (G 270).

⁷⁸ *The Fable of the Bees*, quoted by Marx in his 1861 manuscript, MECW 30, p. 310.

Trickle-down economics—and the quest for a clean-conscience—are essential to capitalism. The question of how to produce surplus-value resolves itself into that of what our prospective capitalist has to do in order to take part in this immaculate self-enrichment.

Considered economically, all activity is either production, exchange, or consumption. Consumptive activity can be excluded *prima facie*, for if the world stopped engaging in production or exchange, and simply consumed what was at hand, the value of the world would obviously drop precipitously and continuously until there was no wealth left at all. Consumption is self-interested without being world enriching.⁷⁹ Therefore, the consumptive classes were the regular target of early bourgeois polemics, and the capitalist was lionized precisely for *not consuming*, for his thrift, his abstinence.⁸⁰ Exchange can also be excluded, for exchanging equal for equal can never lead to more.⁸¹ Obviously, individuals can get richer by speculating, money-lending, monopolizing a trade, price gouging, etc., just as individuals can get richer by robbing banks. But no one would, therefore, suggest that the world as a whole is valorized by robbery, or that everyone ought to take up robbery for the sake of the common weal.⁸² Likewise, buying and selling can enrich the individual, but never the

⁷⁹ “[T]he industrial capitalist becomes more or less unable to fulfill his function as soon as he personifies the enjoyment of wealth, as soon as he wants the accumulation of pleasures instead of the pleasure of accumulation” (MECW 31, p. 180).

⁸⁰ “It was of decisive importance for the bourgeois economists, when confronted with the habitual mode of life of the old nobility, which, as Hegel rightly says, ‘consists in consuming what is available,’ and is displayed in particular in the luxury of personal retainers, to promulgate the doctrine that the accumulation of capital is the first duty of every citizen, and to preach unceasingly that accumulation is impossible if a man eats up all his revenue, instead of spending a good part of it on the acquisition of additional productive workers, who bring in more than they cost” (C1 735). Compare also MECW 31, pp. 197f, and Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, with its emphasis on restraining the desires so that the child does not grow into a prodigal.

⁸¹ “[B]oth sides gain by the exchange, insofar as it is a question of use-value. It is entirely different with exchange value. Here the reverse is the case: ‘Where there is equality there is no gain’ (Galliani [...])” (MECW 30, p. 23).

⁸² However, in his 1861 manuscript, Marx outlines a development from the revolutionary bourgeoisie—who condemn everyone except the capitalist as “unproductive” or “idle”—to the victorious bourgeoisie, who embrace every possible undertaking as productive. Marx points to Mandeville as expressing this

whole, for the gain of one is directly and immediately offset by the loss of another, and our capitalist cannot maintain a clean conscience by enriching himself at the expense of others.⁸³

It is for precisely these reasons that classical economics turned to production to seek the origin of the wealth of nations. An aspiring capitalist can only end up with surplus-value by selling commodities that are worth more than the commodities he buys. But in order for the commodities he sells to be worth more than the ones he buys, something must happen to the commodities he buys; they must be turned into the more valuable ones he sells. The only way they can become more valuable is by representing more abstract labor-time at sale than they did at purchase. Valorization requires the exploitation of labor; it requires that labor-power be expended in order that the product sold might be more valuable than the materials bought. This is the case even if the buyer/seller, through speculation, only exploits, second-hand, the labor of indefinite others in society.

Production for the sake of surplus-value; this is the simplest formula of capital. It entails, immediately in this simplest form, the use of labor for something other than labor's immanent purpose; it entails the exploitation of labor for the purpose of valorization. And just as labor seeks to attain its own concrete end as effectively as possible, so every capitalist, insofar as he is a capitalist, seeks to exploit labor in the

tendency with utmost boldness, and Marx himself produces a rather funny discourse on the productivity of crime (MECW 30, pp 306-10). As Marx writes a bit further on; "The educated bourgeois and his mouthpiece are both so stupid that they measure the effect of every activity by its effect on the purse. On the other hand, they are so educated that they *grant recognition* even to functions and activities that have nothing to do with the production of wealth [...]" (MECW 31, p. 185). The important thing to notice is that even these justifications can only take place by calling every function and activity *productive*; thus, these arguments implicitly recognize that only production can be a source of value.

⁸³ See C1 259-66 for Marx's demonstration. What distinguishes Steuart as the first post-Mercantilist economist, for Marx, is that he "does not share the illusion that the surplus value which accrues to the individual capitalist from selling his commodity above its value is the creation of new wealth. [...] '*Positive profit* implies no loss to anybody [...]. *Relative profit* is what implies a loss to somebody; it marks a vibration in the balance of wealth between parties, but implies *no addition to the general stock* [...]" (MECW 30, p. 348).

most effective way. Therefore, we must first examine what follows directly from the fact that capital has control over labor and bends it to the end of valorization. Marx calls this immediate utilization of labor the formal subsumption of labor under capital. But we must also investigate what happens when capital begins to use labor more and more efficiently, to modify the labor process to suit its new purpose. This is the real subsumption of labor. We will find that both of these moments constitute further developments in the social abstraction of labor.

2. Formal Subsumption

In the drafts of his “Critique of Political Economy,” Marx has extended discussions of the distinction between the formal [*formelle*] and the real [*reelle*] subsumption of labor under capital.⁸⁴ In its final form, however, *Capital* only mentions the distinction in passing.⁸⁵ I believe this shift may be due to certain difficulties in the way Marx formulates the distinction, difficulties I will discuss below. Nonetheless, in both the drafts and *Capital*, Marx aligns formal subsumption with the production of absolute surplus-value and real subsumption with the production of relative surplus-value, and this latter pair—which Marx calls the “material expression” of subsumption⁸⁶—retains an absolute centrality in *Capital*, occupying all of Parts Three, Four, and Five. Therefore, while the *phrases* are largely absent, the *processes* of subsumption are an integral feature of Marx’s discussion of capital’s production process.⁸⁷ Marx’s categories of subsumption are especially important from the point of

⁸⁴ RIPP, C1 1019-38; MECW 30, pp. 92f and 233-306.

⁸⁵ C1 645f

⁸⁶ RIPP, C1 1025

⁸⁷ Hence, I disagree with James D. White (“Marx: From ‘The Critique of Political Economy’ to *Capital*,” *Studies in Marxism*, 1, 1994, pp 89-105), who maintains that the lesser prominence of formal and real subsumption in *Capital* signifies Marx’s growing doubts in the original scope of his critique of political economy, and that the philosophical weight of the discussion of subsumption was out of place in the modified, much more locally historical *Capital*. I think this conclusion is overly broad, given the clear

view of this study because, as Patrick Murray puts it, they are “categories for sorting the ways capital makes labor abstract.”⁸⁸

Labor is formally subsumed under capital as soon as surplus labor is extracted from the worker through “a purely *sale and purchase relationship* or *money relationship* [...] *stripped* of every patriarchal, political or even religious amalgam.”⁸⁹ The formula for capital is M—C—M’; money is exchanged for commodities, which are then exchanged for more money.⁹⁰ Production has to fit into this formula in order to be capitalist, and this entails that everything required for production—including the workers’ ability to work—must enter into production through sale and purchase, i.e., as commodities. The capitalist controls the production process, not because of any personal qualities he may have, not because he is favored by the gods, nor because he has conquered, but only because he has hired the workers for a wage. “This formal subsumption of the labor process, the assumption of control over it by capital, consists in the worker’s subjection as worker to the supervision and therefore the command of capital or the capitalist. Capital becomes command over labor.”⁹¹

This control of the labor process by a capitalist is thus definitive of capitalism as such. Marx calls it formal subsumption “because it is only *formally* distinct from earlier modes of production on whose foundation it arises immediately (is introduced).”⁹² In other words, if you enter into a formally capitalist business, you won’t be able to tell by examining the labor taking place therein whether it is run by a capitalist or not. Perhaps the owner works alongside his or her employees. Certainly,

“philosophical” bent of the Postface to the second edition, penned in 1873, as well as the “Critique of the Gotha Program” and “Notes on Adolf Wagner”, from 1875 and 1879, respectively. The interpretation I am constructing in this chapter constitutes my full argument against White’s claims.

⁸⁸ “Marx’s ‘Truly Social’ Labour Theory of Value: Part I,” op. cit., p. 30.

⁸⁹ RIPP, C1 1027; translation modified.

⁹⁰ More precisely, this is the formula for commercial capital. Usury is M—M’ without any commodity mediation.

⁹¹ MECW 30, p. 93.

⁹² RIPP, C1 1025; translation modified.

the work being done by the employees is in no way distinguishable from the work of independent artisans or apprentices, or (on a farm) serfs or small peasants. “The *labor process, technologically* viewed, goes on as before [and as analyzed in Chapter One], only now as the labor process *subordinated* to capital.”⁹³

There are, however, other changes. When labor is subordinated to capital, it is subordinated to capital’s end of creating surplus-value. This formal subordination manifests itself in the lengthening of the working day and in the close supervision of the labor process by the capitalist.⁹⁴ Both of these follow directly from the fact that labor-power is a commodity used by capital for capital’s purpose; the capitalist has hired workers for a certain period of time, and, since he is only employing labor for the sake of surplus-value, the more use he can get out of that labor power in the time allotted, the better. The expiration date on a jug of milk similarly encourages its buyer to use it up in a timely manner. Because the use of labor-power belongs to the capitalist, he, by rights, directs that use. In Marx’s words, “The labor process is subsumed under capital (it is its *own* process) and the capitalist steps into the process

⁹³ RIPP, C1 1026; translation modified. Compare MECW 30, p. 92: Capital initially subsumes the labor process “without making any changes in its specific technological character.” Compare also C1 425: “At first capital subordinates labor with the technical conditions within which it encounters it historically. It does not therefore immediately change the mode of production” (translation modified).

⁹⁴ Thus, Part Three of *Capital*, “The production of Absolute Surplus Value”, corresponds exactly, *contra* White, to the draft discussions of formal subsumption. This is not to say that there are no problems here. Marx calls absolute surplus value the “material expression” of formal subsumption (RIPP, C1 1024), but also says formal subsumption is “based on” absolute surplus value (*ibid.*, 1025). This vacillation signals a difficulty, to be sure. I think it casts doubt on Chris Arthur’s claim that subsumption “is perfectly suited to conceptualizing a relation between ideal forms and the content regulated by them that is not ‘identical’ with this ideality” (“Debate: Chris Arthur and James White on History, Logic, and Expanded Reproduction in *Capital*,” *Studies in Marxism*, 8, 2001, p. 131); instead, subsumption only seems to *reproduce* the difficulty of conceptualizing such a relation. Here is an idea that is supposed to conceptualize the relationship between ideas and their content, yet in discussing the relation between the idea of subsumption and *its own* content (processes of extracting surplus value), Marx reverts to two contradictory figures: 1) the extraction of surplus value is a material expression of subsumption, and 2) the extraction of surplus value forms the basis for subsumption. This indeterminacy of priority (is the extraction of surplus value or the process of subsumption the originary moment?) is a symptom of the indeterminacy of the ideal-material relation in capital itself.

as its director, manager [*Dirigent, Leiter*]; it is for him at the same time the immediate exploitation of alien [*fremder*] labor.”⁹⁵

As we saw in the last chapter, Marx also calls the means of labor its director.⁹⁶ The status of *Leiter*, shared by a hammer and a capitalist, stems from the role of mediator that each plays in the production process. In fact, the mediation of capital, Marx suggests, is a further development of the mediation performed by the technical means of labor, a development wherein the tools become independent of the workers and even become the producing subject.⁹⁷ One of the strands of Marx’s critique that remains quite constant from 1844 to 1883 is the notion that in the valorization process—as he puts it in “Results of the Immediate Process of Production”—“it is not the worker who makes use of the means of production, but the means of production that make use of the worker.”⁹⁸ This is not the place to examine this development of mediation in detail,⁹⁹ but it is worth noting that Marx claims a sort of generality for the development of the mediator into the subject. In a footnote near the end of *Capital*, Marx writes that “in all spheres of social life the lion’s share falls to the middleman [...]; in religion God is shoved into the background by the ‘mediator’ [Christ], and the latter is again shoved back by the priests, who are the inevitable mediators between the good shepherd and his flock.”¹⁰⁰ What matters for our purposes here is the fact that, according to Marx, the means of labor likewise push the producer and the

⁹⁵ RIPP, C1 1019; translation modified; compare TSV, MECW 31, p. 539: “The capitalist is the direct exploiter of the workers, not only the direct appropriator, but the direct creator of surplus labor. But since (for the industrial capitalist) this can only take place through and in the process of production, he is himself a functionary of this production, its director.”

⁹⁶ In addition to the passages cited in Chapter One, see also G 299.

⁹⁷ “In fact the rule of the capitalist over the worker is nothing but the rule of the independent *conditions of labor* over the *worker*, conditions that have made themselves independent of him” (RIPP C1 989).

⁹⁸ RIPP C1 988

⁹⁹ I will return to it below, in section C.1.

¹⁰⁰ C1 907n3. Compare G 322: “Thus, in the religious sphere, Christ, the mediator between God and humanity—a mere instrument of circulation between the two—becomes their unity, God-man, and, as such, becomes more important than God; the saints more important than Christ; the popes more important than the saints.”

product into the background, becoming the subject of the production process, and that this displacement is what gives the capitalist production process its specificity. This is simply another way of acknowledging that the capitalist is in charge, and that, therefore, the logic or form of capital is determinative.

What this means for labor is that its particular concreteness is further disregarded. This follows from the fact that the aim of capital is now the aim of the production process.¹⁰¹ Capital doesn't care *what* it makes, so long as it makes a profit.¹⁰² Capital, as a form, is "indifferent to every particularity of its substance," and thus "the labor which confronts it likewise subjectively has the same totality and abstraction in itself."¹⁰³ Capital moves around to where the rate of profit is high; it "can come into relation with every *specific* labor; it confronts the *totality* of all labors *dunamei*, and the particular one it confronts at a given time is an accidental matter."¹⁰⁴ Murray passes on a particularly telling example of this feature of capitalism. Explaining the decision of U.S. Steel to change its name to USX, then president of the company James Roderick stated; "The duty of management is to make money, not steel."¹⁰⁵ The labor that management hires to make money is not any labor

¹⁰¹ Chris Arthur has said it well: "Considered in terms of the labor process, labor seems to be a purposeful activity that transforms raw materials by means of instruments of labor in order to achieve determinate ends. However, in terms of the valorization process, labor is significant as a source of value, regardless of its purpose, its qualitative specificity, the specificity of the raw materials it uses, and the product it creates. Labor is separated from its concrete purpose and becomes a means toward a goal given by the alienated structures constituted by (abstract) labor itself. Considered in these terms, labor is actually the object of production" (*Dialectics of Labor: Marx and His Relation to Hegel*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 325).

¹⁰² With appropriate irony, Marx reminds us that "all men are alike in the face of capital" (C1 364).

¹⁰³ G 296

¹⁰⁴ G 296f. This is another element of Marx's critique that spans the gamut of his writings. In 1844 he put it this way; "In the case of labor, all the natural, spiritual and social variations in individual activity step forth, and are variously waged, whereas dead capital always takes the same steps and is indifferent to *actual* individual activity" (EPM, EW 284, translation modified).

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Murray, "Marx's 'Truly Social' Labour Theory of Value: Part II," op. cit., p. 113n46. Roderick only says explicitly what Marx had already read into statements by E.F. Sanderson, owner of "steel-rolling mills and forges," who protested restrictions on night-work by children by saying; "As far as the work itself is concerned, this would suit as well, but..."—and here Marx finishes his thought—"But Messrs Sanderson have something else to make besides steel. Steel-making is simply a pretext for profit-making" (C1 372f).

in particular; the field of labor that makes money today may not make money next year.¹⁰⁶ Capital that remains loyal to one sort of labor at the expense of profitability will cease to be capital; it will be driven from the field by competition. This abstraction from the particularity of labor is obviously not a mental construct, but “a frightful reality.”¹⁰⁷ To use Lukács’ words, it “has the same ontological rigor of facticity as a car that runs you over.”¹⁰⁸

3. Real Subsumption

These developments are not the end, however, but only the beginning of the changes wrought by capital. The bare, formal control of the labor process by capital does not yet change the technical process of labor, but, given that the aim of capital is different from the various aims of *tekhnē*, it is only a matter of time before the controlling power of capital begins to modify the means in view of their new end. Marx calls this reconstruction of the labor process in order to align it more perfectly with the purposes of capital the real subsumption of labor under capital. Real subsumption gives rise to a “specifically capitalist mode of production.”¹⁰⁹

Valorization demands a reconstruction of labor along two fronts. First, the goal of surplus-value imposes a regime of economy in the use of all the commodities that enter materially into production. For the means and materials of labor, this implies a

¹⁰⁶ “Capital remains the same whether we put cotton in the place of wool, rice in the place of wheat, steamships in the place of railroads, provided only that the cotton, the rice, the steamships—the body of capital—have the same exchange value, the same price, as the wool, the wheat, the railroads, in which it was previously embodied. The bodily form of capital may transform itself continually, while capital does not suffer the least alteration” (“Wage Labor and Capital”, MECW 9, p. 212).

¹⁰⁷ PP 61

¹⁰⁸ Marx’s *Basic Ontological Principles, (Part 1, Ch. 4 of Toward the Ontology of Social Being)*, tr. David Fernbach, (London: Merlin Press, 1978), p. 40. Murray details the specific nature of the car in question when he writes: “Commodity producing labor is *actually* abstract, in the sense that those who perform it must be ready to abandon their jobs and relocate, retrain, etc., according to the demands of the market” (op. cit., p. 118). My only quibble is that this is not so much a feature of commodity-producing labor in general as it is of formally subsumed labor in particular. Artisans produce commodities, but they do not thereby feel the same pressure to abandon their jobs according to the demands of the market.

¹⁰⁹ E.g., C1 645; also RIPP, C1 1019 and 1024.

reduction in waste,¹¹⁰ efforts to find cheaper equivalents,¹¹¹ increases in the scale of production, etc. For the use of labor-power, it entails work speed-ups and the rearticulation of the labor process itself, first through an infinitesimal division of labor within the workshop, and then through the mechanization of production. These tendencies culminate in what Marx calls scientific production, the continuous examination and restructuring of the production process according to the requirement that the process itself should be as streamlined and productive as possible.¹¹² In scientific production, “the total process is examined objectively, viewed in and for itself, and analyzed into its constitutive phases. The problem of how to execute each partial process, and to bind the different partial processes together into a whole, is solved through the employment of machines, chemistry, etc.”¹¹³ This is, for Marx, the direct introduction of science into production.

Intimately bound up with this is the second transformation, whereby the real subsumption of labor is also directly its socialization. Marx is categorical on this point; “Capitalist production first begins in fact [...] where each individual capital simultaneously employs a comparatively large number of workers,”¹¹⁴ a change which, all alone, “effects a revolution in the objective conditions of the labor process.”¹¹⁵ In part, this is due simply to economies of scale, but the quantitative growth progressively becomes a qualitative transformation, for, the co-operation of many

¹¹⁰ “[A]ll wasteful consumption of raw materials or instruments of labor is strictly forbidden, because what is wasted in this way represents a superfluous expenditure” (C1 303).

¹¹¹ “Englishmen, with their good command of the Bible, knew well enough that man, unless by elective grace a capitalist, or a landlord, or the holder of a sinecure, is destined to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow, but they did not know that he had to eat daily in his bread a certain quantity of human perspiration mixed with the discharge of abscesses, cobwebs, dead cockroaches and putrid German yeast, not to mention alum, sand and other agreeable mineral ingredients” (C1 359).

¹¹² “Capital [...] has an immanent drive, and a constant tendency, towards increasing the productivity of labor” (C1 436f).

¹¹³ C1 501f; translation modified.

¹¹⁴ C1 439; translation modified.

¹¹⁵ C1 441; translation modified.

workers is “the creation of a productive power, which must be in and for itself a power of the masses.”¹¹⁶ This is the social side of the material transformation just discussed.¹¹⁷ Economy in production, which follows directly from capital’s pursuit of surplus value, gives rise to the socialization of labor without that socialization being the intent of the capitalist. This socialization is, however, just as necessary an effect of real subsumption. No one makes anything in a truly capitalist business, except insofar as they are part of a collectivity. Efficiency always demands cooperation, a division of labor, and, hence, a coordinated effort by many.¹¹⁸

This complex of changes in the production process radically reconfigures what workers make and how they make it, and, in the process, renders their labor abstract in more immediately palpable ways. First, real subsumption deepens the sense in which labor is abstract from the standpoint of capital. Because of the increase in productivity that attends subsumption, the product of the specifically capitalist mode of production “is not individual goods, but a *mass of commodities*.” Therefore, “The labor expended on each commodity can no longer be calculated—except as an average, i.e., an ideal estimate.”¹¹⁹ In the collective worker, each individual figures only as an aliquot part of the whole. Marx cites Edmund Burke, “that famous sophist and sycophant,” to the effect “that ‘in so small a platoon’ as that of five farm laborers, all individual differences in the labor vanish.”¹²⁰

More importantly, the abstraction of labor now comes to have both a phenomenal reality for workers and an objective reality within the process itself.

¹¹⁶ C1 443; translation modified.

¹¹⁷ “The *social* productive forces of labor, or the productive forces of directly social, *socialized* (i.e., collective) labor come into being through cooperation, division of labor within the workshop, the use of *machinery*, and in general the transformation of production by the conscious use of the sciences [...], and similarly, through the enormous increase of *scale* corresponding to such developments” (RIPP, C1 1024).

¹¹⁸ “[I]t is only socialized labor that is capable of applying the *general* products of human development, such as mathematics, to the immediate process of production” (RIPP, C1 1024).

¹¹⁹ RIPP, C1 954

¹²⁰ C1 440

Because of the breaking down of the labor process into component movements, work is drained of much of its expertise, knowledge, and differentiation. The worker comes to disregard the specificity of her labor. From an identity attested in surnames, one's field of labor becomes a matter of no personal import; "the worker himself is absolutely indifferent to the specificity of his labor; it has no interest for him as such, but only insofar as it is in fact *labor* and, as such, a use-value for capital."¹²¹ *What* one makes doesn't matter, only that one has a job and *makes a wage*.¹²²

Furthermore, the labor process itself comes to be indifferent to the specificity of what is being made. This begins at the site of the individual worker as a point within that process. Because the final product is only the result of the entire system of movements, no individual needs to attend to the *Vorstellung* of the product's functionality.¹²³ My particular station in the production mechanism—and this is as true of a fast food restaurant as of a factory—may be completely indifferent to the identity of the product; I go through the same motions whether we're making hamburgers or TVs. As Marx writes; "labor loses all its characteristics of art; as its particular skill becomes something more and more abstract and irrelevant, and as it becomes more and more a *purely abstract* activity, a purely mechanical activity, hence

¹²¹ G 297

¹²² "But the putting of labour-power into action—i.e., the work—is the active expression of the laborer's own life. And this life activity he sells to another person in order to secure the necessary means of life. His life-activity, therefore, is but a means of securing his own existence. He works that he may keep alive. He does not count the labor itself as a part of his life; it is rather a sacrifice of his life. It is a commodity that he has auctioned off to another. The product of his activity, therefore, is not the aim of his activity. What he produces for himself is not the silk that he weaves, not the gold that he draws up the mining shaft, not the palace that he builds. What he produces for himself is wages; and the silk, the gold, and the palace are resolved for him into a certain quantity of necessaries of life, perhaps into a cotton jacket, into copper coins, and into a basement dwelling" ("Wage Labor and Capital", *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, April 5-8 and 11, 1849, MECW 9, pp. 197-228).

¹²³ "The knowledge, judgment and will which, even though to a small extent, are exercised by the independent peasant or handicraftsman [...] are faculties now required only of the workshop as a whole" (C1 482). Compare also C1 475n34 and G 693.

indifferent to its particular form.”¹²⁴ Only now are we starting to see the apotheosis of this process of abstraction, “flexible production,” in which the same production facilities can be wholly transformed from making one commodity to making an entirely different commodity within days, with a minimum of retooling and retraining.¹²⁵

The real subsumption of labor, therefore, is the creation of a form of labor that is not *tekhnē*. The work we do when we’re at work no longer produces any useful thing by itself, according to our perception. Its products are only use-values in the context of the system within which it is embedded. *Tekhnē* has been socialized to the point where only social labor can create anything useful. Within the avant-garde of capital, individual labor has been so abstracted that it produces nothing but value.¹²⁶ Data entry, quality assurance, customer service, tech support: such labors are useless outside of The Firm, whether they happen to be part of the production of steel or of lifestyles.¹²⁷ The variety of purposes that defined the myriad branches of *tekhnē* has been melted down into an “all-purpose” abstract labor, a labor that disregards its own end in favor of the end of capital.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ G 297; compare EPM, where Marx already complains that, in manufacture, the worker is “forced down spiritually and bodily to a machine, and from a human being becomes an abstract activity and a stomach” (EW 285, translation modified). Compare also Arthur: “Considered abstractly and on a total social level, the effect of increased productivity on direct human labor, within the framework characterized by the structural retention of such labor in production, is to render labor more uniform and simple and to intensify its expenditure. It imparts to human labor a concrete form that begins to resemble the initial determination of its fetishized social form (abstract labor)—the expenditure of muscles, nerves, and so on” (*Dialectics of Labor*, op. cit., p. 347).

¹²⁵ Thus, in contrast with the traditional emphasis of Marxist discussions of the exploitation of labor, I agree with Chris Arthur—contra, e.g., Paul Sweezy and Maurice Dobb—that Marx “is concerned not only with the source of the surplus but also with the form of the surplus wealth produced [and with] the two structural imperatives of the value form of wealth—the drive toward increasing levels of productivity and the necessary retention of direct human labor in production” (ibid., p. 308).

¹²⁶ See, e.g., G 694.

¹²⁷ About a much earlier stage of this process, Marx wrote; “Unfitted by nature to make anything independently, the manufacturing worker develops his productive activity only as an appendage of that workshop” (C1 482).

¹²⁸ According to Althusser, Marx is giving in to unfortunate historicist tendencies when he claims that “the reality of labor in general, of abstract labor, is produced as a phenomenal reality by capitalist production. In some sense history has reached the point and produced the exceptional, specific present in which *scientific abstractions exist in the state of empirical realities*, in which science and scientific concepts exist in the form of the *visible* part of experience as so many directly accessible *truths*” (*Reading Capital*,

Marx repeatedly describes the act of creation of this abstract labor as capital's incorporation of labor. In the *Grundrisse*, he calls capital an "organic system," and writes; "This organic system itself, as a totality, has its presuppositions, and its development to its totality consists precisely in subordinating all elements of society to itself, or in creating out of it the organs which it still lacks."¹²⁹ The processes of subsumption we have just outlined are the precise methods whereby capital makes labor into its own organ. Since we have seen how this incorporation comes about, we are now free to investigate the functioning of the new social body created thereby. In other words, we may now turn to capital as a form of society and ask how this society functions as a whole.

C. The animated monster

...capital, value which can perform its own valorization process,
an animated monster which begins to "work"...

Capital
Vol. 1, Part 3, Ch. 7, §2 (1867)¹³⁰

1. Making Capital Productive

The precise difference between formal and real subsumption seems to elude Marx at times; the reader of "Results of the Immediate Process of Production" can see him struggle with a tendency for formal subsumption to slide ineluctably into real subsumption. The difficulty is in trying to isolate capital's direct control of the production process from any changes in the production process that follow from that control. For example, Marx allows that formal subsumption immediately includes

op. cit., p. 124). I don't think Althusser's understanding of Marx's science is serving him well in this regard. The next two chapters ought to make clear the extent of my disagreement with Althusser on this point.

¹²⁹ G 278

¹³⁰ C1 302

economizing on the means and materials of production.¹³¹ Yet, any economy beyond what is called for by the technical requirements of the work—e.g., cutting leather to maximize the number of shoes one can make rather than with an eye to the material best suited to protecting the feet—is an alteration of the labor process itself, and ought, therefore, to belong only to real subsumption. As I suggested above, this difficulty in fixing the distinction may explain Marx’s decision to largely drop the terminology of subsumption from the published version of *Capital*.

Despite these difficulties, I believe there is a very real distinction at work, though it seems to me to lie beyond the bounds of Marx’s explicit discussion. I think this real distinction can come to light through excavating below what Marx says about “the mystification immanent in the *capital relation*,” the mystification whereby “The value-preserving power of labor appears as a self-preserving power of capital, the value-creating power of labor as a self-valorizing power of capital.”¹³² This mystification is intimately related to the commodity fetish, whereby value seemed to inhere in things rather than in a relation between people. In the “capital fetish,” similarly, capital is identified with the conditions of labor, thereby rendering capital both an eternal necessity and the condition of labor’s productivity.¹³³ Marx claims that this mystification is already present in formal subsumption, but that it “is greatly intensified” by real subsumption.¹³⁴ This is another case in which the distinction between formal and real subsumption seems to be one only of degree.

I believe, however, that this relative difference in the intensity of mystification marks a fundamental difference between the status of formally subsumptive capital

¹³¹ RIPP, C1 1026

¹³² RIPP, C1 1020f; translation modified. See also, e.g., G 591-4.

¹³³ In the 1861-3 draft, Marx calls explicit attention to the parallel; “Just as the general, abstractly social character of labor [...] presents itself as *money*, [...] in the same way does the concrete social character of labor present itself as the character and quality of capital” (MECW 30, p. 261).

¹³⁴ RIPP, C1 1020, 1024

and that of really subsumptive capital. This difference can be brought out by looking first at those “antediluvian” forms of capital that existed before formal or real subsumption began: usurer’s capital and merchant’s capital.¹³⁵ Both usury and commerce satisfy the general formula for capital, $M—M'$; they use money to get more money. So long as these were the only forms of capital in existence in the West, they were generally condemned by the dominant philosophical and moral traditions. Plato, Herodotus, and Thucydides all viewed merchants—and the ports and ships that accompanied them—with suspicion.¹³⁶ Aristotle considered commerce to be “expertise in exchange,” which “is justly blamed since it is not according to nature but involves taking from others.”¹³⁷ Much more recently, Ben Franklin, usually a fount of capitalist common sense, declared as well that “commerce is cheating.”¹³⁸ The condemnation of usury—one can look at Aristotle, Aquinas, Dante, Shakespeare, or Luther—is even more sustained and intense. Moralizing denunciations of usury and huckstering were commonplaces of Nineteenth Century anti-Semitism, and even left their mark on the young Marx and Engels.¹³⁹

What I want to call attention to is the dominant motif in these attacks; capital that has not subsumed labor is condemned either for being unproductive or for being unnaturally productive, largely by unfavorable comparison to *tekhnē*. Merchants and usurers are not respectable because they do not subordinate their activity to a concrete function. They don’t make anything useful. As Aristotle puts it, “usury is

¹³⁵ C1 266

¹³⁶ The cities of both the *Republic* and the *Laws* are purposefully placed inland, away from any harbors. Herodotus’ *History* can be read as an extended allegory of the corruption that attends ship-building, and the consequent imminent downfall of the Athenian empire. Thucydides provides further grist for this mill.

¹³⁷ *Politics*, 1258b1-2.

¹³⁸ Cited by Marx, C1 267.

¹³⁹ See especially Engels’ “Contribution to a Critique of National Economy” and Marx’s “On the Jewish Question,” both published in the *Deutsche-Französische Jahrbuch* in 1844, as well as Marx’s recap of the fight against Bruno Bauer’s “critical” anti-Semitism in *The Holy Family*. Hal Draper has a nice overview of the intellectual and political milieu of these works in an appendix to his *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution*, vol. 1, (New York & London: Monthly Review Press, 1977).

most reasonably hated because one's possessions derive from money itself and not from that for which it was supplied. For it came into being for the sake of exchange, but interest actually makes more of it. And it is from this that it gets its name [*tokos*]: offspring are similar to those that give birth to them, and interest is money born of money."¹⁴⁰ Dante makes the contrast with *tekhnē* even more explicit in Virgil's words from *Inferno*; "art follows nature as much as it can, [and] from these two [art and nature] we must draw our life and advance our people; and because the usurer holds another way, he scorns nature in herself and in her follower."¹⁴¹ Usury and commerce don't produce anything useful for human life, but parasitically insert themselves between the works of others, drawing off life and wealth from the social body.¹⁴²

Contrast this ignominy with the position of capital once it has formally subsumed labor. Where the merchant and usurer were solitary parasites on the social body, the early capitalists are able to engage in a spirited polemic to show that they are productive organs of that body, together with the farmers and artisans, and as opposed to the real parasites, the aristocracy, the government, and their servants.¹⁴³ Capital becomes respectable, and it does so by becoming productive; but it only becomes productive by subsuming labor. There is a marvelous passage from Benjamin

¹⁴⁰ *Politics*, 1258b2-6.

¹⁴¹ 11.103-110

¹⁴² See C1 267, where Marx says that the merchant "parasitically inserts himself between" "the buying and the selling producers."

¹⁴³ See, e.g., Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (op. cit., 1.2.3, pp. 351-371) or Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (Which is concerned throughout to raise a gentleman who will be productive rather than consumptive); compare also Georges Bataille's discussion of the Reformation and industrial society (*The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, vol. 1, "Consumption," tr. Robert Hurley, (New York: Zone Books, 1991), Part Three, pp. 115-42). In his manuscript for *Capital*, Marx comments as follows on the controversy surrounding Smith's division between productive and unproductive classes; "The great mass of so-called 'higher grade' workers—such as state officials, military people, artists, doctors, priests, judges, lawyers, etc.—some of whom are not only not productive but in essence destructive, [...] found it not at all pleasant to be relegated *economically* to the same class as buffoons and menial servants and to appear merely as people partaking in consumption, parasites on the actual producers (or rather agents of production)" (MECW 31, p. 30).

Franklin, quoted by Bataille,¹⁴⁴ that neatly measures the distance traveled from pre-subsumptive to subsumptive capital. On the heels of his “time is money” quip, Franklin writes:

He that can earn ten shillings a day by his labour, and goes abroad, or sits idle, one half of that day, though he spends but sixpence during his diversion or idleness, ought not to reckon *that* the only expense; he has really spent, or rather thrown away, five shillings besides. Remember, that money is of the prolific, generating nature. Money can beget money, and its offspring can beget more, and so on. Five shillings turned is six, turned again it is seven and threepence, and so on, till it becomes a hundred pounds. The more there is of it, the more it produces every turning, so that the profits rise quicker and quicker. He that kills a breeding-sow, destroys all her offspring to the thousandth generation. He that murders a crown, destroys all that it might have produced, even scores of pounds.

By taking direct control of labor, capital “incorporates [*einverleibt*]” labor, capital “begins to ‘work,’ as if its body were by love possessed.”¹⁴⁵ Despite Franklin’s enthusiasm, this can only happen where capital can purchase labor-power on the market.¹⁴⁶ With this purchase, the worker “surrenders [labor’s] creative power, like Esau his birthright for a mess of pottage.”¹⁴⁷ Capital gets a complete makeover; it has purchased its passage out of the ghettos and ports and into polite society.

However, this newfound acceptability must be quite sharply differentiated from capital’s status once it has *really* subsumed labor. Real subsumption renders capital’s productivity overwhelming and hegemonic in whichever arena the subsumption takes place. Instead of sharing the field with *tekhnē*, capital becomes the only recognized

¹⁴⁴ Op. cit., p. 126.

¹⁴⁵ The closing phrase [*als hätt’ es Lieb im Leibe*] is from *Faust*, I, “Auerbach’s Cellar in Leipzig”, line 2141. Marx has an almost identical passage in his 1861-3 draft of CPE (see also G 704), but he leaves the scare quotes off from around “work,” putting it in English instead (see MEGA² II.3.1, p. 99). Marx’s vacillation on how much reality to allow the work of capital is symptomatic of the “neither here nor there” aspect of capital itself. With capital, even more than with the simple objectivity of value, “a man [even Marx—a “man’s man” in this respect] knows not where to have it” (see C1 138).

¹⁴⁶ “What the capitalist buys [...] is the use value of labor capacity, i.e., labor itself, which creates and enhances value. This value creating and value enhancing power therefore belongs not to the worker but to capital” (MECW 30, p. 112).

¹⁴⁷ G 307

productive power.¹⁴⁸ Within any branch of industry really subsumed under capital, the stubborn intransigence of an independent artisan or small farmer appears as idiosyncratic and as unproductive as the usurer or merchant seemed in ancient Greece, as sadly comical as Don Quixote. Furthermore, this sentence of social irrelevance is quite ruthlessly enforced by the invisible hand of the market, for an independent artisan cannot remain in business as such, cannot possibly compete on the basis of such a mode of life for any length of time, much less expect it to flourish and spread. Far from defining productivity in late modernity, non-subsumed *tekhnē* has become an exercise in futility.¹⁴⁹

The formal subsumption of labor renders capital productive, but the real subsumption of labor negates the productivity of non-subsumed labor. Capital thereby gains a monopoly on productivity; “The only worker who is productive is the one who produces surplus-value for the capitalist, or in other words contributes to the self-valorization of capital.”¹⁵⁰ This monopoly on productivity corresponds to capital becoming the whole of the social body. Capital is the “collective laborer,” whose “organs” are the multitude of its productive employees;¹⁵¹ it is the “organic whole,” which appropriates social material to its own functions.¹⁵² The socialized totality of

¹⁴⁸ This new hegemony manifests itself, according to Marx, in a sovereign magnanimity among capitalism’s ideologists. “As the dominion of capital extended [...]—especially when the positive sciences (natural sciences) were subordinated to it as serving material production—the sycophantic underlings of political economy felt it was their duty to glorify and justify every sphere of activity by demonstrating that it was ‘linked’ with the production of material wealth, [...] and they honored everyone by making him a ‘productive laborer’ in the ‘primary’ sense, namely, a laborer who labors in the service of capital, is useful in one way or another to the enrichment of the capitalist, etc.” (MECW 31, p. 31).

¹⁴⁹ The real role the independent artisan plays in such times is a negative one, that of a provocation to the hegemonic capitalist production process. Insofar as the microbrewery or artisan bakery effects any broad change in what we drink or eat, it is through the action of capital viewing the niche market as a threat or as an arena for expansion. Like Socrates, the artisan is the gadfly that prods complacent capital to renewed activity, only to be promptly killed by the enlivened beast. This is an indication that *tekhnē* cannot provide any fundamental challenge to capital, but can only furnish it with an internal mechanism of disturbance, whereby it maintains its dynamic stability.

¹⁵⁰ C1 644

¹⁵¹ See, e.g., C1 643f. Also C1 457, where capital is “a productive mechanism whose organs are human beings.”

¹⁵² G 278

production now “presents itself as the *productive power of capital*, not as the productive power of labor, or even as the productive power of labor so far as it is identical with capital, and in any case not as the productive power of the individual workers or of the workers combined in the production process.”¹⁵³ In the *Grundrisse*, Marx declares the end of the era of *tekhnē*. Under the regime of real subsumption, “the question whether capital is productive or not is absurd. Labor itself is *productive only* if it is absorbed into capital.”¹⁵⁴

2. *The Transubstantiation of Capital*

But if the productivity of capital is ascendant, right across the face of the globe, that productivity is nonetheless a queer thing.¹⁵⁵ Marx is very clear that “the production of the normal capitalist, of the industrial capitalist as he ought to be, is production for the sake of production.”¹⁵⁶ This is not however, the production of *things* for the sake of producing *things*; it is the production of surplus-value for the sake of producing surplus-value. The capitalist “becomes more or less unable to fulfill his function,” Marx writes, “as soon as he wants the accumulation of pleasures instead of the pleasure of accumulation.”¹⁵⁷ Since capitalist accumulation as such—the insatiable *more*—has no object, it is most true to say that capital produces only itself.¹⁵⁸ Capital is self-valorizing value, self-reproductive and ever-expansive. Value

¹⁵³ RIPP, C1 1024; translation modified. To flirt with historicism for a moment, it is perhaps for this reason that the labor theory of value arose in the economic literature earlier on in the development of capitalism, when the traditional labor process was still clearly the basis of capital’s production, and has fallen into disfavor primarily since the rise of large industry.

¹⁵⁴ G 308

¹⁵⁵ According to Chris Arthur, “capital is a very peculiar object” because it is “grounded in a process of real abstraction in exchange” (“The Infinity of Capital”, *Studies in Marxism*, 5, 1998, p. 17). While the abstraction in exchange is a presupposition of capital, it does not, I think *ground* capital, nor does it account for the height of capital’s peculiarity.

¹⁵⁶ TSV, MECW 31, p. 179.

¹⁵⁷ TSV, MECW 31, p. 180.

¹⁵⁸ For an intelligent discussion of the role of the “more” in Marx’s picture of capital, see Chris Arthur’s “The Infinity of Capital”: “What was a good reason for the original investment of £100 is a good reason for

“thus appears as a *self*—the incarnation of this self is the capitalist—the *selfhood of value*.”¹⁵⁹ So “personified,” value “has become a will in its own right, being-for-itself, a conscious end in itself [*Selbstzweck*].”¹⁶⁰

Analytically inclined Marxologists hate it when Marx starts talking like this. Capital sounds like Hegel’s *Geist*; it is a mysterious speculative construction that cannot be reduced to any set of lower-order mechanisms, a supra-individual intentional actor, a piece of providence in a godless universe—in short: nonsense.¹⁶¹ I hope that tracing the various mechanisms of abstraction has removed some of the sense of mystery from Marx’s presentation.¹⁶² It is clear, for example, that Marx himself wanted to trace the shape of capital as a social totality back to the interactions of its individual members. Thus, in “Theories of Surplus Value,” he approvingly cites Hodgskin; “‘The *capitalist* is the *oppressive middleman*’ between the different laborers. If he is put out of view, ‘it is plain that *capital* or the *power to employ labor* and *co-existing labor* are one; and *productive capital* and *skilled labor* are also one; consequently capital and the laboring population are precisely synonymous. In the system of nature, mouths are united with hands and with intelligence.”¹⁶³ This is perfectly in line with his statement from the “Theses on Feuerbach,” cited previously,

reinvesting the valorized capital of £110. It is reminiscent of compulsive neurotic behavior, for example of repeated washing of hands” (op. cit., pp. 22f).

¹⁵⁹ MECW 30, p. 96.

¹⁶⁰ MECW 30, p. 39.

¹⁶¹ Elster’s *Making Sense of Marx*, op. cit., contains the most sustained and explicit critique of Marx along these lines. Others however have (appreciatively) noted the similarity between capital and *Geist*; see especially: Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, op. cit., p. 75. Much Western Marxism, following Lukács, has looked instead to the *proletariat* as the (not-yet fully self-conscious) Marxian equivalent to *Geist*. See Lukács’ own self-critical characterization in the “Preface to the New Edition (1967)” of *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, tr. Rodney Livingstone, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971).

¹⁶² Marxologists who are loyal to Marx’s own method don’t help matters when they do not trace these connections and dependencies, but remain at the level of the abstraction. To arbitrarily pick on someone, Richard Marsden, a commentator with many intelligent things to say about Marx’s method, explains Marx’s understanding of value as follows; “The law of value refers to the power of a real, but non-empirical, social substance which undergoes metamorphoses through various material forms” (*The Nature of Capital: Marx after Foucault*, (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 99). This is true, but hardly the sort of statement that reassures people like Elster that there is any sense to Marx’s theory of value.

¹⁶³ MECW 32, p. 446.

that the *menschliche Wesen* “is no abstraction inherent in the single individual. In its actuality, it is the ensemble of social relations.”¹⁶⁴

What cannot be reduced, however, is the logic of the capital-form itself, for this is what defines the specificity of *this* ensemble of relations. The test Elster runs on Marx’s statements about capital, e.g., is to see if they can be translated into statements about the technically intentional actions of individuals.¹⁶⁵ What vanishes in such translations, however, is the specific intentionality definitive of capital. As Chris Arthur ably puts it, “the capitalist production process, as presented by Marx, cannot be understood as a technical process that is used in the interests of a class of private appropriators.”¹⁶⁶ The logic of capitalist intentionality is different from the logic of *tekhnē*. Capital doesn’t aim at *any good*; it aims at the *abstraction from any good*. The pursuit of this aim by individual capitalists, as we’ve seen, puts out of view the particularities of the human actors (including the capitalist),¹⁶⁷ of their needs, of their products. It cares for these things only so far as they can be reduced to something else (value), only so far as they can be represented by money. This is what it means to say that capital is based upon processes of social abstraction; the logic of action that is capital makes abstractions into social forces by treating the abstraction from function as the goal of social practices. Abstraction becomes both the substance and subject of modernity.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁴ MECW 5, p. 7; translation modified.

¹⁶⁵ This is methodological individualism.

¹⁶⁶ *Dialectics of Labor*, op. cit., p. 326.

¹⁶⁷ Thus, Marx writes, e.g., that, for the capitalist, the worker “has in this process no other existence than that of labor capacity in action. It is therefore not a person, but active labor capacity personified in the worker, that is working” (MECW 30, pp. 54f).

¹⁶⁸ As substance: C1 128, 129, etc.; as subject: C1 255, and passim, wherever Marx speaks of capital *acting* in any way. Compare Murray: “value deserves the name ‘social substance’ because self-expanding value is the social form of capitalist production, and that social form is capable of reproducing itself—it is substantial” (“Marx’s ‘Truly Social’ Labour Theory of Value: Part I,” op. cit., p. 61).

This movement whereby abstractions become embodied cannot simply be dismissed as ludicrous¹⁶⁹ or irrational¹⁷⁰ or metaphorical.¹⁷¹ Marx's own insistence on the mysticism, obfuscation, and fetishism of the capital relation needs to be held together with his insistence that the mystery is real and very effective; "those who demonstrate that the productive force attributed to capital is a *displacement*, a *transposition of the productive force* of labor, forget precisely that capital itself is essentially this *displacement*, this *transposition*, [...] this *transubstantiation* [*Transubstantiation*]." ¹⁷² Marx more than once refers to capital's processes of abstraction as transubstantiations,¹⁷³ and, more broadly, illustrates his critique of economics by referring the workings of capitalism to the workings of religion. In this regard, the earliest such cross-reference by Marx is illuminating. In a footnote to his dissertation, Marx dismisses as irrelevant Kant's critique of the ontological argument for the existence of God. Marx writes:

[T]he ontological argument means nothing but: 'what I really imagine is an actual idea for me,' that works on me, and in this sense *all* gods, heathen as well as Christian, have possessed a real existence. Did not

¹⁶⁹ Even a sensitive reader of Marx's discussion of abstract labor, like Patrick Murray, can write; "I believe that Marx expects us to be shocked by the ludicrousness of the very proposition that abstract labor is 'embodied' in commodities: how can *abstract* labor be *embodied*? Is not the bodily the antithesis of the abstract?" ("Marx's 'Truly Social' Labour Theory of Value: Part I," op. cit., p. 58)

¹⁷⁰ "Thus, what Marx ends up articulating is [...] an insane discourse whose irony alone can express the truth of an irrational reality" (Robert Paul Wolff, *Moneybags Must Be So Lucky: On the Literary Structure of Capital*, (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), p. 72). I'll return to the theme of Marx's irony in Chapter Four.

¹⁷¹ Another sensitive reader of Marx, Geert Reuten, thinks that, when Marx speaks of "substance" and "embodiment," "the metaphors have somewhat taken over the presentation" ("Abstract Labor and the Metaphor of Embodiment and Substance: Reconstructing a Theory of Social Value," op. cit., p. 12). As opposed to economists (like Reuten), it is literature professors who seem willing to take the metaphor seriously as such. Thus, Elaine Scarry writes; "If metaphor is perceived to reside here, [...] the artifact itself rather than Marx's description of the artifact is metaphorical; the description merely records the presence of the metaphor. Thus his allusions cannot be dismissed on the grounds that they are 'metaphorical', for that argument only recapitulates the very point made by the allusions themselves" (*The Body in Pain*, op. cit., p. 246).

¹⁷² G 308

¹⁷³ Hence, "the process which makes exchange-value of use-value" is "this act of transubstantiation" (PP 34; translation modified). Geert Reuten notes that the connotation of "transformed in our hands [*in der Hand verwandelt*]" (C1 128) is the transubstantiation of the Eucharist, which takes place in the priest's hands. "Abstract Labor and the Metaphor of Embodiment and Substance: Reconstructing a Theory of Social Value," op. cit., pp. 9f.

the old Moloch rule? Was the Delphic Apollo not an actual power in the lives of the Greeks? Here, also, Kant's critique means nothing. If someone imagines that they possess a hundred thalers, if this idea is no arbitrary, subjective idea to him, if he believes in it, then the hundred imagined thalers have as much value as a hundred actual thalers. He will, e.g., make debts on his imagination, they will *work*, as *the whole of humanity has made debts on its gods*. Actual thalers have the same existence as imagined gods. Has the thaler another existence than in the imagination, if the general, or rather, social imagination [*Vorstellung*] of humanity?¹⁷⁴

In another footnote, written twenty-six years later, Marx seems to continue this thought; "It is, in fact, much easier to find by analysis the earthly kernel of religious fog-formations than to do the opposite, to develop from the always actual relations of life their deified forms. The latter is the only materialist, and, thus, the only scientific method."¹⁷⁵ Marx attempts, in *Capital*, to do just this, to develop from the structure of our active interrelations—buying and selling goods, hiring labor, looking to make a profit, etc.—the coming into being of a "social *Vorstellung*," an abstract subject, which we embody as its moments, but the logic of which we cannot control or alter.

3. *Squandering Substance*

There have been multiple attempts, going back to the "Marxist humanists" and, in a very different way, Althusser, to overcome the notion that Marx reduces everything ideal to the material base, the means and relations of production. Hopefully it is clear by now that, so far as I'm concerned, Marx's understanding of both technical and capitalist production always contains an ideal moment, a *Vorstellung*.¹⁷⁶ This *Vorstellung* is nothing more than the form that defines the productive activity as such. In one case, it is the form of the anticipated product; in the other, it is the form of no-

¹⁷⁴ MECW 1, p. 140; translation modified.

¹⁷⁵ C1 494n; translation modified.

¹⁷⁶ Thus, I agree with Thomas Kemple that "an essential part of how a society 'works' can be read in the imaginary principles and symbols through which it functions" (*Reading Marx Writing: Melodrama, the Market, and the "Grundrisse"*, (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press: 1995), p. 93).

form-in-particular, the form of ever-expanding value. We saw, in the previous chapter, that the relation between *Vorstellung* and result in labor was anarchic because labor, as such, was incapable of coping with the externality of its material product. Because labor's guiding *Vorstellung* is an anticipation of a particular function, it can never cope with the unanticipated consequences of its own products. I glossed this failure of labor as a lack of attention to the difference between form and matter; labor cannot accept its own materiality. Now I want to ask whether the abstract labor of capital is more in touch with this internal tension between form and matter, *Vortellung* and result.

In one regard, it seems clear that valorization is more harmoniously related to its materiality than is *tekhnē*. It avoids precisely the source of labor's problem; abstract labor does not anticipate any particular function. Capital does not presume that the future will be like the past, that our current needs will be our future needs, that life will retain its same shape. In fact, it positively counts on the development of new needs, and actively fosters their formation. It doesn't want its products to be used only for their intended purposes. "The continual transformation of production, the uninterrupted convulsion of all social conditions, a perpetual uncertainty and motion distinguish the epoch of the bourgeoisie from all earlier ones." While the aim and "first condition" of the artisans' making is "the unaltered maintenance of the old mode of production," the rendering eternal of past experience, it is quite the opposite in the world of capital. "The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, hence the relations of production, and therefore social relations as a whole."¹⁷⁷

But if capital is at peace with the unpredictability implied in material production, this does not mean it has a healthy relationship to its materiality in

¹⁷⁷ CM, LPW 4.

general. Capital suffers from a different pathology than does concrete labor. Rather than seeking to erase or overcome a materiality it acknowledges to be its own condition—as labor does—capital simply and utterly disregards its own material conditions. The only reason capital doesn't worry about the materiality of its products is that it doesn't acknowledge its own materiality in any way. Capital happily allows its material products to become whatever they happen to become, but only because it is convinced that whatever they happen to become, they will always already be moments of capital. They will always remain commodifiable; they will never cease to be money. Capital doesn't need to suppress the externality of its products, for it doesn't recognize the possibility of an outside.¹⁷⁸

There is an outside, however, whether capital recognizes it or not; capital is a conditioned form of being. Specifically, it is conditioned by two things: workers and the earth. These are the material sources of all wealth, whatever its form.¹⁷⁹ But capital does not—cannot—acknowledge these material conditions; instead, it squanders and depletes them. It does so because these material bases are the two things that can never be commodified within capitalism itself. If workers themselves were commodified, they would be slaves, not free workers, and capitalism would collapse; labor only produces surplus-value so long as labor-power is a commodity sold by the free laborer.¹⁸⁰ The earth itself—not in the in the sense of landed property, but of the forces and materials of nature—is always given for free. What costs no labor cannot become a commodity. Thus, coal is a commodity once its extracted from the ground, but it does not cost anything beyond the labor necessary to appropriate it. Nature does

¹⁷⁸ Once again, the similarity between capital and Hegel is astonishing. I'll come back to this homology in the next chapter.

¹⁷⁹ C1 133f, 638; GP, LPW 208f.

¹⁸⁰ For an extended argument for this assertion, see Murray, "Marx's 'Truly Social' Labour Theory of Value: Part II," *op. cit.*, pp. 128-36.

not sell it to us, nor do we pay for its combustibility. The same goes for the breathability of the air, the fertility of the soil, the energy of the sun.¹⁸¹

As we've seen, capital economizes on all the commodities that enter into its production process, insofar as they are commodities. It has a built in tendency to reduce the costs of production as much as possible. But every input into the production process enters both as a value and as a material body. Capital cares as little for the latter as if it didn't exist at all. With regard to labor, capital's attitude is: "Time is everything, man is nothing; he is no more than the carcass of time."¹⁸² The same nothingness masks everything corporeal from capital's accounting. Insofar as the means and materials of production are flesh and blood, air, water, energy, soil—insofar as they are natural bodies—capital cannot possibly have any incentive to economize.¹⁸³

In an 1848 speech delivered before the Democratic Association of Brussels, for example, Marx sarcastically enthuses; "You thousands of workers who are perishing, do not despair! You can die with an easy conscience. Your class will not perish. It will always be numerous enough for the capitalist class to decimate it without fear of annihilating it. Besides, how could capital be usefully applied if it did not take care to keep up its exploitable material, i.e., the working men, to be exploited over and over

¹⁸¹ In fact, the labor/nature duality breaks down here; the capacity of human beings to do work is just as much a free gift of nature. This labor-power can only be commodified because we treat the worker as the owner of this power. A universal slave economy (itself an economic impossibility) would eliminate this possibility, thus making labor-power as uncommodifiable as gravity.

¹⁸² PP 57

¹⁸³ Therefore, I agree with Arthur's rejoinder to David Harvey and other Marxists who emphasize only the fact that capitalism's crisis-prone nature means we don't produce as much as we could. "It is clear that [Marx's] critique of capitalism's peculiar process of accumulation for the sake of accumulation is not one of distribution alone, that is, a critique of the fact that social wealth is not used for the benefit of all. It is also not a productivist critique—its thrust is not to indicate that the problem with capitalism is that the aggregate output of surplus value is not maximized in a balanced way. Marx's critique is not undertaken from a standpoint that affirms such maximization. Rather, his critique is of the very nature of the growth immanent in capital, of the trajectory of the dynamic itself" (*Dialectics of Labor*, op. cit., p. 309; see also pp. 311-14).

again?”¹⁸⁴ The answer, of course, is that it couldn't; but capital, *qua* capital, cannot see this. And capitalists—living, thinking human beings—are compelled by competition to disregard it as if they cannot see it either. Therefore, “Capitalist production is [...] a greater spendthrift than any other mode of production of man, of living labor, spendthrift not only of flesh and blood and muscles, but of brains and nerves.”¹⁸⁵

This characteristic of capital is something that Marx comes back to time and again, from a number of different angles. It lies behind much of his vitriol towards Malthus, for example, whose population theory represents “the brutal viewpoint of capital.”¹⁸⁶ Marx sums up this viewpoint in *Capital*; “What experience generally shows to the capitalist is a constant excess of population, i.e., an excess in relation to capital's need for valorization at a given moment, although this throng of people is made up of generations of stunted, short-lived and rapidly replaced human beings, plucked, so to speak, before they were ripe.”¹⁸⁷ As a consequence of this blindness to its own conditions of existence, a certain nihilism pervades capital, for, as a logic of production, it “allows its actual movement to be determined as much and as little by the coming degradation and final depopulation of the human race, as by the probable fall of the earth into the sun. [...] *Après moi le deluge!* is the watchword of every capitalist and every capitalist nation.”¹⁸⁸

This same nihilism exhibits itself in capital's relation to the earth.¹⁸⁹ While we may most readily think of the depletion of fossil fuels, the destruction of rainforests, or

¹⁸⁴ “Free Trade,” PP 222.

¹⁸⁵ MECW 30, p. 168.

¹⁸⁶ G 605

¹⁸⁷ C1 380

¹⁸⁸ C1 380f

¹⁸⁹ I think there is an implicit criticism of Horkheimer and Adorno here, for, as Chris Arthur puts it, “that Marx's critique is based on an analysis of the specific form of labor in capitalism rather than ‘labor,’ implies that the growing destruction of nature should not simply be seen, conversely, as a consequence of increasing human control and domination of nature” (*Dialectics of Labor*, op. cit., p. 312).

the greenhouse effect as signs of modern capitalism's inability to conserve the natural bases of wealth, Marx's own concern is most clearly invested in the depletion of the soil. In *Capital*, he argues that "all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is a progress towards ruining the more long-lasting sources of that fertility." Drawing together the two strands of capital's failure, he concludes; "Capitalist production, therefore, only develops the techniques and the degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth—the soil and the worker."¹⁹⁰ Likewise, in "Theories of Surplus Value," he pinpoints the "premature over-exertion and exhaustion" of the worker and the land, "the disturbance of the balance between expenditure and income" that characterizes capitalist production.¹⁹¹

The subsumption of labor under capital, the formation of capitalism as the global social form, presents us, therefore, with an unprecedented crisis. If *tekhnē*, through its blindness, created history, then capital, through its blindness, creates the end of history, for it presents us with Armageddon, with the real possibility of "common ruin."¹⁹² As a form of productivity, capital is a dead end; given the chance, it will simply use up every bit of its human and natural material, driving its workers into the ground and grinding down the earth itself into an unlivable ball of rock, a graveyard spinning silently through the void.¹⁹³

In the face of this crisis, Marx is often shockingly sanguine. He repeatedly emphasizes the positive aspects of capital, claiming, for instance, that; "It is in fact only at the greatest waste of individual development that the development of general

¹⁹⁰ C1 638

¹⁹¹ MECW 32, p. 442.

¹⁹² CM, LPW 2

¹⁹³ Despite my obvious debt to Chris Arthur's work, I don't think Arthur identifies the mechanism within capital's logic that leads to this apocalyptic tendency. The closest he comes is his claim that, "Raw materials and products [...] are bearers of value [and, therefore, capital] consumes material nature not only as the stuff of material wealth but also as a means of fueling its self-expansion" (op. cit., p. 312).

man is secured in those epochs of history which prelude to a socialist constitution of mankind.

Should this torture then torment us,
Since it brings us greater pleasure?
Were not through the rule of Timur
Souls devoured without measure?”¹⁹⁴

He is assured that capital has prepared the way for us to overcome it, that, “Above all, it produces its own gravediggers.”¹⁹⁵

But we are not yet considering that possibility,¹⁹⁶ and what must be stressed here is that, while capital may produce its own gravediggers, it also, in its crises, “drags with it into its grave the corpses of its slaves, whole hecatombs of workers.”¹⁹⁷ According to Marx, the bourgeoisie—capital’s vicar on earth—“is incapable of continuing as the ruling class of society [...] because it is incapable of assuring its slave any kind of existence within his slavery.”¹⁹⁸ We must remember that capital does not just “enslave” the industrial working class; capital enslaves every body that is subsumed under its form of productivity, whether as a worker, a raw material, a tool, or a product. As bodies—as the organs of its own body—capital squanders these, its slaves. It does not recognize or care that, in doing so, it is squandering its own substance. “The dream implied by the capital form is one of utter boundlessness, a fantasy of freedom as the complete liberation from matter, from nature. This ‘dream of capital’ is becoming the nightmare of that from which it strives to free itself—the planet and its inhabitants.”¹⁹⁹ As a mode of production, capital is the form of our collective suicide.

¹⁹⁴ MECW 30, p. 168; translation modified. The closing verse is from Goethe’s “An Suleika”, from *Westöstlicher Diwan*.

¹⁹⁵ CM, LPW 12

¹⁹⁶ This will be the project of the next chapters.

¹⁹⁷ “Wage Labor and Capital,” MECW 9, p. 228.

¹⁹⁸ CM, LPW 12

¹⁹⁹ Arthur, op. cit., p. 383.

Three

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Labor's Hell: Into Political Economy

You will not say that I hold the present too highly, and, if I do not despair about it nevertheless, it is only its own desperate position that fills me with hope.

Marx to Ruge, May 1843
Published in *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbucher* (1844)¹

The real subsumption of labor under capital seems to present us with an unprecedented dilemma. On one side, we are pressed ever more fearfully by the threat of mutually assured destruction inherent in capital's mode of production. The necessity of working our way out of capitalism, therefore, is continuously palpable. On the other side, however, we are confronted with the overwhelming effectivity of that very mode of production; capital works like nothing else, and in the face of developed capital, nothing else seems to work at all. The impossibility of working our way out of capital, therefore, is just as palpable. To see both of these things clearly, to consider the weight of them simultaneously, is to gain a sudden appreciation for the tragic.

But Marx's texts, which present us with the clearest and fullest appreciation of these twin necessities, do not read as tragedies. In Marx, we seem to have a figure who, after long and laborious consideration of the fateful dilemma posed by the capitalist mode of production, retains the self-certain calm of someone blissfully ignorant of the crisis. I don't think this feature of Marx's work can be explained by reference to some psychological peculiarity. Marx was dismissive of attempts by Hegel's students to "explain one or the other determination of his system out of accommodation and the like." In other words, he did not think it sufficient to explain, say, the justification of the monarch in the *Philosophy of Right*, by reference to Hegel's

¹ EW 205; translation modified.

personal desire to hold onto his prestigious university position, or his fear of censure. “That a philosopher commits this or that apparent inconsistency out of this or that accommodation is thinkable,” Marx continues; “he himself may be conscious of this. But what he is not conscious of is that the possibility of this apparent accommodation has its deepest roots in an inadequacy in or an inadequate composition of his principle itself. Thus, if a philosopher has actually accommodated himself, then his students have to explain *out of his inner, essential consciousness* what *for him himself* has the form of *an exoteric consciousness*.”² Likewise with Marx; the task is to explain the very possibility of his revolutionary optimism by reference to the innermost workings of his whole thinking.

Whatever this internal mechanism is, it is not a late mutation in Marx. In 1843-44, he played the foil to the defeatism rampant among his Young Hegelian peers. Responding to Arnold Ruge’s despondency—“our nation has no future, so what’s the point in our appealing to it”—Marx wrote; “No people despairs, and if, through stupidity, it merely hopes for many years, a sudden burst of cleverness will eventually enable it to fulfill its promise.”³ After savaging the current situation in Prussia, Marx adds the sentence I have placed at the head of this chapter; “You will not say that I hold the present too highly, and, if I do not despair about it nevertheless, it is only its own desperate position that fills me with hope.”⁴ His famous line from the 1859 Preface seems only to echo this much earlier sentiment; “Thus, humanity always only sets itself tasks that it can solve, since closer observation will always find that the task itself only arises when the material conditions of its solution are already present or at

² DDE, MECW 1, p. 84n2; translation modified.

³ Marx to Ruge, May 1843 (published in *Deutsche-Französische Jahrbuch*); EW 200; translation modified.

⁴ EW 205; translation modified.

least are understood to be in the process of their becoming.”⁵ That Marx drew hope from nothing other than the desperate situation before him seems, therefore, to be a constant of his political and theoretical practice.

Seeking to understand this hope is one part of the task of this chapter. It is, after all, a hope that few share anymore, and is, therefore, not easy to understand. The melancholy and “evil eye” of Arnold Ruge seems much more at home among late-Twentieth Century epigones and critical-critics of Marx than does anything like the “magnificent objective naïveté” that marks Marx’s own calls for revolution.⁶ But if Marx’s outlook is part of an overall tendency characterizing his whole thought, then to explain his hopefulness is also to account for his whole practical energy; it is, in short, to depict Marx’s own activity. Indeed, I hope that the depiction of Marx’s activity, spread over the next three chapters, will show that Marx does not simply call for a post-capitalist productivity, but that he engages in it. Marx’s hope, I want to show, is just the flip-side of his own revolutionary productivity, his own existence beyond capital.

Up to this point, I have tried to do nothing more than pay careful attention to the logic of Marx’s arguments. Where he has remained silent on a point, I have tried to reconstruct the argument on the basis of what he has said. Where he seems to say contradictory things, I have tried to find a perspective from which the apparent contradiction is reconciled. From here on out, however, something more will be required. It has been sufficient, hitherto, to listen carefully to what Marx has said, to read the words on the page. Now, however, I want to return to Marx’s texts with an ear for what he doesn’t say, an eye for what he doesn’t write. Beginning with *Capital*, I

⁵ LPW 160, translation modified.

⁶ Marx hails the “magnificent objective naïveté” of the Greeks in his dissertation notebooks (MECW 1, p. 500).

want to engage in something akin to what Dan Conway calls a “symptomatic reading.” The question, now, is not what Marx is *saying in* these texts, but what he is *doing through* them. Each of the previous two chapters has focused on a labor that appears explicitly in Marx’s own argument; now I want to attend to the labor that Marx himself performs in constructing his arguments and putting them forth into the world in the form he did. We know what Marx *says* about labor, but what does he *do* about it?

A. At the entrance to science

And, putting his hand on mine
with a cheerful glance from which I drew strength,
he introduced me into the secret things.

Dante,
Inferno, 3.19-21

It seems that every effort to rediscover Marx, to find a “Marx beyond Marx,” must, by some unspoken rule, proceed by bracketing *Capital*. The “1844 Manuscripts,” *The German Ideology*, and the *Grundrisse* have each functioned as bases for elaborating an “unknown” Marx, a Marx that challenges the orthodox assumptions.⁷ The broadsheets and broadsides Marx published as a journalist and pugilist for the varied democratic and communist factions with which he was allied

⁷ The 1844 Manuscripts have spawned: David McLellan, *Marx Before Marxism*, (New York & Evanston, IL: Harper & Row, 1970); Takahisa Oishi, *The Unknown Marx: Reconstructing a Unified Perspective*, (London: Pluto Press, 2001); Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx’s Concept of Man in Capitalist Society*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1971); and the entire range of Marxist Humanism, from Lukács and Hyppolite to Lawrence Wilde.

The German Ideology supports the whole sub-genre on “historical materialism,” and its second part has provided ammunition for those who develop a picture of Marx the politician, as opposed to the economist and philosopher. See, e.g., Mark Reinhardt, *The Art of Being Free: Taking Liberties with Tocqueville, Marx, and Arendt*, (Ithaca, NY & London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1997).

The *Grundrisse*, finally, gave rise to: Carol C. Gould, *Marx’s Social Ontology: Individuality and Community in Marx’s Theory of Social Reality*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978); Thomas M. Kemple, *Reading Marx Writing: Melodrama, the Market, and the “Grundrisse,”* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press: 1995); Richard Marsden, *The Nature of Capital: Marx after Foucault*, (London & New York: Routledge, 1999); Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*, tr. Harry Cleaver, et al., ed. Jim Fleming, (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia/Pluto, 1991); and Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993) (for starters).

have furnished ample material for reconstructing a rhetorical, political Marx clearly engaged in concrete and uncertain struggles.⁸ The unpublished drafts and marginal notes have provided evidence of a Marx at once more nuanced and more visionary.⁹ But *Capital* is always ceded as the province of the orthodox. It is the old Marx, the one that everyone knows.¹⁰

I think this pigeonholing of *Capital* follows from an uncritical acceptance of certain notions of Marx's intellectual progress. The "mature" Marx, the one who puts social science before political practice, sets aside his role as philosopher, pamphleteer, and partisan, and becomes a social and economic scientist, retreating to the study to discover the truth of capitalism; *Capital* is the fruit of this scholarly labor. This is the story every commentator agrees on because it is the story Marx himself tells in the 1859 Preface, the prologue to the first attempt at *Capital*, wherein his massive output of polemics, philosophy, and journalism between 1839 and 1859 either disappears or—as with the *Manifesto* (of all things)—is assimilated to a progression of scholarly works. Looking over the mountain of books that dissect, diagnose, and demystify Marx—from love or from malice—it is astonishing how central this short text, and the story it tells, have become to our efforts to know where Marx stands, whether in order to place ourselves at his side, to run as far away from him as we can, or to better

⁸ See, e.g.: Terrell Carver, *The Postmodern Marx*, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1998); Martin Harries, *Scare Quotes from Shakespeare: Marx, Keynes, and the Language of Reenchantment*, (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2000); Alistair McLeish, "The Rhetoric of the *Communist Manifesto*," *Studies in Marxism*, 4, 1997, pp. 59-78; and Reinhardt, op. cit.

⁹ See: Michael Heinrich, "Engels' Edition of the Third Volume of *Capital* and Marx's Original Manuscript," *Science and Society*, 60, 1996-7, pp. 452-66; Leszek Nowak, *The Structure of Idealization: Towards a Systematic Interpretation of the Marxian Idea of Science*, (Dordrecht, Boston & London: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1980); Allen Oakley, *Marx's Critique of Political Economy: Intellectual Sources and Evolution*, 2 volumes, (London & Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984); and, most explicitly, James D. White, "Marx: From 'The Critique of Political Economy' to *Capital*," *Studies in Marxism*, 1, 1994, pp. 89-105.

¹⁰ As Terrell Carver summarizes the popular wisdom, "amongst those works thought to be boringly literal in their scientificity, it would be hard to find one more widely derided than Marx's *Capital*" (*The Postmodern Marx*, op. cit., p. 9). Carver's work stands out in this regard, in that he actually begins the process of reading *Capital* differently.

target our missiles and bombs. Whether it is cited explicitly or not, the autobiographical narrative of the 1859 Preface is the keystone of the edifice of Marxology.¹¹

What I find so worthy of skepticism in all attempts to fix Marx's position by means of the 1859 Preface is the eminently questionable assumption that Marx is therein "really" or "honestly" telling us "what he's up to." As soon as Marx says, "This is what I have been doing," we jump to take him at his word, and then judge the success of his other works on the basis of the intention he so conveniently revealed to us in 1859. Here, we seem to think, we have gotten behind all textuality and are exposed directly to Marx's own self-image, to his statement of purpose. The hermeneutics of suspicion is here suspended in the face of Marx's simple declaration.¹²

I hope, in the next two chapters, to disclose a "*Capital* beyond *Capital*"—and beyond capital as well. I think this task is particularly important given my own presentation of capital's Hegelian logic in the previous chapter, for I have portrayed capital as a seemingly closed system, an abstracting machine that founds and re-founds itself, making the world more and more adequate to its own functioning, even at the price of destroying that world. If *Capital* is to alleviate these concerns, not only must it *not* be the work in systematic dialectics that Hegelians want it to be, but it

¹¹ Compare the judgment of Richard Marsden: "The *Preface* functions as the guide to Cohen's, much criticized, but not yet displaced, use of analytic philosophy to explicate Marx's Key concepts. And Sayer's critique of Cohen agrees that 'there remains no reason not to regard the 1859 *Preface* as Marxists traditionally have: as providing a definitive summary [...] of the core of materialist conception of history.' The *Preface* survives as the most influential guide to Marx's analytic and it is no exaggeration to say it stands as an obstacle to developing an alternative to traditional Marxism" (*The Nature of Capital*, op. cit., p. 91).

¹² Our credulity in the face of autobiographical statement is hardly limited to Marx. Socrates in the *Apology* and the *Phaedo*, Plato in the "Seventh Letter," Augustine and Rousseau in their *Confessions*, Machiavelli and Dante in their letters, Nietzsche in *Ecce Homo*: we believe them all. Doesn't this account for the hermeneutic fascination with interviews and letters—that here, at last, we expect to be told the truth, and in plain language, too?

must also not *fall short* of such systematicity. In other words, if it is to be a revolutionary text, *Capital* must be a fully systematic conceptual presentation, but it must also exceed the very system it presents, and direct its reader towards this “going beyond.”

I believe that *Capital* does just this. I hope in these two chapters to demonstrate this by attention to the explicit and implicit textual linkages between *Capital* and Dante’s *Inferno*. If political economy is the logic of capital, distilled into propositional form, then Marx’s critique of political economy enacts a descent into that logic and an overcoming of it. Capital is the hell of labor, and *Capital* is the hell of Marx’s own labor; but, as in Dante, only by a passage through hell can we make ourselves ready for the purgatory of revolution.

1. Karl Marx’s *Wanderjahre*

In 1859, Karl Marx declared to the world that he was an unbiased scientific investigator. The preface to his *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* is composed of what he calls a “sketch of the course of [his] studies,” an intellectual autobiography that traces his trajectory from editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung* to surveyor of bourgeois political economy. Marx portrays this development as a movement from ignorance to knowledge. While engaged in journalism, he claims, he had run up against “so-called material interests” involuntarily, and, he claims further, much to his embarrassment. He says he resisted the first pushes of those around him toward French socialism and communism, out of a principled unwillingness to botch the job. Only after his researches in Paris did he come to see that “the anatomy of bourgeois society is to be sought in political economy.” He only admits reaching the

“general result,” which “served as a guiding thread for [his] studies,” in Brussels in 1845.¹³

At the end of the preface, Marx casts the just completed sketch of his history as an *apologia*. It “should merely demonstrate that my views, however one may judge them, and however little they agree with the interested prejudices of the ruling classes, are the result of conscientious and lengthy research.”¹⁴ The point of the preface is to portray Marx as a serious scholar, and to thereby foreclose the accusation that his position is merely that of a political partisan. This strategy gives the whole preface what Terrell Carver calls “a curiously de-politicized form.”¹⁵ In addition, Marx’s pointed remarks about opposing the botching of the *Rheinische Zeitung* lend a Cartesian flavor to his conscientiousness. His colleagues at the paper turned to “French socialism and communism, faintly tinged with philosophy” because “the good will to go further often outweighed factual knowledge at that time.” Marx avoided this error by refusing to allow his will, good or otherwise, to exceed the scope of his intellect.¹⁶ Instead, he withdrew to his “private study” to “dispel the doubts that disturbed [him],” just as Descartes before him, seeking certain knowledge, on which secure basis he could make certain judgments.¹⁷

¹³ CPE 20; translation modified. This general result is the oft-cited passage: “In the social production of their lives men enter into relations that are specific, necessary, and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a specific stage of development of their material productive forces. The totality of these relations of production forms the economic structure of society, the real basis from which rises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond specific forms of social consciousness” (CPE 20; translation modified). About this passage, Terrell Carver writes; “That text can be read as the doctrinal foundation of Marxism, a science of law-like tendencies in economic and political life guaranteed by abstractly formulated ‘materialist premises’ or concretely perceived ‘class struggle.’ [...] The same propositions can also be examined as ‘empirical’ propositions in social science, or as attempts at such. [...] Both readings are at the heart of the academic enterprise that Marxology has become, and both have generated intensely interesting intellectual debate. *Neither puts Marx into perspective as a political theorist*” (LPW, “Introduction,” p. xv; my emphasis).

¹⁴ CPE 23; translation modified.

¹⁵ LPW xiv.

¹⁶ See Descartes’ “Fourth Meditation” for his formulation of error as the will exceeding the intellect.

¹⁷ CPE 20; translation modified.

Here is Marx presenting himself to the public as a scientist who believes that right action can only proceed on the foundation of a correct knowledge of the situation and the laws that govern it. In the realm of the relations of production, as he says, the transformation of society is “to be established with the accuracy of physical science.”¹⁸ This self-presentation is only reinforced by his second preface to the critique of political economy, the one to the first edition of *Capital*, where Marx analogizes his work to that of the physicist, the molecular biologist, and the natural historian. He warns the reader about the difficulty of the first few chapters by saying, “Beginnings are always difficult in all sciences.” He refers twice to the natural laws of economic development. He laments the obstacles that “the Furies of private interest” present to “free scientific inquiry” in economics.¹⁹

However, there is one detail in each preface, consistently overlooked by Marxologists of every stripe, that puts a question mark after this whole self-presentation. Both prefaces end with citations from Dante. The final sentence of the 1859 Preface, directly following Marx’s *apologia*, incorporates a quotation from the *Inferno*. The sentence runs thus: “But at the entrance to science, as at the entrance to Hell, this demand must be registered: ‘Here one must abandon every suspicion; every cowardice must die here.’”²⁰ Similarly, the final lines of the *Capital* preface contain a citation of *Purgatory* (slightly doctored by Marx); “Every opinion based on scientific criticism I welcome. As to the prejudices of so-called public opinion, to which I have never made concessions, now as before the maxim of the great Florentine is mine: ‘Follow your own course, and let the people talk.’”²¹

¹⁸ CPE 21; translation modified.

¹⁹ C1 89-92

²⁰ CPE 23; translation modified.

²¹ C1 93; Dante’s line runs, “Come after me, and let the people talk” (Pur. 5.13).

To my knowledge, no one has drawn attention to these citations, despite their crucial placement in the unfolding of Marx's science. Why is Marx twice drawn to Dante's poem at the very same juncture—the *final* words before entering into his critique of political economy? What can account for the apparent need to turn to Dante immediately before investigating the commodity? Is it not remarkable that Marx closes both published prefaces to his life-long scientific project with references to the greatest poet of Christianity?²²

The quote in the 1859 Preface is especially striking. If Marx is so bent on producing a science, why compare science to Hell?²³ Hell has the distinction of never being a chosen destination. Given the plot of Dante's poem, moreover, the questionableness of the comparison seems doubled. One of the reasons cited in the letter to Can Grande for calling Dante's poem a comedy is that it portrays a movement that overcomes all of the unhappiness of its beginning; it is "the conversion of the soul from the grief and misery of sin to the state of grace."²⁴ *The Divine Comedy* has a happy ending because Dante escapes from Hell, and from the prospect of ever returning to it. Perhaps science must likewise be escaped in order for *Marx's* tale to end happily. Perhaps our souls must be saved from the prospect of eternal damnation in science. If, in Marx's judgment, political economy is still needed, it would certainly not be as a principle or foundation for political action, but rather as a necessary trial.

With this comparison of science and Hell, I propose, Marx situates his critique of political economy as the heir to the Western tradition of the *katabasis*, the

²² Even if Dante's Christianity is less than orthodox, his reception has generally been far more conservative than his texts themselves. Also, his only real competition for the title of "greatest Christian poet" is Milton, whose orthodoxy seems equally dubitable.

²³ Richard Marsden notes the citation, but quite inexplicably decides that "by quoting Dante in conclusion, Marx cloaks himself in the legitimacy of science" (*The Nature of Capital*, op. cit., p. 107).

²⁴ Dante's authorship of the letter to Can Grande has been contested, but the explanation of the meaning of *commedia* does not rest so much on authorial intention as it does on connotation, something over which no author has command.

“educational” descent into the underworld. He casts us, his readers, as pilgrims—joining, among others, Odysseus, Theseus, Heracles, Dionysus, Socrates, Er, Aeneus, Jesus Christ, Saint Paul, and Dante himself—on a round-trip to a place from which one can hardly expect to return. Obviously, given just this partial list of past pilgrims, the *katabasis* can take many forms, and serve many functions. Nonetheless, Marx’s citation links him to a very particular lineage, the identification of which can help to characterize Marx’s project. Dante’s inferno is an elaborate reworking of the Hades of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, which, in turn, draws many of its central tropes from Homer’s portrayal of the underworld in the *Odyssey*. When one examines this direct citational lineage—Odysseus to Aeneus to Dante—there emerges a tendential pattern that produces certain expectations of Marx’s *katabasis*.²⁵ With every reiteration, the *katabases* of the Homer-Virgil-Dante line transform and empower the pilgrim to a greater degree. I believe that Marx’s reiteration further augments this theme of empowering metamorphosis.

2. *The Function of the Katabasis*

To see what I mean by “empowering metamorphosis,” let us examine the reiterations in question. Odysseus returns from the land of the dead oriented toward his fate, which is foretold by Tiresius. This knowledge does not, however, alter his course in any obvious way; he persists without any fundamental change in his activity.²⁶ Even when his fate makes room for a choice, as with the flocks of Helios, he does not avoid the worst outcome, the prophesied loss of his crew. The change he

²⁵ It is worth noting that Marx references all three of these epics within *Capital: Odyssey* (364); *Aeneid* (416, 925); *Inferno* (356).

²⁶ This is basically Heidegger’s characterization of Greek “science,” though with Prometheus standing in for Odysseus as the exemplary figure. “Science is the questioning holding one’s ground in the midst of the ever self-concealing totality of what is. This active perseverance knows, as it perseveres, about its impotence before fate” (“The Self-Assertion of the German University,” tr. Karsten Harries, in *The Review of Metaphysics* 38:467-481, 1985, p. 470).

could have made—restraining his and his crew’s desires—is not effected, but merely recognized as *not* having been effected at the moment its absence becomes tragic. Odysseus perseveres in the face of his revealed fate; he is immutable, and so is the world in which he finds himself. He can mourn the loss of his crew and lament his own hubris, but he can change neither himself nor his fate. He had to die and wait for Plato to give him a chance at a new life as a private man.²⁷

Aeneas also learns of his fate in Hades, but the fate of which he is appraised is one that stretches beyond himself through his offspring to the creation of the Roman Empire. The future foretold in Hades is the future of his productivity. It is not simply something that befalls him from beyond; instead it is something that he will make. Despite Virgil’s deep indebtedness to Homer’s account, there are two striking additions to Aeneas’ pilgrimage. Aeneas is not simply *told* of the future; he *sees* it in the forms of spectacular warnings and promises. The souls punished in Hades are the warnings. They produce in Aeneas an aversion to certain appetites and activities. The procession of souls awaiting rebirth is the promise. The cosmos is awaiting your actions, they say to Aeneas.

Dante’s journey radicalizes Aeneas’ education by inwardizing it as “a descent in humility, a death of the self,” as John Freccero has called it.²⁸ His travels below make Dante into a new person, one who is ready for the labor of purification that awaits in Purgatory. At the beginning of the poem, he is unable to climb the hill towards the light he has seen.²⁹ He is damned to Hell no matter what. Were Beatrice not to intervene, he would be consigned *eternally* to Hell. Because of her intervention,

²⁷ See Plato’s *Republic*, 620c.

²⁸ *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. Rachel Jacoff, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986), p. 4. Freccero’s reading of the *Inferno*—contained in the first eleven chapters of his book—will be a touchstone throughout what follows.

²⁹ See *Ibid.*, Chapters One and Two, especially pp 4-15 and 44-54.

however, Dante must only go *temporarily* to Hell. Unlike both Odysseus and Aeneas, Dante has a salvific conversion experience; his *katabasis* changes his fate by changing his soul.

Yet this inward transformation is not a repudiation of the worldly effects highlighted in the *Aeneid*. In Canto Two, before entering Hell, Dante recoils from the pilgrimage in doubt of his own strength (*virtù*). He compares himself to Aeneas and Paul, the acknowledged precedents for his descent, and questions his presence in such illustrious company. He refers to “the high effect that was to come” from Aeneas, and then elaborates: “Through this journey that you [Virgil] claim for him, he understood things that were the cause of his victory and of the papal mantle.”³⁰ He then says of Paul: “Later the chosen vessel went there, to bring back strengthening for that faith which is the principle of the way of salvation.”³¹ Aeneas’ *katabasis* prepared him to found the Roman Empire, the precursor of the Church. Paul’s *katabasis* permitted him to strengthen Christianity, transforming Aeneas’ empire into a Christian one. The *katabasis* is a sign of election and a preparation for playing a world historical role. Dante sees this significance and protests: “I am not Aeneas, I am not Paul.”³²

But we should not be thrown off by the protestations. Dante is here establishing himself as precisely a *new* Aeneas, a *new* Paul. The protest of the pilgrim might signify honest incredulity, but for the fact that the pilgrim is also the poet, who already knows the pilgrim is strong enough to succeed, since he is writing the poem from the perspective of the completed journey. We must conclude that Dante’s self-effacement is insincere; Dante is writing himself into history as the third of a glorious

³⁰ Inf. 2.17-18, 25-27

³¹ Inf. 2.28-30

³² Inf. 2.32

triumvirate. Aeneas' trip to Hell prepared him to found an empire on earth. Paul's trip prepared him to found an empire of the heart. Dante's trip, he himself implies, inaugurates a third empire, an empire of the letter, perhaps. When one reflects, as well, that Dante is the first great poet to write in the vernacular (almost a century before Chaucer), that he, in *De Monarchia*, called for a global government on the basis of humanity's oneness, and that he reveals to all readers "the secret things" of Christianity,³³ one can justifiably conclude that the empire Dante claims to inaugurate is modernity itself.

Thus, Dante's *katabasis* gives rise not only to a salvific metamorphosis of his own soul, but also to an immense new power. Aeneas' generative powers were revealed to him in Hades, but it is ambiguous whether or not they were bestowed upon him *by* his descent. With Dante, however, it is obvious that he could not produce his poem without undergoing the journey it relates. The proof of the descent's gift of productivity is that we know about the descent in the first place. Dante's *katabasis* gives rise, through Dante himself, to its own memorialization. The *katabasis* itself becomes an *autopoietic* subject, replicating itself in Dante's poem, whereby it is then disseminated far and wide, universalized for each and every reader.

That Marx cites Dante's *katabasis* in 1859, therefore, in the final instant before entering into the critique of political economy, mouthing Virgil's reassurance to the pilgrim at the gates of Hell, suggests to me that Marx is himself engaged in a similar project.³⁴ I will use the remainder of this chapter, and part of the next, to outline what

³³ Inf. 3.21

³⁴ Citations from Dante crop up rather suddenly in Marx's writings from the 1850s, and continue throughout the rest of his life. The first published citation I know of is in his column for the *New York Daily Tribune*, 4 April, 1853. Karl Liebknecht, who was close to Marx throughout the '50s, gives testimony that Marx declaimed aloud from *The Divine Comedy*, and that he taught himself Italian by reading Dante and Machiavelli. There is also a cluster of citations from '59 and '60—from the *NYDT* and, especially, *Herr Vogt*, as well as the *Contribution*—and another cluster from the first volume of *Capital*. See S. S. Praver, *Karl Marx and World Literature*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), especially pp. 208, 239f, 261-264, 338f,

I take to be the transformative and empowering effect of Marx's own *katabasis*, all in an effort to show that *Capital* does far more than it is usually given credit for.

B. Marx as guide

Everything in science depends on what one calls an *aperçu*, on becoming aware of what is at the bottom of the phenomena. Such becoming aware is infinitely fertile.

Goethe
Galileo Galilei (1810)

1. The Guide's Rhetoric

Both of Marx's preface citations were originally Virgil's words to Dante. In repeating Virgil's words, Marx would seem, therefore, to cast himself as a Virgilian guide to his readers. In order to understand this role-playing, we must first investigate what characterizes Virgil as a guide.

Marx's 1859 citation comes from Canto Three of *Inferno*. Virgil has brought Dante to the gate of Hell, which bears this inscription:

Through me the way into the grieving city,
through me the way into eternal sorrow,
through me the way among the lost people.
Justice moved my high maker;
divine power made me,
highest wisdom, and primal love.
Before me were no things created
except eternal ones, and I endure eternal.
Abandon every hope, you who enter.³⁵

383f, and 419-421. Dante also heads a list of Marx's favorite poets—also including Aeschylus, Shakespeare, and Goethe—in an undated “confession” in his hand found in his daughter Jenny's album. (Another version of the “confession,” from the spring of 1865, does not include Dante; see MEW 42, pp. 569, 674n620.) Finally, there is a page of excerpts from Karl Lüdwig Kannegießer's German translation, *Die göttliche Komödie dem Dante Alighieri*, in one of Marx's notebooks from 1859 or 1860 (IISG, B 93, S. 19), all from *Inferno*. These excerpts form the basis of the citations in *Herr Vogt*, to which I will return in Chapter Five.

³⁵ Inf. 3.1-9

Dante sees the inscribed words, but he does not fully understand their import; “their sense is hard for me,” he says. “Hard [*duro*]” can be taken in at least the two senses of 1) difficult to understand or 2) harsh (as of God’s punishments at II.96), though it also echoes the gate’s claim above that “eternal I endure [*io eterno duro*].” I will stress the first reading, but the ambiguity seems important to the passage, since the inscription’s harsh threats surely explain why the words are hard for Dante to understand. Dante reacts the way one suddenly sentenced to death might react; he is stunned, and can only mutter, “But I don’t understand.” Virgil, “like one alert,” responds with the words Marx quotes; “Here one must abandon every suspicion; every cowardice must die here.” Then he smiles, takes Dante’s hand, and leads him into Hell.

Virgil’s response is initially unsatisfying, in that it does not explicate the hard sense of the inscription as the pilgrim seems to request. The inscription Dante doesn’t understand instructs travelers to abandon every *hope*; Virgil tells Dante to abandon only his suspicion.³⁶ The words on the gate *inspire* fear, yet Virgil demands that Dante put his cowardice to death. He does not give Dante any reasons for ignoring the threats contained on the gate. He does not explain the gate’s claims. As hermeneutics, Virgil’s response fails miserably. Nonetheless, the poet explicitly tells us Virgil is alert.³⁷ Virgil must, therefore, be engaged in something other than explication.

Dante has already suggested the answer to the riddle, I believe, in Canto II, where Virgil tells of Beatrice descending to limbo to recruit him. In her appeal,

³⁶ There is, throughout *Inferno*, a strong negative relationship between hope, strength and faith, on the one hand, and suspicion, doubt and fear, on the other.

³⁷ The Italian is *accorta*, which connotes for Dante much more than sense perception, and could also be rendered as “shrewd” in order to stress the many levels of Virgil’s perception, which has much in common with practical wisdom.

Beatrice makes special reference to Virgil's "ornamented" and "virtuous speech."³⁸ Beatrice's choice of Virgil to guide Dante is motivated, largely, by the two rhetorical considerations implied in *parola ornata* and *parlare onesto*. First, Virgil's speech is artfully constructed. This means, in keeping with classical rhetoric, that he is aware of the power of language as a tool, and takes care to wield that tool with skill. Compassing Virgil's speech throughout *Inferno*, it appears that the aim to which he puts his art is assuaging the pilgrim's fear and replacing it with confidence. The measure of his success can be taken from the drastic reduction in references to the pilgrim's fear after the first few cantos.³⁹ He is not, for this, perfect; there are two notable instances in *Inferno*—the two confrontations with devils—where Virgil slips and says more to Dante than he ought, making the pilgrim fearful. Even in these two cases, however, Virgil catches his error and is able to repair it almost immediately.⁴⁰

Of greater import is that both of Virgil's slips come from him saying *too much*, expressing too openly his own thoughts, being too truthful. The artfulness of Virgil's speech must be contrasted, therefore, with openness. For this reason, Beatrice's faith in his "*parlare onesto*" should not be taken as a sign that Virgil will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. The etymological derivation of honesty from honor must be recalled. Virgil's speech is honest in that it is honorable; it "honors [Virgil] and those who have heeded it."⁴¹ It is not honorable to say everything that could be said. Honest speech, in order to be honest, must leave things unsaid, which is to say, rhetoric is the only honest speech.

³⁸ Inf. 2.67; 2.113.

³⁹ I count fourteen attestations of the pilgrim's fear or cowardice in the first four cantos, and only fifteen in the next thirty cantos combined. Of the latter, four are clustered around the confrontation at the gates of Dis, and four more around the encounter with the devils in the fifth bolgia, the two places where Virgil's rhetoric breaks down. This pattern is not greatly altered by including references to the pilgrim's suspicion, linked to cowardice in Virgil's command.

⁴⁰ See Inf. 9.1-15 and 23.139-24.18.

⁴¹ Inf. 2.114

Second, Virgil's speech is attuned to the audience for whom he has been chosen. As the pilgrim attests when Virgil reveals himself; "You are my master and my author, you alone are he from whom I have taken the lovely style that has won me honor."⁴² Virgil has more than an abstract technical proficiency with words; he approaches Dante as someone whose words are already admired and trusted. The ornament of his speech is lovely *to Dante*. His words are honorable *to Dante*. Indeed, as Beatrice's homage to Virgil's virtuous speech establishes, honor binds author, speech and audience together. Honorable speech honors its author and "those who have heeded it." For this reason, it is misleading to make Virgil into simply an allegory of reason, especially if reason is taken in a universal, Kantian sense. If Virgil is Dante's reason embodied, then he is *Dante's* reason. Dante's master and author would not be chosen to lead another into Hell; Virgil is a made-to-order guide.

The response to Dante's query at the gate, then, is an early and prominent example of Virgil's artful and fitting speech. What fails as hermeneutics succeeds as rhetoric. Virgil does not explain the gate's sense because he does not need to do so in order to accomplish his goal of strengthening Dante and moving him along. He redirects Dante's attention away from the inscription and back to himself as guide, drawing upon his charge's trust and admiration. By telling Dante to abandon his suspicion and kill his cowardice, Virgil implies that the only possible reasons the pilgrim would not enter Hell would be mistrust of his master and author—something we already know Dante could not admit—or cowardice. This is a classical rhetorical strategy—"What? Are you chicken?"—that is still used to high effect on school-yards everywhere.

⁴² Inf. 1.85-87

It is also used by Marx in the 1859 Preface, except that in his rhetorical task he faces obstacles Virgil does not. First, the average reader in Germany doesn't know him from Adam. It is worth remembering that, at the time of its publication, the *Contribution* was not preceded by universal recognition of Marx's name. He was a rather obscure journalist and polemicist, known in the labor, socialist, and democratic movements, but hardly a household name. (This status was not much improved by the *Contribution*, either, for it sold very poorly.) Virgil can use the pilgrim's avowed adoration to his advantage. When Virgil says, "Trust me," Dante does. If Marx's audience were to stop at the threshold of the critique of political economy and say, "I'm not sure..." what resources of trust could Marx possibly draw upon to lure them on?

Second, the small number of readers who do know his previous work—mostly the *Manifesto*—are not so much devotees who will follow Marx anywhere as they are wary and embattled radicals who are suffering through a long hangover from the heady days of 1848. This new dispatch from the expatriate Marx would be noted with curiosity, but perhaps with skepticism as well. Finally, the readers who probably best know Marx for who he is, and whose reactions must be attended to before all others, are the Prussian censors. A. M. Prinz has done an admirable job highlighting the effects of censorship upon Marx's presentation in the 1859 Preface.⁴³ As he writes, "censorship had produced the art of reading between the lines and thus induced authors to practice the art of writing between the lines."⁴⁴

It seems to me that Marx attempted to placate the censors, encourage the supporters, and establish himself as a trustworthy guide, all in the space of a few

⁴³ "Background and Ulterior Motives of Marx's 'Preface' of 1859," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 30 (3), 1969, pp 437-50.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 439.

pages. “Marx’s frankness about his earlier political activities revived memories among his supporters of past battles and impressed the authorities with his apparent sincerity. His remarks about ‘starting again from the very beginning’ and working ‘carefully through the new material’ can be interpreted as a break with his former convictions or as an intensification of them, depending on one’s point of view, censor or supporter.”⁴⁵ The guiding thread of his studies is couched in utterly impersonal terms, and revolution is depicted as an abstract social process, in no way suggesting violent uprisings or armed struggle; it is simply a transformation of society. The only conflict mentioned is that between “the social forces of production and the relations of production.”⁴⁶ It is one of the great ironies of Marxology that so much orthodox and academic Marxism should take as its absolute touchstone a characterization of Marx’s project that was deliberately written to allay fears of revolution, to seem absolutely unthreatening, and to be completely acceptable to Prussian censors in a time of reaction.

Yet, securing his critique’s arrival at its audience is only the first hurdle for Marx’s Preface. The primary rhetorical task remains the enlistment of the readers’ trust. Marx tackle’s this problem, it seems, by exploiting the fact that his primary audience doesn’t know him from Adam, or from Adam Smith. The autobiographical sketch is Marx’s attempt to create himself in the reader’s mind as someone who may be trusted. Since moderns trust no one so much as they trust a scientist, it is no surprise that Marx should don the mantle of the scholar, and highlight his lengthy research, carried on under the most disagreeable circumstances. Expelled from France and Belgium (he doesn’t mention Germany) because of his fearless inquiries, continuously set upon by necessity, Marx has finally arrived. His “whole material lies

⁴⁵ Marsden, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

⁴⁶ CPE 21; translation modified.

before” him, and he is prepared to guide his readers, who, if they “want to follow,” “must decide to climb from the singular to the general”⁴⁷—the decision is theirs. And so, when Marx comes to the end of his self-portrait, when he has insisted that his conclusions are the results of conscientious and lengthy research, he has finally reached the point where he can make a demand. He has established the basis on which he can be trusted—he is a scientist and a fearless seeker of truth—and he has cast himself as the sort of brave soul who can challenge others to be brave as well. Science, even before the comparison to Hell, has been portrayed as dangerous, as the sort of pursuit that can get you deported. It is not for everyone. It is for the few who are brave. Marx asks his readers to elect themselves as fearless enough to enter science with him.

This tactic is redeployed and further developed in the *Capital* preface. As I mentioned above, Marx alters the Virgilian command he cites. Where Virgil rebukes Dante—“Follow me and let the people talk”—Marx says only, “Follow your own course and let the people talk”—and this not as a command, but as a simple report of his own motto. This alteration follows from the difference between Virgil’s personal relationship to Dante and Marx’s impersonal relationship to his readers. Marx cannot possibly draw upon any personal authority; to flatly command his readers to follow him would get him nowhere. Yet, his feigned solitude and indifference is belied by his efforts, frequently attested in letters, to popularize *Capital* as much as possible. Marx wants his audience to follow him, but he also knows his audience. If he claims to be following his own course, then those who follow him can tell themselves the same thing. He has hit upon a rhetorical device that could only work in modernity: “Be an individual—like me.” Again, but in an even more radical way, only self-election will suffice.

⁴⁷ CPE 19; translation modified.

The theme of self-election is, as I mentioned above, also present in Dante. I suggested that Dante the poet elected himself to inaugurate a modern empire that would transcend Aeneas' Roman and Paul's Catholic empires. Extending this speculation, we can say of Marx that his Preface seeks those readers willing to elect themselves part of the constituent power of a post-modern empire. With apologies to Hardt and Negri, we can call this mobile and collective "subject"—interpellated by Marx's demand in 1859 and joined by new readers ever since—the "executive council" of the multitude. This self-elected body, democratic yet radically non-representative, whose members do not generally know one another, and which is without any institution, is the reinstatement of the communist party that manifested itself in 1848.⁴⁸ It is also, perhaps, the working body of the Paris commune in 1871. If we join this body now on its descent into political economy, we will hopefully have occasion later to consider what it might do upon its re-emergence.⁴⁹

2. *The Guide's Awareness*

As I mentioned above, the word used to describe Virgil in his response is *accorta*, which denotes perception or awareness. I have already glossed this awareness as a sort of practical wisdom, and linked it to the rhetorical tradition. Now I want to examine more closely the object of this awareness. What does Virgil perceive that enables him to speak to Dante as he does? What end in view directs his rhetoric?

⁴⁸ Hal Draper, among others, has called attention to the fact that the "party" of the manifesto does not refer to any "party apparatus," despite our retrospective associations. In the 1840s, "party" simply meant "faction," whether or not that faction was in any way organized. See Draper's *The Adventures of the Communist Manifesto*, (Berkeley: Center for Social History, 1994).

⁴⁹ I am also reminded of the use Derrida makes of Blanchot's "community of those who have nothing in common." In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida calls this "the new international," for which he has caught a lot of flak from the Marxist police (i.e., Terry Eagleton). Whatever shortcomings Derrida's reading of Marx might suffer from (see, e.g., Terrell Carver, *The Postmodern Marx*, op. cit., Chapter One), it is not clear to me that his radically anti-*avant garde* notion of the international is so far from Marx's own conception.

Dante, as a pilgrim, is defined by a certain unawareness, by what he has not yet seen. To lead one who is blind, you ought not be blind yourself. So what does Virgil see?

In general, we can say that a condition for the possibility of the guide's rhetoric is a perceiving of the limit of the pilgrimage. The guide must know where the pilgrimage *ends* in order to lead the pilgrim. Because pilgrimages are more than simple journeys from A to B, the guide must know not only the bare fact of the end, but must understand that end, perceive it for the end it is, and know what constitutes its finality. By definition, this awareness cannot be shared with the pilgrim at the beginning of the journey; the point of the pilgrimage is for the pilgrim to come to see what she does not yet see.

We can now answer the riddle of Virgil's (non)response at the gate. Virgil chooses not to explicate the gate's inscription because he knows what Dante cannot yet know, and what the gate does not say, that Hell is finite, that there is a way out. No pilgrim would willingly enter Hell after reading and understanding the sense of the inscription on the gate. Dante's fear and hesitation are absolutely warranted by that inscription, for Dante does not yet see the way beyond Hell.⁵⁰ Indeed, even at the final moment of their journey, Dante does not see beyond Hell. With Dante on his back, Virgil is climbing down Satan's flank; when he reaches the very center of the cosmos, he turns 180 degrees and begins to climb (what is now) up into the cave beneath Purgatory. Dante, at that moment, thinks Virgil is climbing back into Hell, and he is confused when they emerge to find—instead of the frozen lake of Cocytus—Satan's feet protruding helplessly into the cavern.⁵¹ Dante cannot, even at the very end of his

⁵⁰ I will return in the next section—and again in Chapter Four—to the fact that the gate's inscription does not reveal the limit of Hell.

⁵¹ Inf. 34.88-90

journey, understand the reversal and exit that he is experiencing. He is that much less able to perceive such an exit's possibility at the moment of entrance.

Virgil, however, is aware of Hell's limit from the very first. Much further on, in Canto Nine, he will admit that "I have been down here once before." He was sent by a sorceress "to bring up a soul from the circle of Judas." As Virgil draws his own conclusion from this experience:

That is the lowest place and the darkest
and the furthest from the sky that turns all things:
well do I know the way; therefore be free of care.⁵²

When we receive this confession, it confirms a suspicion occasioned by Virgil's demand that Dante abandon his cowardice and suspicion in the face of the gate's warning. This most presumptuous demand is only reasonable if it is conjoined with Virgil's knowledge of the downward path to the lowest, darkest place, and of the exit from Hell that awaits the pilgrim there.

Marx, likewise, is aware of political economy's limit and exit, and, by virtue of this awareness, claims the mantle of our guide. In the "Historical Notes on the Analysis of Commodities" that closes the first chapter of the *Contribution*, Marx explicitly engages with the scientific discourse of political economy, and he explicitly declares this science to be finished, a closed realm. Ricardo is the "finisher of political economy."⁵³ Everyone who comes after him can offer, at best, a supplementary fine-tuning. As Marx puts it in reference to Sismondi; "If in Ricardo political economy ruthlessly draws its final conclusion and therewith *ends*, Sismondi supplements this

⁵² Inf. 9.22-30

⁵³ CPE 61; translation modified. Jon Elster, citing and agreeing with Paul Samuelson, calls Marx "basically 'a minor post-Ricardian.'" (*Making Sense of Marx*, op. cit., p. 513). Since Elster confines this judgment to Marx as an economist, Marx would certainly agree; in Marx's estimation *all* economists after Ricardo are *necessarily* minor post-Ricardians. This would also constitute Marx's reply to Foucault's judgment, in *The Order of Things*, that, "At the deepest level of Western knowledge, Marxism introduced no real discontinuity; it found its place without difficulty, [...] within an epistemological arrangement that welcomed it gladly [...] and that it, in return, had no intention of disturbing and, above all, no power to modify, even one jot, since it rested entirely upon it" (New York: Vintage, 1970, pp 261-2).

end in that he expresses its doubt in itself.”⁵⁴ Ricardo’s position as finisher of political economy consists in the rigor with which he works out the labor theory of value. Political economy is defined as a science by “the determination of exchange-value by labor-time,” and Ricardo works up this determination into its “purest” formulation.⁵⁵ “The analysis of the commodity into labor in a double form—use-value into real work or purposive productive activity, exchange-value into labor-time or equal social labor—is the critical final accomplishment of the research carried on for over a century and a half by classical political economy, beginning with William Petty in England and with Boisguillbert in France, and ending with Ricardo in England and with Sismondi in France.”⁵⁶ Again, in the Postface to the second edition of *Capital*, Marx writes that “with [Ricardo’s] contribution the bourgeois science of political economy had reached the limits beyond which it could not pass.”⁵⁷ Indeed, beyond this limit, political economy becomes nothing but “the bad conscience and evil intent of apologetics,” as Marx puts it in the Postface to the second edition of *Capital*.⁵⁸

Marx himself, in his presentation of the commodity, begins with Ricardo’s formulation, as virtually all commentators note. What follows from this beginning, however, is almost never grasped. Harry Cleaver has criticized the tendency, stretching back to the Second International, and even to Engels, to read Marx’s *critique* of political economy as essentially a *correction* of political economy. “In other words, Marx’s *Capital* differed from Ricardo’s [*On the*] *Principles [of Political Economy and Taxation]* principally by being more correct. He is seen either as fulfilling its promise or

⁵⁴ CPE 61; translation modified.

⁵⁵ CPE 61; translation modified.

⁵⁶ CPE 52; translation modified.

⁵⁷ C1 96

⁵⁸ C1 97; we will have to consider below what status political economy has within its limits.

as having corrected its errors.”⁵⁹ The truth is, there is nothing to fulfill or to correct. Political economy is done, finished, closed; Marx says this explicitly. Therefore, when he begins with the two-fold appearance of the commodity, wherein the value is determined by the labor-time expended on its production, he begins with the boundary marker of political economy before his eyes. From the first sentences of the critique, Marx has the limit of political economy in view. He has this limit in view because the whole task of the critique is to guide us to an encounter with this limit, to the point where we can cross over this limit and leave political economy behind.

By repeating Virgil’s words, Marx repeats his gesture of reassurance—“Trust me; be brave”—at the very same moment that he tells us we must enter Hell. As with Virgil, the two moments of this address can only reasonably coexist by way of Marx’s awareness of political economy’s limited scope, and of the possibility of moving beyond economics. By explicitly noting this awareness, I hope that we, Marx’s potential readers, will be empowered to set aside our fears of economism and our suspicions that Marx might abandon us among economic categories. If we can leave these behind and accept Marx’s interpellation as brave and intrepid explorers, we might come to perceive the limit we cannot yet see, and to experience a strength we currently doubt.

3. Getting Past the Inscription

The inverse of Virgil’s knowing rhetoric at the gate to Hell—that against which his encouragement stands in relief—is the inscription itself, with its apocalyptic ending, “Abandon every hope, you who enter.” Virgil’s reassurances are completely at odds with the words on the gate, and his project, as a guide, is defined by this

⁵⁹ *Reading Capital Politically*, op. cit., p. 32; compare Althusser’s discussion in *Reading Capital*, op. cit., pp. 18-30. (Ironically, Cleaver denounces Althusser as a Stalinist, despite the extreme proximity of their readings. Such are the perils of Marxology!)

opposition. If Dante is going to pass through Hell and exit it again, he cannot enter in the way demanded by Hell's mouthpiece. Virgil's way is not the way depicted by Hell itself. If Hell's self-description is absolutely true, then Dante's journey would be doomed from the beginning—there would be no hope.

In fact, however, the gate has already been made a liar before Dante encounters it, and this is admitted within the poem. Obviously, Virgil has passed out of Hell, and will do so again, but he is at least constrained to return to limbo where “without hope we live in desire.”⁶⁰ More troublesome for the gate's account is the story Virgil tells when Dante asks, “wishing to be assured of that faith which overcomes all error,” whether anyone has ever left Hell for beatitude. Virgil relates; “I was still new in this condition when I saw a powerful one come, crowned with the sign of victory. He led forth from here the shade of our first parent, [...] and many others, and he made them blessed.” And Virgil does not rule out the possibility that such a thing might happen again; he only stresses that “*before* them no human spirits were saved.”⁶¹ Even more devastating to Hell's self-conception, Dante has already admitted, as discussed above, that two mortal, flesh-bound humans—Aeneas and Paul—have gone down to the inferno and returned safely.⁶² Later in the poem, Theseus and Hercules will be admitted to this growing list of pilgrims.⁶³ But if so many have passed through its gates on round-trip tickets, then Hell's fearsome admonition seems less like the voice of fate, and more like braggadocio. Hell wishes that all who enter have no hope of leaving, but, with so many past exceptions, it might not get its wish.

Yet, it is precisely this possibility that hope is empirically warranted for any one of those who enter its gates that makes it necessary for Hell to so vehemently demand

⁶⁰ Inf. 4.42

⁶¹ Inf. 4.47-63; my emphasis.

⁶² Inf. 2.13-30

⁶³ Inf. 9.54, 99

that all hope be abandoned. Hell can't very well be filled with hopeful souls; that would vitiate the essence of its being Hell. So if hope might actually be reasonable for some of its guests—and even the smallest of chances is a reasonable bet over an eternal span of time—then Hell must scare that hope out of them. Hell can be Hell only by successfully interpellating its denizens as hopeless. Thus, by reversal, the very fact that the gate to Hell has such a frightful inscription is evidence that Hell is not actually so frightful as it claims to be. If Hell were a place truly devoid of hope, it would have no need to say so, but would welcome its inhabitants mutely to their doom. Hell's gate tells a lie, but it is a performative lie. The inscription seeks to construct an existence that is not real, and cannot be real, but can asymptotically approximate reality only and precisely through the lie that it is already real.

It is this interpellating performance that Virgil seeks to disrupt with his demand that Dante abandon his suspicions and put his cowardice to death. Virgil's response does not aim to take Dante through the inscription, but rather to turn him aside from it, to bypass the gate without probing its meaning. The pilgrim does not have the luxury of lingering over the words on the gate; the pilgrim must keep moving. Indeed, this necessity of moving beyond the inscription exerts itself even on the reader who pauses at the gate. The choice is absolute; either you abandon all hope or you turn aside from the inscription. You can postpone the choice, but you cannot escape it.

Political economy, according to Marx, performs the same interpellation as the Hellmouth.⁶⁴ Hell says; "Through me the way into the grieving city; through me the way into eternal sorrow; through me the way among the lost people." Political economy reveals a world that is grieving a "paradise lost of the bourgeoisie, where people did not confront one another as capitalists, wage-laborers, landowners, tenant farmers,

⁶⁴ I am indebted to Hasana Sharp for first drawing my attention to this parallel.

usurers, and so on, but only as simple commodity-producers and commodity-exchangers.”⁶⁵ This is the realm imposed on us by necessity and scarcity. We must toil and sweat, say the political economists, in order to wrest some security from the pain of this world. We are lost, for nature does not provide for us, guide us, or order our social positions as the Scholastics believed. Carlyle, in christening economics the dismal science, “gave to economics a name that it has never quite escaped because it was never quite undeserved.”⁶⁶

Hell tells us; “Justice moved my high maker; divine power made me, highest wisdom, and primal love.” Political economy tells us how to establish justice in the world of necessity by showing how the market provides to each their own, distributing all goods in the fairest and best manner possible. Everyone gets exactly what they deserve in the world of economics. “The institution of the right of property gives no advantage to any one man over any other man. It deals out justice impartially to all.”⁶⁷ Furthermore, the market, by maximally utilizing the initiative and skills of each, recognizes and reflects the full power of the commonwealth, and this free development of the power of each is identical with providence and love, in that the participants in the market, by looking only to their own benefit, best provide for their neighbors as well. Smith’s famous line is representative; “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we can expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our necessities but of their advantage.”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ CPE 59; translation modified.

⁶⁶ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, (New York & Toronto: The New American Library, 1958), p. 31. Galbraith, not incidentally, titles the chapter from which this quote is taken “Economics and the Tradition of Despair.”

⁶⁷ John Ramsey MacCulloch, as transcribed by Marx in his Manchester notebooks from 1845 (MEGA² IV/4, p. 269).

⁶⁸ *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan, (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1976), vol. 1, p. 18.

Hell claims; “Before me were no things created except eternal ones, and I endure eternal.” Political economy claims—and this is the most crucial point—that its own truths are as timeless as God’s commands. Its laws have animated production and exchange since humanity was expelled from the garden of plenty, and they will continue to do so forever. In Malthus’ words; “The constancy of the laws of nature is the foundation of the industry and foresight of the husbandman, the indefatigable ingenuity of the artificer, the skilful researches of the physician and anatomist, and the watchful observation and patient investigation of the natural philosopher.”⁶⁹ Thus, Ricardo expects that ancient hunters and fishers calculated labor times, and Smith imagines that the impulse to “truck and barter” holds sway everywhere and at all times. The laws of the bourgeois world are the laws of all history; this is just how things are. According to what economics claims for itself, then, the notion of passing through its world to some other, post-economic world is as fantastical as the idea that one could travel through Hell and come out the other side. “Abandon every hope, you who enter.”

Mirroring Hell’s braggadocio, however, political economy is actually engaged in an elaborate performance. It’s whole method and logic is trying to produce the situation it claims to describe as always already the case. We’ll have to examine this in more detail below, but for now we can simply note that Marx asks us to ignore this façade. He doesn’t immediately counter it, or parse its intricacies; he simply begins his descent into political economy by putting the proclamations of eternity off to one side. In both the *Contribution* and *Capital*, the first sentences after the Dante citations direct our attention very specifically to “bourgeois wealth” and “the wealth of societies in

⁶⁹ *Essay on the Principle of Population*, ed. Anthony Flew, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 205.

which the capitalist mode of production rules,” respectively.⁷⁰ It’s as if, in the face of science’s proclamation of eternal *veritas*, Marx had simply pointed off the other direction; “Look over there!” He does not claim to be examining something timeless; contrarily, he continuously directs us towards the limited scope of his investigation.⁷¹ Just as at the gate of Hell, at the gate of science we must confront the moment of decision: either we abandon all hope, or we turn aside from science’s self-presentation, from its claim to portray things as they always have been and ever will be.

Turning aside from what science says about itself is not, however, the same as turning aside from science. It is not that science is not science for Marx, nor that science is unimportant. In fact, it is just the opposite; if we want to experience science in its actuality, we must get past its self-presentation. Adapting something Marx said about the proletariat, we can say, “It does not matter what this or that [scientist], or even the whole [of science], *imagines* as its aim. It matters only *what* it is, and what, in accordance with this *being*, it will historically be forced to do.”⁷²

C. The anatomy of Hell

Having accepted Marx as our guide into political economy, the “anatomy” of bourgeois society,⁷³ we can now ask what it is that Marx shows us about that anatomy. What is the structure of capital, and how does the text of *Capital* proceed

⁷⁰ CPE 27 and C1 125; both translations modified.

⁷¹ This plain statement has been continuously misunderstood in the Marxological tradition, ever since Engels’ unfortunately concluded that, in the first two sections of *Capital*, Marx is investigating some heretofore unknown form of society called “simple commodity production,” lying somewhere in the past. Even more confusing are the claims made by commentators like Philip J. Kain, that “the ‘commodity,’ with which *Capital* begins, is in fact a transhistorical category” (*Marx’s Method, Epistemology, and Humanism: A Study in the Development of His Thought*, (Dordrecht, NL: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1986), p. 63). It is unclear what Kain means by “transhistorical,” since it can hardly be maintained that commodities have always existed. Perhaps, instead, he means only that no matter when in history commodities exist, they will be as Marx describes them. But this is a trivial claim, since the same can be said of anything whatsoever; it is what it is as long as it remains what it is.

⁷² HF, MECW 4, p. 37; translation modified.

⁷³ CPE 20

through that structure? Of course, the structure of *Capital* is one of the most endlessly debated questions in Marxology. I do not hope to provide an exhaustive exposition. To a certain extent, the argument of the previous chapter has already laid bare some of the most important moments: the identification of abstract labor, the move from circulation to production, the formal and real subsumptions of labor. Once again, however, I believe Dante's *Inferno* provides a whole series of clues and analogues. This is perhaps not so strange as it sounds. Both Marx and Dante wear their Aristotelian influence on their sleeves, and this goes some way towards determining the structure of each of their works, independently of any direct influence the *Inferno* may have had on Marx's presentation. Nonetheless, I also suspect some of the latter, for, as I hope to show, the parallels are quite striking.

1. *The Inverted World*

In Dante's cosmology, Hell descends to the center of the earth. When Lucifer turned against God, he was cast down from the highest spheres to the very lowest place, the central point of the universe, as far from God as one can be. This corresponds to what one could call Satan's absolute materiality.⁷⁴ In *Inferno*, therefore, Dante and Virgil's descent takes them from the airy shades of limbo and the windblown lovers of the circle of lust, through water, mud, and fire, to the very bodily Malebolge and the entombed and frozen sinners in Cocytus. They also encounter sins in the order of their increasing severity, an order directly opposite the one in which they will encounter them in Purgatory, which is like a mirror image of Hell. They must descend from lust through pride before they can turn and ascend from pride through lust. More particularly, each major division of Hell is a pale *imitation* of the one below

⁷⁴ In Aquinas, matter is, in fact, nothing but the spacing out of God's providence; the greater the predominance of form in a being, the more perfect is that being, and the nearer it is to God.

it. Incontinence, going beyond the bounds of natural desire, is a lesser representation of violence, which is the denial of the natural order itself. Fraud, in turn, is that of which violence is the image, for fraud transgresses the ontological distinction between appearance and reality, which founds the natural ordering itself, including the ordering of Hell. But fraud itself is a representation of a sin more fundamental yet, treachery; traitors act directly against that which is more real than themselves, that which founds their own being. The purest and most originary instance of this treason is Satan's act of turning away from his creator at the very moment of his creation. This is the archaic sin that establishes the possibility of all others. And it is this sin that situates Satan at the deepest point of Hell, gnawing on those sinners whose deeds bear the greatest verisimilitude to his own: Brutus, Cassius, and Judas.

I think it is remarkable the extent to which *Capital* reproduces this narrative structure. It replicates the descent into materiality, from the airy abstractions of the value-forms to the "blood and dirt" of primitive accumulation.⁷⁵ Each major stage of this descent is revealed to be dependent upon the stage that comes after it; it therefore has the structure of an excavation. Within these major divisions, moreover, one can discern logics very similar to the logics of incontinence, violence, fraud, and treason that constitute the architecture of Dante's Hell. Marx even reworked the chapter divisions of *Capital* in such a way that they mimic those of the *Inferno*.⁷⁶ I don't know whether this isomorphism was intended by Marx or not, but as Marx himself

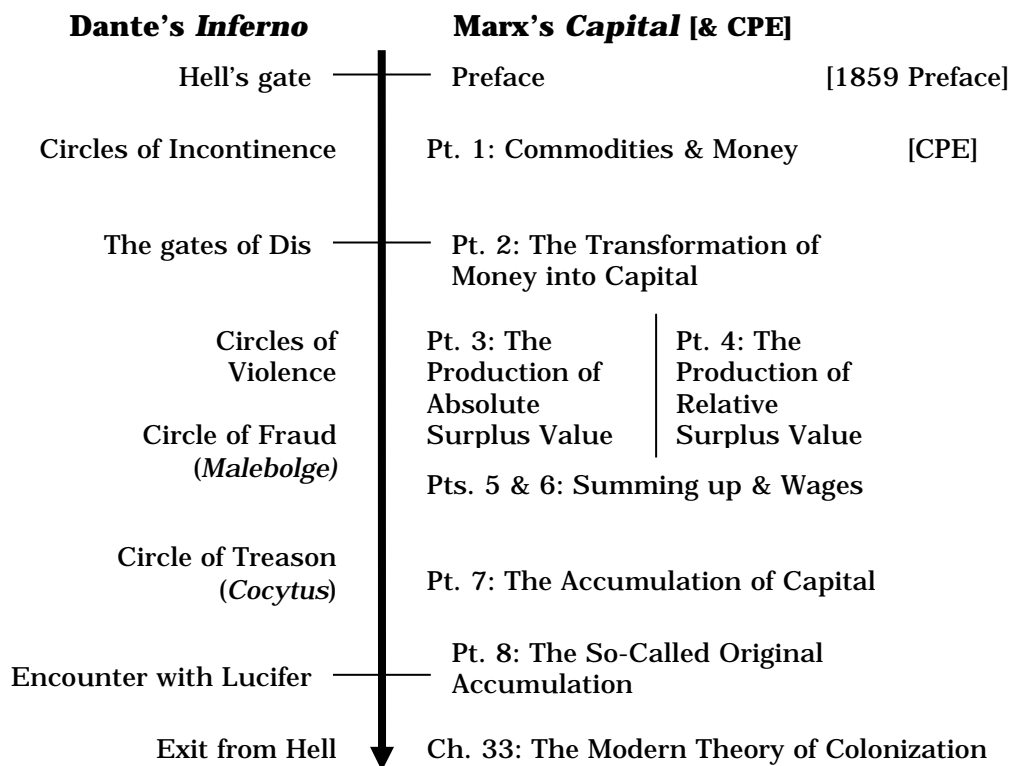
⁷⁵ C1 926

⁷⁶ Marx was in the habit of continually revising the work, but beginning with the French edition, and continuing posthumously into the English edition, Marx divided *Capital* into a preface and 33 chapters. (The tale told by Ben Fowkes (C1 110n), according to which Engels changed the chapter breakdown on his own authority for the first English edition, is not true, as any glance at the French edition will prove. Unfortunately, the tale has come to seem true through dint of repetition.) The *Inferno* has 34 cantos, the first of which is something of a preface to the whole *Comedy* (the other two canticles, lacking this preface, have 33 cantos each). Interestingly, whenever I mention this matter of chapter numbers to philosophers, the response is, essentially, "So what?" When I mention it to Danteists, on the contrary, their eyebrows arch and they're suddenly much more interested in my theory. Numerology is a lost science.

maintained in relation to Hegel’s accommodations, what matters is not the “exoteric consciousness” of the writer, but the inner movement of the work itself. In its inner workings, *Capital* constitutes an *Inferno* for the capitalist era.

Substantiating this claim will require an extended, point-by-point analysis; however, the structural relationships may first be barely outlined, as in Figure 1:

[Figure 1: The Parallel Structures of Dante’s *Inferno* and Marx’s *Capital*]



Beginning at the beginning, the outer circles of Dante’s Hell—the first four after limbo—house the sins of incontinence: lust, gluttony, avarice and prodigality, and wrath and sullenness. Likewise, the first major part of *Capital*—the part that recapitulates the *Contribution*—deals with the market, which Marx depicts as a place

of boundless incontinence. Bourgeois wealth is first encountered as “a monstrous accumulation of commodities.”⁷⁷ The individual commodity is first encountered as “a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind. The nature of these needs, whether they arise, for example, from the stomach, or the imagination, makes no difference.”⁷⁸ From this beginning, the commodity enters into exchange, where it gives birth to new desires and to new forms of itself. The desires treated cease to be human desires, and come to be the desires of the commodities themselves. Marx treats of the flirtation of the coat with the linen.⁷⁹ He says of commodities that they recognize no limit; “A born leveler and cynic, [a commodity] is always ready to exchange not only soul, but body, with each and every other commodity, be it more repulsive than Maritornes herself.”⁸⁰ The limitlessness of this readiness for exchange transforms the commodities’ desire for one another into their desire for money, for “commodities are in love with money.”⁸¹ Thus does the incontinence of exchange spread and intensify. “Circulation sweats money from every pore.”⁸² “When the circulation of commodities first develops, there also develops the necessity and the passionate desire to hold fast to the product of the first metamorphosis [money];”⁸³ “the lust for gold awakens;” “as a radical leveler, [money] extinguishes all distinctions. [...] Ancient society therefore denounced it [, but] Modern society, which already in its

⁷⁷ Marx quotes from the first line of CPE—“*eine ungeheure Warensammlung*.” I have modified the Fowkes translation (which renders this as “an immense collection of commodities”) in order a) to retain more of Marx’s color, and b) to draw attention to what I think to be important parallels with textual markers later in *Capital*: the animated monster (*beseeltes Ungheuer*) of capital in Part Three and the primitive accumulation (*ursprüngliche Akkumulation*) of capital at the end of the book.

⁷⁸ C1 125. Compare this to a line from MacCulloch’s *Principles of Political Economy*, transcribed by Marx in his Manchester notebooks; “*There are no limits to the passion for accumulation*” (MEGA² IV/4 p. 274; Marx’s emphasis). To this, Marx appends a quote from Juvenal’s *Satires*; “*Nec Croesi fortuna unquam nec Persica Regna sufficient anima*” [Neither the fortune of Croesus, nor even the Persian crown would be sufficient].

⁷⁹ C1 139-44

⁸⁰ C1 179

⁸¹ C1 202

⁸² C1 208

⁸³ C1 227

infancy had pulled Pluto by the hair of his head from the bowels of the earth, greets gold as its Holy Grail, as the glittering incarnation of its innermost principle of life.”⁸⁴

This reference to Pluto in the discussion of hoarding mirrors Dante’s encounter with Pluto, “the great enemy,” at the boundary of the fourth circle, which holds the avaricious and the prodigal.⁸⁵ And Dante’s picture of the punishment there—

Here I saw people more numerous than before,
on one side and the other, with great cries
rolling weights by the force of their chests.
They would collide, and then right there
each one, reversing directions, would look back,
crying: ‘Why do you hold?’ and ‘Why do you toss?’⁸⁶

—could have served Marx, as a depiction of the tension between the market and the miser, just as well as the Shakespeare and Sophocles he does cite. Virgil’s words could be Marx’s; “Bad giving and bad keeping has deprived them of the lovely world and set them to this scuffling: whatever it is, I prettify no words for it.”⁸⁷

In both *Inferno* and *Capital*, the realm of incontinence ends with a difficult transition. For Dante and Virgil, this is the crossing of the Styx and the confrontation with the devils and Furies at the gates to the city of Dis.⁸⁸ This is the point where Dante’s *katabasis* diverges from, and exceeds, Aeneas’, for Aeneas turned aside at the gates of Dis and followed a different path. Dante, however, must penetrate the barrier his predecessor did not and descend to the circles of malice, where the multifarious practitioners of violence and fraud are punished. Marx must similarly transgress a boundary at this point; he must lead us deeper than the political economists ever went. The marketplace, that “noisy sphere where everything takes place on the

⁸⁴ C1 229f; compare Christopher Arthur, “The Infinity of Capital”, *Studies in Marxism*, 5, 1998, p. 22n26.

⁸⁵ Inf. 6.115-7.15

⁸⁶ Inf. 7.25-30

⁸⁷ Inf. 7.58-60

⁸⁸ I will examine this incident in greater detail in the next chapter.

surface, and in full view of everyone,”⁸⁹ presents us with money, but it cannot account for the existence of capital. The market seemed to be the very picture of limitlessness, but circulation itself is always limited externally by consumption and formally by the exchange of equals. Circulation presents us with a monstrous accumulation, but it possesses in itself no generativity whereby this monstrosity could be produced. We have reached an aporia.

For this reason, Marx writes that “our friend the money-owner must be lucky enough to find within the sphere of circulation, on the market, a commodity whose use-value possesses the peculiar quality of being a source of value, whose actual consumption is therefore itself an objectification of labor, hence a creation of value.”⁹⁰

The only commodity that fits the bill is labor-power. But, as Marx writes:

The consumption of labor-power is completed, as in the case of every other commodity, outside the market or the sphere of circulation. Let us therefore, in the company of the owner of money and the owner of labor-power, leave this noisy sphere [...] and follow them into the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold hangs the notice ‘No admittance except on business.’ [...] He who was previously the money-owner now strides out in front as the capitalist; the possessor of labor-power [...] is timid and holds back, like someone who brought his own hide to market and now has nothing to expect but—a tanning.⁹¹

Beyond the market—the realm of boundless desire—Marx must lead us into the realm of capitalist production.⁹²

In Dante, the violence punished in the second division, the outer circles of Dis, is depicted as a denial or perversion of the divine order of generativity. Heretics produce doctrines that deny the soul, the principle of the body; murderers and tyrants pervert the *polis*; suicides and wastrels deny their own lives and livelihoods;

⁸⁹ C1 279

⁹⁰ C1 270

⁹¹ C1 279f

⁹² “The heart of Marx’s post-Enlightenment theory of capitalist society lies in the transition of money into capital and the associated transition from the sphere of circulation to that of production” (Patrick Murray, “Enlightenment Roots of Habermas’ Critique of Marx”, *The Modern Schoolman*, 57, 1979, p. 15).

blasphemers and sodomites deny or rebel against God and nature. The final perpetrators of this violence against natural generation encountered by the pilgrim are the usurers, who made money grow unnaturally and are now reduced to the status of strange grazing animals.⁹³

It is precisely the problem of usury that confronts Marx as capital; money has somehow become perversely productive.⁹⁴ If the pushing and pulling of the avaricious and the prodigal perfectly illustrates the sort of cheating that happens within exchange, it is inadequate as an expression of usury. Within exchange, one holds, another tosses, but it only amounts to a back-and-forth; there is no *growth*. It is only after Dante and Virgil have passed into Dis that they begin to encounter transformations and monstrosities. The outer circles are about movement; the inner circles are about growth and mutation. Likewise in *Capital*; there is movement in the market, but no growth. One can take from another, but no wealth is created thereby. Only in the realm of production can the capitalist have a “Eureka!” moment. “The trick has at last worked: money has been transformed into capital.”⁹⁵ But, as we’ve seen already, Marx transforms the traditional problematic of the growth of money, for he does not treat usury as its own final term. After discussing it briefly he declares, “In the course of our investigation, we shall find that both the merchant’s capital and interest-bearing capital are derivative forms, and at the same time it will become clear why, historically, these two forms appear before the modern primary form of capital.”⁹⁶ Marx inscribes usury within capital, thereby reconfiguring the terms by which its violence against natural productivity is understood and critiqued. No longer is usury

⁹³ Inf. 17.34-75

⁹⁴ As I mentioned in Chapter Two, Marx cites Aristotle’s paradigmatic critique of chrematistics: C1 253n6, 267.

⁹⁵ C1 301

⁹⁶ C1 267

an inexplicable or even unholy breeding of money; instead, it is revealed to be a derivative form of the “tanning” of the workers.

The violence of capital, however, should not be thought of primarily as the sort of intersubjective assault that “tanning” brings to mind. Rather, it is a breaching of every limit, a violation of everything proper and self-contained. As we saw in detail in Chapter Two, the productivity of capital is not unreal for Marx. He thus plays out the theme of the productivity of capital in a serious, even tedious fashion until “the voice of the worker” pipes up in his discussion of the working day,⁹⁷ and returns to the same theme in the first chapters of Part Four, where Marx begins to discuss relative surplus value. The subsumption of labor actually does render capital productive. And it is this productivity that subtends the holding and tossing of the commodities market. The monstrous [*ungeheure*] accumulation of commodities that greeted our eyes at the entrance to political economy has become the animated monster [*beseeltes Ungeheuer*].⁹⁸ The problem of incontinence—the going beyond measure of bourgeois wealth—has been found to conceal within it, as a more fundamental moment, the problem of the animation of monstrosity itself, of a measureless and measure-destroying productivity.

In both *Inferno* and *Capital*, this confrontation with monstrous productivity leads the pilgrim directly to fraud. The usurers are transitional; immediately after encountering them, Dante and Virgil are carried into the Malebolge on the back of Geryon, the embodiment of fraud, with its pleasant human face masking the lion’s claws that will hook its victims and the scorpion’s tail that will deliver the deadly blow. Meanwhile, the two-pronged examination of the subsumption of labor allows Marx to reveal that capital’s productivity rests upon the capitalist’s fraudulent extraction of the

⁹⁷ C1 342

⁹⁸ C1 302

surplus-value created by labor; the smiling face of Bentham masking the grip of the labor contract and the sting of exploitation.⁹⁹ Exploitation is mentioned for the first time only in Chapter Nine, and it is only after this that Marx begins to use the language of “tricks, artifices, temptations, threats and falsifications” to characterize capital’s operations.¹⁰⁰ The capitalists’ discourse is “the purest cant and the most shameless hypocrisy.”¹⁰¹ They hide their profit-mongering behind the “odor of sanctity.”¹⁰² They engage in “small thefts” and “petty pilferings of minutes.”¹⁰³ They adulterate their goods, and even “God Almighty does not escape” the *falsification des substances sacramentalles*.¹⁰⁴ In other words, “they only exist now by first defrauding the public, and next getting 18 hours’ work out of their men [sic] for 12 hours’ wages.”¹⁰⁵ Precisely where Dante enters into the greatest detail—crossing the circle of fraud, the Malebolge, with its ten sub-circles, takes up thirteen cantos—Marx begins the fine-grained historical treatment of the struggle between the working class and capital, the details of which occupy the greater part of the center of *Capital*.

While the relationships obtaining among the various levels of Marx’s critique are different from those among the circles of Hell—I, at least, do not detect any representational referentiality—there is still the critical relationship: that which is encountered later is the condition for the possibility of what came before. There could be no monstrous accumulation of commodities if there were no animated monster of

⁹⁹ There is, therefore, a doubling back in Marx’s descent; Part Three descends from violence into fraud, and then Part Four retraces this same movement.

¹⁰⁰ C1 337

¹⁰¹ C1 337

¹⁰² C1 343fn6

¹⁰³ C1 352

¹⁰⁴ C1 358fn44. For both Marx and Dante, there is an especially piquant pleasure to be had in exposing the fraud that attends holy things. The Malebolge, along with the circle of the avaricious, is the place in Hell where one is most likely to find priests, cardinals and popes. Marx also makes a point of indicating the irony of the religiosity of capitalist thieves, adulterators, and apologists, generally in sarcastic footnotes, (see, e.g., 336fn11, 343fn6, 347, 351fn22, 375fn72, 387, 401n21, etc.).

¹⁰⁵ C1 361

capital, and there could be no capital without the fraudulent exploitation of the workers' labor-power. But what is that underlies the possibility of exploitation? In order to buy labor-power on the market, I must already have accumulated some capital; I must have a surplus on hand, over and above what I need for my life, and with which I can purchase the means and materials of production, and hire workers to do the producing. Capital seems to always presuppose itself. Therefore, Marx writes; "From our current standpoint it [...] seems likely that the capitalist, once upon a time, became possessed of money by some form of original [*ursprüngliche*] accumulation that took place independently of the unpaid labor of other people, and that this was therefore how he was able to frequent the market as a buyer of labor-power."¹⁰⁶ Whence cometh this original accumulation of capital? "From [the capitalist's] own labor and that of his forefathers,' is the unanimous answer of the spokesmen of political economy."¹⁰⁷ The original accumulation must derive from some original labor.

On this assumption—the assumption of political economy—Marx proceeds to show that even the simple reproduction of this original capital fund, to say nothing of the actual accumulation of further capital, transforms the entirety of the original fund into "value appropriated without an equivalent, the unpaid labor of others."¹⁰⁸ Thus, even if all capital were born of immaculate conception, it must, in the course of its own reproduction and propagation become completely and utterly the product of original sin. This is the debt capital owes to the working class; "When a person consumes the whole of his property, by taking upon himself debts equal to the value of that property, it is clear that his property represents nothing but the sum total of his

¹⁰⁶ C1 714; translation modified.

¹⁰⁷ C1 728

¹⁰⁸ C1 715

debts. And so it is with the capitalist.”¹⁰⁹ Regardless of how it originated, the capitalist comes to owe his entire wealth to the workers. Considered as a monadic embodiment of capital itself, the capitalist’s entire substance is ill-gotten gain, a theft disguised, the ultimate counterfeit.¹¹⁰

The fraud inherent in capital’s exploitation, therefore, in the course of reproduction and accumulation, comes to be treacherous fraud, in precisely Dante’s sense of breaking a special bond. Capital *just is* the growth of capital, but it can only accumulate—and, thus, can only be itself—by defrauding its sole benefactors, its parents even. The more fully capital develops, the more massive is its debt, and the greater is its treason. This treason is nowhere more clearly manifested than in the apocalyptic wastefulness of capital analyzed at the end of Chapter Two. Capital does not just steal from the workers; as we’ve seen, it undermines the very sources of its own productivity, squandering the earth and the workers from which it draws all its strength.

Indeed, Marx closes Part Seven by condemning the British capitalist “accumulation” of Ireland. Given Dante’s imperial politics, I find the terms of this condemnation especially intriguing. Marx writes; “The Irishman, eliminated by sheep and ox, arises on the other side of the ocean as a Fenian. And over against the old queen of the seas rises, threatening and more threatening, the young giant republic: ‘*Acerba fata Romanos agunt, Scelusque fraternae necis.*’”¹¹¹ The line is from Horace; “A cruel fate torments the Romans, and the crime of fratricide.” The modern empire of capital, the successor to Rome embodied in Marx’s day in the British Empire, is a traitor to its kin, a fratricide and a matricide, rightly placed in Cocytus alongside

¹⁰⁹ C1 715

¹¹⁰ I will return to the notion of counterfeiting in a very different context in Chapter Five.

¹¹¹ C1 870; translation modified.

Ugolino and Cain. But its crimes are also giving rise to a counter-empire, a force fated to topple the imperial regime. If, in our century, the young giant republic has become more of a reincarnation and further development of the old queen of the sea than a true counter-empire, this does not necessarily mean that fate has been averted. The augers are always a bit tricky.

3. *The Archaic Limit*

We have now descended, in both *Inferno* and *Capital*, to the deepest level. I have already stated that the structure of both Hell and capital is such that the movement from one level to the next is the movement from the conditioned to the conditioning moment. Therefore, the treason represented in Cocytus and capital's accumulation founds everything that comes before it. But now that we have reached the ground floor, as it were, of each structure, we are faced with two questions: 1) What does this ground itself rest upon? and 2) How do we get out of this place? Marx and Virgil have both promised us that they can lead us out from these inverted worlds, so where is the exit?

I've already mentioned that Dante doesn't fully comprehend Hell's limit until he has passed beyond it. Dante's difficulty in coming to recognize this limit, even at the very moment of reversal and escape, surely has everything to do with the fact that the exit, toward which Virgil constantly directs him, is Lucifer himself. The *katabasis*, if it is to be successful, must descend to the deepest point.¹¹² Only by pushing on to the farthest limit, "the zero-point,"¹¹³ the purest expression of the essence of Hell, can the pilgrim emerge again. There can be no half-measures here; Dante's *katabasis* must be

¹¹² The anus, if you take the bodily structure of Hell into account (see Durling's Additional Notes 2 and 13, in *Inferno*, pp. 552-555 and 576f.). This is a scatological turn Marx would surely enjoy.

¹¹³ Freccero, "Introduction to *Inferno*", in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. Rachel Jacoff, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 176.

radical in a way that was unnecessary for Aeneas. Aeneas did not enter the city of Dis, did not need to confront the greatest evils. Virgil's poem maintained a flavor of the ancient world, and an affinity with Socrates' contention in the *Republic*, that the best guardian of souls would have no real experience of the evils of the soul.¹¹⁴ Dante, on the other hand, insists on the impossibility of innocence. The pilgrim must not only confront his own sins, but must grapple with the *arkhē* of those sins, Satan himself.

Satan is both the temporal and the spatial principle of Hell. Temporally, it was Lucifer's moment of rebellion that established Hell. His most radical of all rebellions occasioned this realm of justice. Spatially, he forms the center of gravity for the pilgrim's spiral descent, and the key to the ordering of Hell. His sin is the principle of all the sins punished in Hell, all of which are arrayed according to their proximity to his primal turn away from God. In Aristotelian terms, Satan is the *pros hen* of infernal cosmology, that one toward which everything else in Hell gestures. But when Virgil and Dante reach this *arkhē*, they have also reached the end of their journey through Hell. They encounter Satan as the ladder out of Hell, and as the moment of reversal, climbing "down" his flank to the center of the world, where they turn and climb up to exit from his realm.¹¹⁵ Only then does Satan appear as he really is, an upside-down king, ruling over an upside-down realm, a giant turd lodged eternally in the asshole of the world. The descent has always also been an ascent. Only through grappling with this inverted foundation of Hell can Dante and Virgil reach the point where they can turn right-side up again, stand on their feet, and escape from the world of no hope.

This dynamic of radical confrontation and reversal is repeated in Marx's critique of political economy. As we've seen, Ricardo's formulation of the labor theory of value marks the limit of political economy's scientificity. But Ricardo's formulation marks

¹¹⁴ *Republic*, 408d-409d.

¹¹⁵ *Inf.* 34.70-93

the end of political economy precisely because it also supplies political economy with its foundation.¹¹⁶ All of political economy is a premonition of, or reference to, the labor theory of value in its purity. As Marx writes, in a rather remarkable passage, “the historical course of all sciences leads first through a mass of crusades and diversions to its actual point of departure. Science, unlike other architects, builds not only castles in the air, but may construct separate habitable stories of the building before laying the foundation stone.”¹¹⁷

But, as we saw in Chapter Two, the labor theory of value refers, most directly, to labor that has undergone a process of social abstraction, and it is labor that is really subsumed under capital that most truly creates value. Therefore, it is inaccurate to imagine that the labor theory of value makes its appearance in the opening section of *Capital*, only to be left behind or disregarded in the later sections. Up through Part Seven, “The Process of Accumulation of Capital,” *Capital* follows the development of capital from its most rudimentary forms up to its constitution as the self-reproducing form of society. This is also a progression through more and more adequate expressions of the labor theory of value. It is in Part Seven that we encounter, therefore, this foundation of political economy in its purest form; labor as it appears here can only produce capital.

But here we face a conundrum. We seem to be at the foundation of capital’s logic, and at the fullest historical development of capitalism, and yet, there remains an entire Part Eight ahead of us. Moreover, this Part Eight does not seem to continue

¹¹⁶ Therefore, Marx mocks Proudhon for declaring “the grounding principle of the old society as the grounding principle of the new” (CPE 62n; translation modified).

¹¹⁷ CPE 57; translation modified. This is a basically Aristotelian account of the progress of an *epistēmē* or a *tekhnē*. The *arkhē* of an art, like rhetoric for example, is only formulated after a long process of practitioners fumbling around by chance. This unguided activity is productive of all manner of useful innovations, but those innovations and practices do not cohere as an art until their *arkhē* is obtained, at which point the art allows of a definitive formulation. Aristotle provides this formulation in the case of rhetoric, a formulation that thereafter only allows supplementary elaboration. See *Rhet.* 1354a6-16.

either the historical or logical progression established by everything prior to it.¹¹⁸ Here, instead, Marx presents us with “the so-called primitive accumulation,” a historical tour stretching back as far as the Fourteenth Century. There is no wonder that numerous commentators have found Part Eight to be tacked on, an addition that in no way furthers the argument.¹¹⁹

We should be glad that *Capital* does not end here, however. If it did, Marx would have led us into the heart of capital only to leave us there, in the belly of the beast. Capital would be a self-creating, self-sustaining, self-reproducing system, with no way out except the eventual collapse of the biosphere. But this would only be the case if *Capital* were indeed able to found itself, if the foundation of its logic—labor that posits capital—were also its historic foundation. This is not the case, however; the foundation of political economy, of the logic of capital, rests on a historical foundation it does not comprehend.¹²⁰ We must try to be precise. The labor theory of value both founds and doesn't found, limits and doesn't limit political economy. There is a doubling here, which we will explore much more fully in the next chapter, but which must be noted now. Political economy expresses the logic of capital, but this logic was

¹¹⁸ Patrick Murray, therefore, puts it into a category all by itself: “The genesis of ‘free’ labor belongs to no systematic dialectical account that Marx offers, but ‘free’ labor is not merely stipulated; it is a historical fact that conditions the systematic dialectical presentation of *Capital*” (“Reply to Geert Reuten”, *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory*, 10:1, 2002, p. 161).

¹¹⁹ E.g., Christopher Arthur: “[*Capital's*] dialectic is aimed at grasping the system of categories as they are embodied in fully developed capitalism. [...] In *Capital*, the historical excursions [...] are illustrative of tendencies inherent to that given structure. The bulk of *Capital* is concerned with depicting its logical genesis; the section on ‘original accumulation’ tacked on to the end of Volume One, dealing with its historical genesis, could be omitted without loss to the argument of the work as a whole. Moreover, there is no sign whatever in this last part of any dialectic, Hegelian or otherwise” (“Debate: Chris Arthur and James White on History, Logic, and Expanded Reproduction in *Capital*”, *Studies in Marxism*, 8, 2001, p. 130).

¹²⁰ Compare this to Alfred Schmidt's discussion of Marx's systematic presentation of capitalism: “Certainly an immanent presentation of the system has its limits, for when carried out rigorously, it immediately refers back ‘toward a past lying behind this system.’ Conversely—and here Marx goes beyond Hegel—the analysis leads ‘to the point at which the suspension of the present form of production relations gives signs of its becoming—foreshadowing of the future’” (*History and Structure: An Essay on Hegelian-Marxist and Structuralist Theories of History*, tr. Jeffrey Herf, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), pp. 31f; the embedded quotations are from G 461). My argument maintains that it is only because Marx brings us up to the first limit that he is also able to point us toward the second.

itself born into the world and given some power over the world, by a very specific set of circumstances. By tracing this logic, Marx has lead us to the point where the logic betrays it's a-logical condition. Only through contact with this condition can the *katabasis* come to an end.¹²¹

This condition, the origin of both political economy and of the capitalism it reflects, is the forceful rending of the peasant from the land, “the expropriation of the agricultural producer,”¹²² and in these events “the knights of industry” “played no part whatsoever.”¹²³ Capitalists did not create capitalism, and certainly not through their own labor. “The dissolution of [feudalism] set free the elements of [capitalism].”¹²⁴ The deterioration of feudal power in England, brought on by the growth of cities, on the one hand, left most of the land in the hands of free peasants, and, on the other, made money into “the power of all powers.”¹²⁵ This provided the old feudal lords with the incentive to drive the peasants off the land, in order that it might provide sheep for the wool market in Flanders. The expropriation of the peasants, in turn, created large numbers of workers who *must* posit exchange-value, workers who cannot work for themselves, but must sell their labor-power and create value for another.

It is the creation of these free workers on a large scale that makes political economy possible, for it is this labor force that founds the possibility of the abstractions with which economics deals. It is this violent “abstraction” of the workers from the land and tools by which they could sustain themselves that makes possible

¹²¹ I, therefore, find myself disagreeing, in a qualified sense, with Richard Marsden when he argues against the traditional view of Marx putting Hegel on his feet “by reversing the direction of causality between the ideal and the material. ...[S]imply to reverse the direction of causality leaves the material/ideal distinction intact, whereas it is the idea of their *separability* that Marx opposes (*op. cit.*, 100f). While the traditional view is indeed rather facile, it seems clear that Marx does, in fact, maintain a robust separation between the material and the ideal. (How this separation is figured will be considered further in the next chapter.)

¹²² C1 876

¹²³ C1 875

¹²⁴ C1 875

¹²⁵ C1 879

abstractions like labor-power, exchange-value, and capital. These abstractions, in their inter-relations, compose the Hell that is political economy, but they cannot account for themselves; political economy must, when followed into its inner sanctum, give up its secret: property is founded on theft, order on violence, “the exclusive realm of Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham” on “the expropriation of the mass of the people by a few usurpers.”¹²⁶ Marx has led us to the devil at the bottom of modernity.¹²⁷

Moreover, Marx shows us how political economy itself confesses these inversions. The final chapter, “The Modern Theory of Colonization,” has confused even more commentators than has Part Eight as a whole. Coming, as it does, after Marx forecasts the expropriation of the expropriators, most ignore it completely, and those who mention it do so only to dismiss it as superfluous. But it is in this chapter that Marx wrings from political economy’s own mouth—in the person of E. G. Wakefield—the admission, not only of the fact of expropriation, but of the continued necessity of expropriation wherever conditions are such that people can easily establish themselves as self-subsisting. This is the case in free colonies; “Where land is very cheap and all men are free, where everyone who so pleases can easily obtain a piece of land for himself, not only is labor very dear, as respects the laborer’s share of the produce, but the difficulty is to obtain combined labor at any price.”¹²⁸ Reading

¹²⁶ C1 280, 930. Because of this, it seems to me that those scholars who argue for a unified reading of Marx on the basis that alienation underlies the fetishism of the commodity are far too conservative. Commodity fetishism is a superficial moment. Alienation underlies all of *Capital*, and it appears nowhere more forcefully than at this final, deepest point of the descent. The expropriation of the peasants, and of colonized populations, was the primal moment of alienation, not in an existential or emotional sense, but in an effective, ontological sense. All of modernity was the unintended material consequence of this process of rending the produce and means of production from the producer.

¹²⁷ Terrell Carver writes; “Marx’s vision of capitalism is a kind of unholy Chartres Cathedral where Christian iconography mingles with the nightmarish creatures and pagan practices that Christianity itself professed to abhor (though often incorporated). Curiously, I have not yet found a reference in *Capital* to the devil” (*The Postmodern Marx*, op. cit., p. 16). I am happy to have found the reference—structural, rather than literal—of which Carver felt the absence.

¹²⁸ Wakefield, *England and America*, vol. 1, p. 247; quoted by Marx, C1 934f.

Wakefield's advice on how to prevent colonists from obtaining any property from their labor, one finds oneself in the same state as Dante: "I raised my eyes, thinking to see Lucifer as I had left him, and I saw that he extended his legs upward; and if I labored in thought then, let the gross people ponder it who do not see what point it is that I had passed."¹²⁹

Political economy, the logic of capital, has been plumbed to its depths. Marx has led us to the point where everything the science claimed to be in the beginning it has ceased to claim, and shown itself never to have been. It is not eternal. It is not founded on rational principles. It is not just. It is not necessary. And yet, it has been necessary for us to see the undoing of this *faux* necessity from within. But why? The problem that faced us was that of escaping from capitalism. What Marx has provided is an escape from political economy. The doubling I mentioned earlier is all the more glaringly apparent now. What good is it to escape from political economy if, when you close the book, you are still living amidst the hyper-kinetic ravages of capitalism? I have portrayed Marx as a critic of political economy, but what about the critique of actually existing capitalism? Isn't that more important? It seems that we must tackle head-on the relationship between political economy and capitalism, between logic and being.

¹²⁹ Inf. 34.88-93.

Four
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Of Science and Poetry: Out from Political Economy

If theory belongs to capital, history is ours.

John Bell and Thomas Sekine
“The Disintegration of Capitalism”¹

It will be helpful to begin by restating the problem. The tendency in the previous chapter was to insist on a strong separation between political economy and the actual workings of capitalism, since Marx’s critique is supposed to descend, I argued, through the former rather than offer a “better description” of the latter. Nonetheless, by the time we reach the so-called primitive accumulation, it has become much harder to hold the realm of political economy separate from the world of capitalist production. Political economy’s ideal premise—the labor theory of value and property—has been exchanged for its actual premise—original expropriation—but this is also the historical premise of capitalism itself. Science and the world seem to have merged in this point of origination. Because it leads us to confront this double origin, *Capital* takes on a double existence; it is a critique of political economy, but it is also a critique of “actually existing” capitalism.²

¹ “The Disintegration of Capitalism: A Phase of Ex-Capitalist Transition,” in *Phases of Capitalist Development: Booms, Crises and Globalizations*, ed. Robert Albritton, et al., (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 54.

² “Marx had a double object: critique of the economy, and critique of the economists (in the German ‘*Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, it is even clearer that the object is two-fold)” (Geert Reuten, “The Interconnection of Systematic Dialectics and Historical Materialism,” *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory*, 7, Winter 2000, p. 140). Despite this formulation, Reuten, in the very same article, complains about precisely this duality; “Within a general systematic dialectical structure, we find a number of deficient transitions as well as many historical excurses that are not accounted for as such and that seem to replace systematic argument as such” (p. 152n53). In a similar vein, Michael Heinrich writes; “In Marx’s work we can find a superposition of two discourses: on the one hand, we have the breach with the theoretical field of classical political economy; on the other, he remains inside that field in many aspects. The superposition of such discourses produces quite a number of problems and unresolved ambivalences” (“Engels’ Edition of the Third Volume of *Capital* and Marx’s Original Manuscript,” *Science and Society*, 60, 1996-7, p. 465n).

Or is it? Certainly it leads us to *confront* actually existing capitalism, but does this confrontation constitute a critique? What would it mean to criticize capitalism? The critique of political economy takes the form of a descent through its concepts and proclamations to the point where the science deconstructs itself, overturning its own premises. But capitalism is not a system of concepts and pronouncements; it is a form of society. How does one descend through a social form? Can one do so in a book? I think the answer is clearly: No. “Critique” *just is katabasis*. But we cannot descend through capitalism in a book anymore than we can grow up by reading about child development. The critique of capitalism must take place in the medium of capitalism, that is, in life, in society, in productive activity. In other words, the “critique of capitalism” is—and, if we are to avoid a gross category mistake, can only be—revolution. In *Capital*, Marx leads us to the overturning of political economy, the overturning of the idea of capitalism. But nothing short of overturning capitalism will overturn capitalism.

Yet, the critical project and the revolutionary project cannot be strangers to one another. Certainly Marx’s activity suggests that he thought his critique of political economy and the revolutionary overturning of capitalism were intimate partners. Specifying this relationship will constitute the subject of this chapter. This does not mean we will be leaving Dante behind. I already suggested in the previous chapter that the transformation and empowerment of the pilgrim is the point of Dante’s *katabasis* as much as of Marx’s. But, whereas I have marked similarities in form or appearance between the *Inferno* and Marx’s critique—Marx and Virgil offer similar rhetorics, and command similar knowledges; Hell and political economy make similar threatening promises, and present similar structures—I must now trace the movement of the workings of these texts. Or, to be more precise, I must trace the play between

appearances and workings in both texts. This play has three acts, as it were: 1) the act of ironic materialization, which is the generation of appearances; 2) the act of encountering the danger of appearances, wherein they threaten to paralyze; and 3) the act of real materialization, which is the resistance to appearances.

I don't think Dante and Marx want to work the same transformation on us, but the moments of the drama are similar enough for Dante's poem to be of considerable assistance, up to a certain point. Beyond that point, however, it will be necessary to enlist a number of other players. My argument will proceed initially by considering the irony inherent in Marx's presentation of capital. This irony presupposes a disjunction between the phenomenal appearance and conceptual account of capitalist society, on the one hand, and the effective material consequences of capitalism, on the other. Those who are engrossed in the systematic and totalizing appearance of capital will be petrified by it, rendered helpless to participate in its overcoming. This, I will argue, has been the fate of Critical Theory in the Twentieth Century. Those who turn away from the appearance, on the contrary, will be empowered by the experience of the *katabasis* by being attuned to the revolutionary *poiēsis* of the multitude. Here I will turn to the work, first, of John Bell and Thomas Sekine, in order to visualize the exit from capitalism, and second, of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, in order to conceptualize the forces within society that tend towards such a transition. This will allow me, in Chapter Five, to return to the very young Marx's efforts, in his dissertation on Epicurus, to identify a form of practice that is adequate to the struggle to activate and organize these forces of revolution within the social body. That investigation will lay the groundwork for a thorough examination of how Marx developed his revolutionary strategy in his later writings.

A. The thingly veil

...what [economists] have quite clumsily meant to hold fast as a thing appears as a social relation, and then, what they have just fixed as a social relation, teases them again as a thing.

A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy
Pt. 1, Ch. 1: "The Commodity" (1859)³

1. The Dead Letter

Taking John Freccero once again as our interpretive jumping-off point, Dante faced a very peculiar poetic dilemma in writing the *Inferno*. He chose to depict in words a place that seemingly precludes the possibility of meaning. Within the Christian semiotics of spirit and letter, God is the ultimate signified, the spirit that animates every letter, that to which everything else refers. Hell, being the furthest removed from God of any part of creation, is a place of hopelessness precisely because the signifiers there have been cut off from their signified, they no longer communicate with the God that is the sole source of their meaning. The cosmos, according to Thomistic neo-Aristotelianism, is a set of love letters God has written to himself; but Hell is the dead letter office, the elaborate storage center for missives that can be neither delivered to their addressee nor returned to their sender (which are the same in this case). Obviously, then, depicting such a realm in words that operate according to the normal rules of signification seems to contradict precisely the hellishness of Hell. Thus, Dante's dilemma: how can his poem possibly convey Hell, when the very conveyance of meaning is antithetical to Hell?

Dante's solution, according to Freccero, is to mimic in his poetry the very coagulation of meaning that is Hell. He does this by means of ironic literalization, the substitution of something bodily for everything spiritual. Such literalization is ironic in

³ CPE 35; translation modified.

Schlegel's sense of *parekbasis*; it steps aside from the signified in order to signify the signifier itself; it "turns words into icons, souls into bodies[,] the spirit into the letter, [and] rhetorical figures into things."⁴ The *Inferno* is the Hell of language, where what is meant is always meant at a remove, where every sign is a sign of a sign, where the channels by which a signifier normally signifies are multiplied into a labyrinth. We've already seen this conflation of signifier and signified in Dante's plea that the sense of the gate's inscription is hard [*duro*], as hard as the stone in which the letters are inscribed. This manner of ironic materialization is nowhere more evident, however, than in the punishments.

The *Inferno's contrapasso* is ironic through and through, for the poem portrays sinners spending eternity engaged in precisely what they chose and pursued in life.⁵ The philosophers in limbo "live in desire" for what they are "without hope" of experiencing, namely, the presence of god;⁶ they are condemned to philosophize forever, to love wisdom from afar without ever becoming *sophoi*. The lustful are buffeted about in Hell by the same love they chose to be buffeted by in life. The gluttonous, who lived like pigs, eternally rut about in the mud. As Freccero says, "If the bodies in hell are really souls, then it follows that their physical attitudes, contortions and punishments are really *spiritual* attitudes and states of mind, sins made manifest in the form of physical punishment. It is therefore correct to say the punishments are the sins; sin bears the same relationship to punishment as the souls in hell bear to their fictive bodies. They are significances become icons."⁷

Given the above-mentioned double character of Marx's critique, it seems that *Capital*, too, steps aside from the signified (capitalism) to address, instead, its signifier

⁴ Freccero, op. cit., p. 106.

⁵ See Kenneth Gross, "Infernal Metamorphoses: An Interpretation of Dante's 'Counterpass'," in *Modern Critical Views: Dante*, ed. Harold Bloom, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), pp. 179-188.

⁶ Inf. 4.42

⁷ Freccero, op. cit., pp. 106-107.

(political economy). Furthermore, according to Marx, this signifier is characterized by *reification*, in much the same way that Hell constitutes a clotting of the normal circulation of providential meaning within medieval creation. Within political economy, relations are “hidden by a thingly veil.”⁸ This is a necessary feature of science, claims Marx, since, turning a Hegelianism to very un-Hegelian purposes, “Reflection only begins *post festum*”:

The forms which stamp products as commodities and which are therefore the preliminary requirements for the circulation of commodities, already possess the fixed quality of natural forms of social life before man seeks to give an account, not of their historical character, for in his eyes they are immutable, but of their content and meaning. Consequently, it was solely the analysis of the prices of commodities which led to the determination of the magnitude of value, and solely the common expression of all commodities in money which led to the establishment of their character as values. It is however precisely this finished form of the world of commodities—the money form—which conceals the social character of private labor and the social relations between the individual workers, by making those relations appear as relations between material objects, instead of revealing them plainly.⁹

That Minerva only flies at dusk means science only encounters things it takes for dead. These corpses it inters within itself as its concepts. In the same way that Hell seals off its inhabitants from vivifying contact with God, locking their souls in bodily death—at its deepest point, they are even frozen—so, too, does political economy preserve social relations in a state of reification, severed from the historical forces that created these relations, maintain them in their existence, and will transform them anew. By addressing his critique to these reified categories, Marx, as much as Dante, is ironically doubling political economy’s own characteristic method, speaking nowhere of his actual—historical and material—concern, but everywhere only of its icon, giving us only signs of signs. As irony, Marx’s critique presents readers with commodities, money, capital, and labor, “personifications of economic relations,” speaking and

⁸ CPE 34; translation modified.

⁹ C1 168f

dancing, falling in love and going to market, bleeding and sucking blood. But these “characters” are only stand-ins, symbols, not the *real* objects of his concern.¹⁰

2. Marx's Irony

That Marx's discourse is fundamentally ironic has been suggested by others before. For the most part, however, these suggestions have only amounted to enticing “what-ifs.” Dominick LaCapra was the first to call for a rereading of Marx (and *Capital* in particular) that would attend specifically to what LaCapra calls “double-voicing.”¹¹

Of the utmost pertinence would be a set of related questions circulating around Marx's indecision—at times calculated and at times seemingly blind—between a ‘positivistic’ assertion of theses and a critical problematization of them. Among these questions would be the following: To what extent is Marx putting forth certain propositions in his own voice (for example, a labor theory of value) and to what extent does he furnish an ironic deconstruction of the system of classical economics and the capitalist practice it subtended (including the assumption of a labor theory of value)? Does Marx himself simply have a labor theory of value or is it part and parcel of the system he is criticizing?¹²

LaCapra, however, does not actually undertake this rereading. Terrell Carver takes up the challenge, but finds, on balance, that the “double-voicing” of *Capital*—at least as regards the labor theory of value—is insufficient. If there is irony in Marx's representation of political economy, Carver concludes, “he and the political economists speak in LaCapra's ‘single voice,’ despite the analytical, historical and political distinctions that Marx introduced into the genre.”¹³ Carver, it seems, largely agrees with Jean Baudrillard (whom he cites in this regard) that Marx's discourse simply

¹⁰ C1 179

¹¹ Before LaCapra, Leonard P. Wessell, Jr. (*Karl Marx, Romantic Irony, and the Proletariat: The Mythopoetic Origins of Marxism*, [Baton Rouge & London: Louisiana State University Press, 1979]) had put forth the argument that Marx's discourse is ironic, but for Wessell this amounted basically to the claim that Marx is lying to his proletarian audience, hiding his delusions of prophetic grandeur under a false mantle of scientific language. This approach requires selective, tendentious, and downright dishonest citation of Marx's *juvenalia*, but Wessell did not even attempt to read Marx's later works.

¹² *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language*, (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 271.

¹³ *The Postmodern Marx*, op. cit., p. 82.

mirrors political economy, rather than ironically turning it back against itself.¹⁴ I believe my own presentation of Marx's arguments in Chapter Two disposes of Carver's particular arguments about the labor theory of value, thereby obviating the reservations about Marx's irony attendant upon those arguments.

John Seery, without tackling *Capital*, has added further weight to LaCapra's supposition by showing that irony was an explicit concern of the young Marx.¹⁵ Marx was, in fact, a student of August W. Schlegel,¹⁶ who also sat on his dissertation committee.¹⁷ That dissertation itself, and the notebooks that surround it, connect discussions of Socratic irony, Epicurean atomism, and the situation of the Young Hegelians in such a way, claims Seery, that; "It is almost as if Marx is informing us from the outset of his career that his subsequent works will assume an 'objective' form of expression, that his philosophy will resemble Platonic myth, Christian eschatology, Hegelian determinism, Democritean materialism, and Epicurean 'repulsion.'"¹⁸ That is, his work will resemble many things—including, perhaps, political economy—without actually being any of them. I will return below to Marx's dissertation, and the ways in which it prefigures the drama of *Capital*; Seery himself, as I said, does not take his hypothesis into the critique of political economy. It seems, therefore, that the inscription on the gate succeeds in warding off many a potential pilgrim, even some already fortified with some sense that Marx might know more than he is letting on.

¹⁴ Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, tr. Mark Poster, (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975).

¹⁵ *Political Returns: Irony in Politics and Theory from Plato to the Antinuclear Movement*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), pp 240-258.

¹⁶ The brother and co-ironist of Friedrich, whose definition of irony as *parekbasis* I cited above. It is worth noting, as well, that A. W. Schlegel was a major figure in the Romantic reappreciation of Dante. He devoted an essay to the *Divine Comedy* in 1791, lectured on Dante in Berlin, and published an attack on Dante Gabriele Rossetti's interpretation of his namesake in 1836. For a portion of Schlegel's lectures on Dante, and further citations, see "August Wilhelm Schlegel, for the reinstatement of Dante," in *Dante: Critical Heritage 1314(?)–1870*, ed. Michael Caesar, (London & New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 420-7.

¹⁷ Seery, *op. cit.*, pp. 240f.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

The one exception of which I am aware is Robert Paul Wolff, who takes an awareness of Marx's irony into the heart of *Capital* itself.¹⁹ Guided by this awareness, Wolff notes, e.g., that Marx mocks the absurdity of the very abstractions that constitute the economic categories, casting doubt on the "single-voicedness" of Marx's own use of those abstractions.²⁰ As Marx writes in *Capital*, in a passage Wolff calls special attention to:

If I state that coats or boots stand in a relation to linen because the latter is the universal incarnation of abstract human labor, the absurdity of the statement is self-evident. Nevertheless, when the producers of coats and boots bring these commodities into a relation with linen, or with gold or silver (and this makes no difference here), as the universal equivalent, the relation between their own private labor and the collective labor of society appears to them in exactly this absurd form. The categories of bourgeois economics consist precisely of forms of this [i.e., absurd] kind.²¹

Wolff's question is a good one: How can Marx be read as a simple proponent of the labor theory of value when he calls the theory's premise an absurd form of appearance of a social relation? Yet what else does Marx present us with than a full elaboration of this absurd form of appearance?

There are two difficulties with Wolff's presentation, however. First, his notion of irony really doesn't go beyond a sort of Socratic esotericism; it amounts to a wink and a nod to the knowing few, an inside joke at the expense of the gullible who are taking this "scientific" discourse seriously.²² Thus, Wolff discards Marx's irony when he turns to the task of reconstructing an actual science of economics out of Marx's work.²³ Furthermore, although he enters *Capital*, Wolff does not go beyond the realm of the

¹⁹ *Moneybags Must Be So Lucky: On the Literary Structure of Capital*, (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

²¹ C1 169

²² *Moneybags Must Be So Lucky*, op. cit., pp. 28-31.

²³ See Wolff's "A Critique and Reinterpretation of Marx's Labor Theory of Value," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 10:2, Spring 1981, pp. 89-120; and *Understanding Marx: A Reconstruction and Critique of Capital*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). Then again, perhaps his irony is simply very thoroughgoing.

market into production. On his account, the transition from circulation to production is the only unmasking that Marx has to do. It is only the fetishism of the commodity that calls for an ironic presentation.²⁴ I disagree on both counts. As I think I have demonstrated, *Capital* continues to descend through appearances right up to the end. But more importantly, its irony is not reducible to the “perspectival rendering of an authorial vision.”²⁵ Irony is embedded in the discrepancy between the apparent surface of the text and what, at some other level, the text does; it traverses the space between *Vorstellung* and *Wirklichkeit*. Wolff is right to connect literary style to ontology; what he fails to notice is that the ontology operative in Marx’s works is one that renders *all science* unintentionally, and thus “seriously,” ironic.

The operation of thought necessarily latches onto the forms of things. As forms of thought, every one of these is preserved eternally. But the eternity of thought-forms does not imply anything about the longevity of those beings of which forms are the forms. To take the schoolbook example, the definition of “bachelor” is still the definition of “bachelor” even if marriage no longer exists, even if there are no men.²⁶ Marx *must* be ironic, or else fall silent, for all this talking is only a discourse about thought-forms conducted among thought-forms; it does not address the actual world except by a *parekbasis*.²⁷ Every word, like one of Derrida’s postcards, or one of Dante’s

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 52f.

²⁵ *Moneybags Must Be So Lucky*, op. cit., p. 82.

²⁶ Incidentally, I think there is a defense of Aristotle’s biology lurking in this statement, for the usual criticism is that, for Aristotle, the species are eternal. What this argument overlooks is that “species” is just a (misleading) translation of *eidos*, “form.” In other words, Aristotle is committed to the claim that the definition of “deer” does not change, even if deer are replaced on the face of the earth by other species derived from the mutant offspring of deer. Beyond this, his further commitments are less clear.

²⁷ This is where my reading parts company with the readings of Murray, Arthur, Reuten, et al., who have rightly stressed the importance of social form in Marx’s thought. With the social form theorists, I think Marx’s account of capitalism is crucially dependent upon formal causality, and that Marx is, therefore, in the Aristotelian tradition. But, against the social form theorists, I also think that a one-sided emphasis on form will only get you as far as the standpoint of capital itself. Studying the social form of capital cannot give you any insight into the passing away of capital, much less any hope for such an event. For a clear explication of the ontology of social form theory, see Murray’s “Redoubled Empiricism: The Place of Social Form and Formal Causality in Marxian Theory,” in *New Investigations of Marx’s Method*, ed. Fred Moseley

hellions, is incapable of reaching its “destination.” This hypothesis that Marx engages in irony within his critique of political economy amounts to saying that the effectivity of Marx’s text, the way it does the work it does, is not to be found in the noise and bustle of his explicit discussions, but lies in silence elsewhere—though this elsewhere is the elsewhere of the words themselves, their own silence. We must now turn explicitly, first, to those words, and then, finally, to their silence.

B. The dangers of phenomenology

1. The Economy of Appearances

As the quote above about the absurdity of political economy’s forms of appearance tells us, political economy is an excellent phenomenology of the modern world.²⁸ The producers of coats and boots *really do* bring their products into relation with money, and the relation of their labor to the labor of the whole *really does* appear to them in the absurd form political economy reports and analyzes. The categories of political economy “are forms of thought which are socially valid,” as Marx puts it.²⁹ This amounts to a further elaboration of my contention, in Chapter Two, that the abstraction of labor is not just an abstraction in the head of the political economist, but an abstraction performed by our social life itself. This is what makes political economy a science, differentiating it from the “bad conscience and evil intent of

and Martha Campbell, (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1997), pp. 38-65. Compare also Scott Meikle, *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx*, (London: Duckworth & Co., 1985).

²⁸ Terrell Carver is right, I think, when he claims that, in *Capital*, Marx “was primarily interested in the language employed ordinarily within capitalist and commodity-producing societies.” I begin to diverge from him when he continues; “*Capital* is an analytic work, proceeding from that ordinary language, through a critique of the ‘science’ of political economy which purported to explain it, ascending ultimately to a realm in which conceptual relationships, deemed ‘logical’ or ‘conceptual’, can be traced out” (*The Postmodern Marx*, op. cit., p.27). Obviously, I think the directionality of Marx’s movement is slightly different than does Carver, and I am trying to show, in this chapter, that the ordinary language of capitalism, the science of political economy, and the realm of conceptual relations are all one.

²⁹ C1 169

apologetics.”³⁰ Within its limits, Marx is unstinting in his praise of political economy, which “has indeed analyzed value and its magnitude, however incompletely, and has uncovered the content concealed within these forms.”³¹ Just as in the 1859 Preface, where he had claimed that “the anatomy of bourgeois society must be sought in political economy,”³² Marx states plainly in *Capital* that classical political economy had “investigated the real internal framework [*Zusammenhang*] of bourgeois relations of production.”³³

That this science of political economy constitutes a *phenomenology* of capitalism is implicit in Marx’s entire presentation. The very first lines of both the *Contribution* and *Capital* establish that we are encountering bourgeois society in its phenomenal being, for the monstrous accumulation of commodities is how the wealth of bourgeois society appears [*erscheint*].³⁴ This language of appearance is at its greatest density in Parts One and Two, but we’ve already seen that it is also an essential component of the discussions of formal and real subsumption.³⁵ Moreover, this mode of appearing of modern relations of production is also the *logos* of its appearance. Thus, Marx characterizes the commodity according to “the manner of speaking of the English economists,” which amounts to “commodities speak[ing] through the mouth of the economist.”³⁶ Marx remains insistent, right up to the end of the book, that the political economists are the mouths through which capitalism speaks.³⁷ And, of course, this ventriloquist operation is just a polemical reworking by

³⁰ C1 97

³¹ C1 173f

³² CPE 20; translation modified.

³³ C1 174fn³⁴

³⁴ Compare the “Notes on Adolf Wagner”; “What I start out from is the simplest social form in which the labor-product is presented in contemporary society, and this is the ‘*commodity*’. I analyze it, and right from the beginning, in the *form in which it appears*” (LPW 241).

³⁵ See above, Chapter Two, and, e.g., C1 310, 314f, 317, 322, 443, 451, 453, etc.

³⁶ C1 177

³⁷ See, e.g., C1 932

Marx of the very Greek understanding of science as an account, a gathering together into words of that which is explained. The political economists give voice to the modern form of society; they speak its appearing. Political economy is thus the *Schein und Sprache*, the legible appearance of the bourgeois world.

This characterization of Marx's approach to political economy, it might be protested, runs afoul of Marx's repeated differentiation between vulgar economy and political economy. In relation to the rate of surplus value, Marx says of the former that it "relies here, as everywhere, on appearance [*Schein*] as opposed to the law of appearing [*Erscheinung*]." ³⁸ Classical political economy, on the other hand, "investigates the inner connection of bourgeois relations of production."³⁹ On the basis of this distinction, isn't Marx claiming for political economy, precisely insofar as it is scientific, a power of penetrating *behind* appearances?⁴⁰ I would answer this question with another question: What is it that political economy *finds* "behind" the appearances it penetrates? In contrast to the vulgar economists, classical political economy discovers "the law of appearing," the *Zusammenhang* by which the various apparitions of bourgeois society "hang together." But this is not really at odds with my characterization, for this discovery does not carry political economy "behind" appearances to something that does not appear, so much as it constitutes political economy as the systematic interrelation of the investigated appearances. For science, the reality "behind" appearances is nothing other than the totality of those appearances in their systematic *Zusammenhang*.⁴¹ This conclusion can also be

³⁸ C1 421f; translation modified.

³⁹ C1 174fn34; translation modified.

⁴⁰ This is the line taken by Norman Geras, "Marx and the Critique of Political Economy," in *Ideology in Social Science: Readings in Critical Social Theory*, ed. Robin Blackburn, (New York: Pantheon, 1972), pp. 284-305.

⁴¹ Compare Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, A.III, "Force and the Understanding: Appearance and the Supersensible World." Geras himself recognizes this, as well, if only partially and belatedly, for he writes; "the distinction between essence and appearance is, as well as everything else, a distinction also between

reached via Aristotle, for, whether one is examining a whole or its constituent parts, the form [*eidos*] grasped in thought is the “look” [*eidos*] of the thing, and however you may analyze and dissect the whole, you only ever see *eidoi*.

2. Imminent Paralysis

Political economy, then, is the grasping in thought and speech of the form of modern society. The social validity of political economy’s phenomenology—its “rightness”—should not distract us, however, from its danger. In the third volume of *Capital*, Marx discusses the “trinity formula,” according to which the surplus-value produced by capitalist production is seen, not as such, but as the interest on capital, the rent on land, and the wages of labor. Marx says of “this economic three-in-one”⁴² that it “completes the mystification of the capitalist mode of production” by immediately conflating “the material production relations with their socio-historical determinations.”⁴³ This conflation gives rise to a:

bewitched, distorted and standing-on-its-head world, where Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre, as social characters and at the same time mere things, set their ghost in motion. It is to the great profit of classical economics to have dissolved this false appearance and deception, this autonomization and ossification of the distinct social elements of wealth vis-à-vis one another, this personification of things and thingification of production-relations, this religion of everyday life [...] *Yet even its best spokesmen remain more or less engrossed in the world of appearance critically dissolved by them, since nothing else is possible from the bourgeois standpoint.*⁴⁴

The classical political economists have, up to certain point, discerned the structure of Hell. They have shown us the interrelation among many of its concepts. They have led us beyond its first appearances. But, in the end, they are unable to lead

the totality and its parts” (op. cit., p. 305). Elster believes Marx misunderstood Hegel on this point; see *Making Sense of Marx* [sic.], op. cit., pp. 124ff.

⁴² C3 953

⁴³ C3 969; translation modified.

⁴⁴ C3 968f; translation modified, my emphasis.

us *out of* those appearances. They are “engrossed” [*befangen*]. And if they are engrossed, how much more so are “the actual agents of production themselves,” who “feel completely at home in these estranged and irrational forms [...] for these are precisely the configurations of appearances [*Gestaltungen des Scheins*] in which they move, and with which they are daily involved.”⁴⁵

In the *Inferno*, there is, on the one hand, a similar relationship between reification and appearance, and, on the other, a similar danger of becoming engrossed. The danger of Hell, both for the pilgrim and for the reader of the *Inferno*, lies precisely in the spectacular character of Hell’s ironic presentation. In Canto IV of *Purgatorio*, Dante describes the way the sensuous soul can become fixated:

When because of pleasures, or else pains,
that some faculty of ours may grasp,
the soul focuses sharply upon that,
it seems to heed no other power;
and this is against the error that believes
one soul is kindled over another in us.
And therefore, when we hear or see something
that holds the soul strongly turned to it,
time passes, and we do not notice its passage.⁴⁶

If Hell should so captivate Dante’s senses that his soul is wholly and firmly “turned toward it,” he might not perceive the passing of time, even unto eternity. Likewise, if the reader of the *Inferno* should be too caught up in the concrete bodily manifestations of Dante’s poem, she would not participate in the salvific deliverance

⁴⁵ C3 969; Marx generally—and this is very important in this context—uses “agents of production” to refer to capitalists, not workers. I will cite, as an example, this passage from the 1861-63 notebooks: “The great mass of so-called ‘higher grade’ workers [...] found it not at all pleasant to be relegated *economically* to the same class as buffoons and menial servants and to appear merely as people partaking in consumption, parasites on the actual producers (or rather agents of production)” (MECW 31, p. 30). I will return to this point in the next chapter, for it is absolutely crucial, on my reading, that the workers come to be less engrossed by phenomenology (whether of *tekhnē* or of capital) than other classes.

⁴⁶ Pur. 4.1-9

that it offers, for she would attend only to the particular characters and punishments, and not to the movement beyond their bodily torment.⁴⁷

The danger posed to the pilgrim by Hell's power of turning the senses toward it is driven home by a strange occurrence in Canto Nine. While they are stalled at the gates of Dis—which have been closed and barred by devils—Virgil and Dante are confronted by the Furies, who threaten them with the coming of the Medusa. Virgil responds dramatically; he orders Dante to turn and close his eyes, “for if the Gorgon appears and you should see her, there would never be any going back up.” Virgil doesn't wait for Dante to act, but grabs hold of him, turns him around, and covers his eyes with both of their pairs of hands.⁴⁸ This moment of active, physical intervention by Virgil—a rarity in itself, to which I will return—is immediately followed by the *Inferno's* second apostrophe to the reader; “O you who have sound intellects, gaze on the teaching that is hidden beneath the veil of the strange verses.” Medusa does not appear; instead, Dante hears an approaching clamor, and Virgil uncovers his eyes in order that he might see an angel arriving from across the River Styx. The angel opens the gates to Dis, and the duo proceeds on the path downward.⁴⁹

Freccero gives to this famous crux an absolutely central role in the unfolding of the *Inferno*. If the inscription on the gate establishes mimesis as the poetry proper to the bodily sight of Hell, and irony as the movement of the reification involved in mimesis, then the Medusa episode warns of the stasis of that movement. “[T]he threat of the Medusa proffered by the Furies represents, in the pilgrim's *askesis*, a sensual

⁴⁷ This failing seems to plague, for example, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and other Victorian neo-romantics who take away from Dante's poem a fixation on Francesca and Paolo as a tragic romantic ideal, and, at most, counterpose to this an ascetic and abstract moralism.

⁴⁸ Despite illuminated manuscripts depicting Dante passively praying while Virgil covers his eyes, the text is quite clear: “and he himself turned me, and he did not stop with my hands, but stopped me up with his own as well” (Inf. 9.58-60).

⁴⁹ Inf. 9.34-63

fascination and potential entrapment precluding all further progress.”⁵⁰ “Petrification” names both the moral failing of sensualism and the hermeneutic failing of literalism; it is “the inability to see the light of truth in an interpretive glance.”⁵¹

At both the level of drama and the level of text, Hell threatens the interloper with paralyzing apparitions. In the Hell through which Dante descends, this threat takes the form of the Medusa, the vision of whom would freeze the pilgrim in his tracks. Fear and hopelessness, the material constituents out of which Hell is built, would come forth in a pure manifestation. Medusa is Hell’s attempt to make good on the gate’s threat of eternity. But there is also danger here for the reader; the poet’s Hell of language is full of interpretive snares. He can depict Hell in words only by replicating its threat in a different sphere. Dante drags the reader into Hell with him, and even if the pilgrim escapes, there is no guarantee that the reader will. The reader who is unable to see past “the veil of strange verses” will find only a horror story of amazing tortures and arresting images. There will be no salvation, but only morbid fascination.

But isn’t this precisely the threat we sense in Marx’s presentation of the phenomenology of capital? Don’t we fear that, after all, the logic of capital is an iron cage? That if we follow Marx in, we’ll never come back out again? The greatest danger of paralysis seems to confront us at the very place I cast in the previous chapter as Marx’s own entry into Dis, the transition from the market to the abode of production. It is here where the vulgar economists are frozen, unable to see in labor-power anything but one more commodity, just like all the others. Here, too, most of Twentieth Century economics has languished, enthralled by the equilibrium of the

⁵⁰ Freccero, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

market. Even Marxists, like Elster and Roemer, were unable to turn away from the exchange logic of marginal utility, and ended up proponents of “market socialism.”⁵²

But beyond the threats that Marx points out, there is the fear that Marx himself was trapped. Even if my argument for the irony of his discourse is convincing, there is still the nagging suspicion that “the mirror of production” is a grave threat. Like Narcissus, perhaps Marx became frozen in fascination of what he saw there. And might we too become mired? Will we be stuck fast, speaking forever of nothing but “modes of production,” “rates of surplus value,” and “fixed and circulating capital”? Wouldn’t it be safer to refuse Marx’s hand? If we just don’t go in, there is no danger of never coming out.

But Marx, like Dante before him, has a prior claim on our attention. Both of these poets would insist that they are not gratuitously producing the dangers of their texts. For Dante, the dangers of sensual literalism—truncating the motions of the soul such as to never approach the perfection of heaven—cannot be avoided by refusing to read his poem. The snares are built into the structure of the world, and can only be overcome by confronting them, if not through the *Inferno*, then through one’s own, unguided *katabasis*. Likewise with Marx; the enthrallment in economic categories is not a danger that lurks only in economics texts, much less only in his critique. The threat is all around us, all the time. We have to do with these appearances every day, in our quotidian dealings with the world. The snares of the devil surround us in the “religion of everyday life” to which he refers in *Capital III*. The question is not whether or not to run the risk, but whether to run it alone and unarmed or under the guiding hand of our Virgil.

⁵² See the second volume of Roemer’s (ed.) *Foundations of Analytical Marxism*, (Aldershot, UK: Elgar Publishing Ltd., 1994).

3. Paralysis: A Case Study

To see how one can be paralyzed by the phenomenology of capitalist society even if one has refused to follow Marx—or precisely *because* and *insofar as* one has refused to follow Marx—one only has to consider the object lesson of the Frankfurt School’s Critical Theory. Although the Frankfurt School started out as a self-conscious effort to follow Marx into the critique of the modern of production, its first generation (I’m thinking, in particular, of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse) became engrossed in the system of presentations of capitalist production, petrified by the spectacle of the capitalist subsumption of productivity. Hoping to escape his predecessors’ paralysis, Habermas refused to follow Marx into political economy. This did not preserve him, however, for he is just as much enthralled by the phenomenal discourse of modernity as were his teachers.

Horkheimer and Adorno follow Marx far enough to see the animated monster of capital. They recognize the process of abstraction as the fundamental assimilation of the world to capital. The trouble is that they are so impressed by this “tool of enlightenment” that “liquidates” its objects,⁵³ that they grant it precisely the eternity and inescapability that Marx deconstructs. Despite the name, there is no dialectic in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; there is only the monotonous insistence that the same logic of enlightenment has characterized everything forever. Thus, myth was always already enlightenment,⁵⁴ Odysseus and his crew were already capitalist and proletarians,⁵⁵ knowledge and technology have always been capital.⁵⁶ And the same liquidation of every particular into the abstract unity that is the rule of bourgeois society is equally

⁵³ *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, tr. John Cumming, (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), p. 13.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 8, 11, etc.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 32-7.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

the rule of Horkheimer and Adorno's discourse.⁵⁷ In the face of triumphant enlightenment, the only possibility is the recitation of enlightenment's own litany, in the future tense as well as in the past. Thus, Horkheimer and Adorno can close their discourse by writing: "The most intimate reactions of human beings have been so thoroughly reified that the idea of something specific to themselves now persists only as an utterly abstract notion: personality scarcely signifies anything more than shining white teeth and freedom from body odor and emotions. The triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them."⁵⁸ Marcuse sums up this Critical Theory; "holding no promise and showing no success, it remains negative. Thus it wants to remain loyal to those who, without hope, have given and give their life to the Great Refusal."⁵⁹

Habermas is right to react against this paralyzing hopelessness.⁶⁰ Unfortunately, rather than rejecting the wide-eyed attention to modernity's spectacular presentation that causes Critical Theory's paralysis, he turns away from all inquiry into the mode of production. Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse approached Marx's object, but they did not approach it in the way Marx did. In response to their petrification, Habermas retains their method of approach, but turns away from Marx's object. But the danger does not lie in the object, but in the approach. Thus, Habermas ends up just as enthralled in the open air of the public sphere as his predecessors were in the bowels of the capitalist production machine.

⁵⁷ They are, of course, aware of this. They turn enlightenment against enlightenment in a self-consciously hopeless gesture.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 167. This final statement could just as easily be rewritten to sum up Horkheimer and Adorno's own procedure: The triumph of enlightenment in modernity is that critics feel compelled to learn and use its methods even though they see through them.

⁵⁹ *One Dimensional Man*, (London: Sphere Books, 1968), p. 200.

⁶⁰ "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno," in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, tr. Frederick G. Lawrence, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), pp. 106-30.

In order to understand how this came about, we must look back first to Habermas' discussion of Marx in *Knowledge and Human Interests*.⁶¹ I have already indicated, in Chapter One, that I think Habermas misreads Marx's concept of concrete labor by conflating *tekhnē's* promised end and its actual result. Because of this, he takes labor to be synonymous with the self-formation of the human species, which, in turn, is nothing but the development of the forces of production. Thus, he can write, supposedly in Marx's voice; "So far as the identity of a society takes form via this level of scientific-technical progress, it is the self-consciousness of 'the' social subject."⁶² In other words, productivity is equated with technology, which is simply the instrumental application of positivistic science. Because of this train of equivalences, Habermas takes Marx's claim that the natural and human sciences will eventually merge into "a *single science*" to be evidence that Marx collapsed the human sciences *into* the natural sciences, conceived as the positivistic prediction and control of natural forces.⁶³ Furthermore, he takes the critique of political economy to be Marx's science of society in this positivist sense, and thus to be an attempt at producing a "knowledge that makes possible the control of the social life process."⁶⁴

Looking to labor as the basis of one's libratory politics fails, according to Habermas' conception, because the only rationality one can get out of the "production paradigm" of activity is reducible to the instrumental reason whose pathologies were diagnosed and exhibited by the previous generation of Critical Theory.⁶⁵ We cannot

⁶¹ *Knowledge and Human Interests*, tr. Jeremy Shapiro, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), pp. 25-63.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 54 (The scare-quotes around "the" reflect Habermas' sense that Marx believed that only with the advent of class antagonism does "the social subject loses its unity" (*ibid.*, p. 54). Obviously, I disagree; on my reading, it is only with the advent of capitalism that anything resembling a "social subject" develops in the first place, and this has precisely a class-character, for it is capital.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 47. Charles Taylor reads Marx in the same way, though without citing any textual evidence; see his *Hegel*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 553ff.

⁶⁵ See "Excursus on the Obsolescence of the Production Paradigm" in *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, op. cit., pp. 75-82.

place our hope in the development of the forces of production because their instrumental rationality has “enter[ed] into a baneful symbiosis with the relations of production.”⁶⁶ On the other hand, the relations of production, maintains Habermas, are still open to an ideology critique, for, as he writes in *Knowledge and Human Interests*; “The institutionally secured suppression of the communication through which a society is divided into social classes amounts to fetishizing the true social relations. [...] In liberal bourgeois society the legitimation of power is derived from the legitimation of the market, that is from the ‘justice’ of the exchange of equivalents inherent in exchange relations. It is unmasked by the critique of commodity fetishism.”⁶⁷

In other words, once production has been reduced to the development of technology, Habermas can argue that “the self-constitution of the human species” involves *both* “self-generation through productive activity and self-formation through critical-revolutionary activity,” where the latter is conceived as communicative action.⁶⁸ In communication, Habermas finds a sphere of human activity with an immanent rationality very different from the instrumental reason found in labor. Conducting a transcendental-pragmatic inquiry into the conditions for the possibility of communication aimed at understanding, he finds that anyone engaged in communication must presuppose certain norms, which are contained in the structure of communication itself. “Participants in argumentation cannot avoid the presupposition that [...] the structure of their communication rules out all external or

⁶⁶ *Knowledge and Human Interests*, op. cit., p. 118.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

internal coercion other than the force of the better argument and thereby also neutralizes all motives other than that of the cooperative search for truth.”⁶⁹

Marx, claims Habermas, ignored the communicative aspect of revolution, reducing it to a purely technical achievement; this attempt founders, however, not only on the complexity of modern society, but on its very *social* character.⁷⁰ Habermas is in agreement with the Right Hegelians in their assessment of forecasts of a communist society; “How can one administer in common something that forms no finished whole and is daily born anew and shaped anew in an endless and endlessly manifold production?”⁷¹ Faced with this apparent impossibility and with the totalitarian techno-bureaucracies that have arisen from Twentieth Century attempts to overcome it, Habermas denies that our liberation can take the form of the communal direction of the forces of production. Rather, it must take the form of a discursively constituted community oriented toward understanding and consensus.

It is not my intention to enter into a full-blown critique of Habermas’ work here. He is far too complex and interesting a thinker to be fully dissected so lightly. Nonetheless, I do want to note an aspect of his work that, I believe, goes to the heart of his difference with Marx. On the whole, Critical Theory fails to see any real *poiēsis* in labor. As I noted in Chapter One, its leading representatives seem to have no problem with positivism as it regards non-human nature. They want the externalization of our technical ideas to proceed smoothly. Their objection to capitalism is that it turns instrumental rationality on humanity itself. Once again, however, they see no real

⁶⁹ “Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification,” in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, tr. C. Lenhardt and S. W. Nicholsen, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), pp 88-9.

⁷⁰ Many writers agree with Habermas’ judgment here, even if they don’t agree with his elaboration of communicative action. See, e.g., Mark Reinhardt, *The Art of Being Free: Taking Liberties with Tocqueville, Marx, and Arendt*, (Ithaca, NY & London: Cornell University Press, 1997). Reinhardt finds material in Marx’s writings for elaborating another, more political Marx, but this “other Marx” is one that can only be found by “taking liberties” with the texts, as his title announces.

⁷¹ Oppenheim, quoted in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, op. cit., p. 395n29.

poiēsis here; their hopelessness is rooted deeply in an inability to see anything other than capital's self-projected image. Critical Theory despairs of capitalism actually bringing forth anything new. But it seems to me that Habermas retains this same inability to see *poiēsis* when he turns to communication.

In one sense, the turn to communication is directly a turn away from *poiēsis*; all making is taken to be merely instrumental, and, as such, inferior to communicative action, which has its end in itself. Making is equated with instrumental activity; non-instrumental activity is equated with communication.⁷² But in another sense, communication is itself approached in a way that disregards even its *poiētīc* aspect. The ideal of free communication is taken as constitutive of our actual, lived practices of communication, and also as a critical standard by which we can measure those real practices. Our communicative mediations are only allowed to become more perfectly themselves. Thus, although it seems, at first glance, that Habermas' discursive ethics is completely open-ended—since it doesn't presuppose any particular outcome of our deliberations—its logic is actually closed in the same way as capital's. Any concrete outcome is allowed because the discursive logic disregards all particulars equally, and is equally certain of being able to subsume them all. Its open-mindedness finds its limit only where something threatens to disrupt its constitutive dominion. Indeed, the reduction of the commodity to embodied abstract labor in the exchange of equivalents seems to me to be a constitutive and regulative ideal in precisely the same sense as Habermas' ideal speech situation. Political economy and Habermas produce the same sort of discourse, only in relation to different objects and practices.

⁷² That Habermas (following Arendt) hops off this train at political *praxis*, rather than riding it all the way to its terminus in philosophical contemplation, I cannot help but see as half-heartedness. After all, the same considerations that lead one to prefer *praxis* to *poiēsis* also ought to lead one to prefer *dianoia* to *praxis*. Thought, left to its own devices, will always prefer itself over any other activity; this is its own natural narcissism, its own will to power.

But Marx's work is an opening onto *poiēsis* that turns away from all paralyzing idealisms—of technology, of capital, of discourse. First, as I argued in Chapter One, Marx's work denies the identification of making and instrumental action. There is, indeed, a "realm of necessity," wherein our productive activity must remain overwhelmingly instrumental. This is a hypothetical necessity given our desire to remain alive and human. Providing for the background needs of the human body will always require subordinating some proportion of our collective activity to the satisfaction of those life functions that all our knowledge and imagination tell us are inescapable for carbon-based terrestrial animals like ourselves.⁷³ But it is the historical greatness of capitalism to have reduced this proportion, potentially, to a bare minimum of our overall exertions. Beyond this, Marx hopes for a realm of productive activity that is *not* instrumental, that is not subordinated to an end outside itself. This is the "realm of freedom,"⁷⁴ the productivity that he figured in 1845 as "the coincidence of the alteration of circumstances and of human activity or self-alteration," a productivity that, he writes, "can only be grasped and rationally understood as *revolutionary praxis*."⁷⁵

Second—pace Habermas's effort to preserve revolutionary *praxis* by translating it into communicative action—precisely what makes this *praxis* revolutionary is its productivity, its *poiētīc* materiality. It is the non-ideality of discursive practice—the distance by which real discourse falls "short" of the ideal speech situation—that allows for the possibility of changing the world through discourse.⁷⁶ Likewise, it is the non-ideality of labor—the distance by which its actual production falls "short" of its

⁷³ "There is no postrevolutionary condition in which necessary labor could be eliminated" (Daniel Brudney, *Marx's Attempt to Leave Philosophy*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 162).

⁷⁴ C3 959

⁷⁵ TF3, MECW 5, p. 4; translation modified.

⁷⁶ I have examined this question more fully in "Marx Contra the Democrats: The Force of *The Eighteenth Brumaire*," *Strategies: Journal of Theory, Culture & Politics*, 16:1, May 2003, pp 51-64.

intention—that makes it into the matrix of our historical being. This disjunction between ideality and materiality is what the earlier Critical Theorists failed to see regarding the instrumentality endemic to capitalism. They were thus paralyzed by the appearance of instrumental rationality. Habermas does not escape that paralysis by turning away from the descent into political economy. He is just as paralyzed by the appearance of the ideal in communication. The danger of paralysis lies, therefore, not in following Marx into Hell, but in failing to follow, whether inside or out.

The support I have offered for this conclusion is still not convincing, perhaps, since it has the quality of a negative induction. The economists were paralyzed; the Critical Theorists were paralyzed; Habermas was paralyzed. None of them trusted to follow Marx. From these premises it is impossible to construct a syllogism with the conclusion: Those who trust to follow Marx will not be paralyzed. As Aristotle would remind us however, not all things can be demonstrated, and it is foolish to ask for a demonstration where no demonstration is possible. A demonstration is never possible when it is a question of grasping a first beginning. The only path to such a beginning is the path of insight, the leap from some number of suggestive instances to a standpoint from which those instances come together and make sense. Perhaps Marx's hopeful struggle is just such a beginning. If so, no argument can demonstrate the need to trust him. Yet, without trying to demonstrate the indemonstrable, I nevertheless think it is possible to present further evidence, to strengthen the circumstantial case, as it were. In order to do so, I want to return to the gates of Dis.

C. Hope and the laboring body

The whole substance and structure of the world,
upheld through many years, will crash.

Lucretius
De Rerum Natura, V.II.96f⁷⁷

1. *The Persistence of Hope*

As I said above, the Medusa is Hell's attempt to make good on the threat of eternity etched on its gate. This attempt, however, remains only an attempt. The paralyzing Medusa never actually shows herself. For all the subtlety of his reading, Freccero never grapples with this crucial fact: Petrification is a damnation that never arrives. The awful power of Hell's sensuousness, which is supposed to reach a moment of absolute density in the petrifying face, never manifests itself. It always only threatens from the immanent future. Hell's other apparitions promise this coming, this moment of absolute presence, when visibility will congeal the viewer into stone, when appearance will become a total reality, when the dead letter will overwhelm and assimilate the living body. But the promised moment never arrives. In other words, just as with the gate's threatening inscription, the eternal damnation represented by the Gorgon has a hollow center. The words of the Furies, like the words on the gate, are, in the end, just words.

Freccero may be right that the Medusa represents the threat of corporeality, but it is Dante's very corporeality—the fact that he is a living body, whose sight can be blocked by his motion and by the opaque materiality of his hands—that preserves him from that threat. Unlike the souls of the damned, Dante's living body does not slip into Hell “when beckoned to, [...] like a falcon to its lure.”⁷⁸ Instead, it continually resists

⁷⁷ Excerpted by Marx, “Epicurean Philosophy: Sixth Notebook,” MECW 1, p. 490.

⁷⁸ Inf. 3.116-117

all forward momentum, and its progress is resisted in turn by the guardians of Hell. Charon, Cerebrus, Pluto, and the devils at the gates of Dis all attempt to forbid Dante's further descent on the basis that he is embodied. As a body, Dante must actively propel himself forward through a medium that does not welcome him. His living embodiment opens him to threats, like that of the Furies. As a body, he is capable of feeling fear, of being overcome by cowardice and suspicion. This seems to make him vulnerable to Hell's threat of hopelessness. But at the same time that the threat has purchase on the pilgrim only because of his embodiment, he is also always preserved from the threat coming to fruition because of this same embodiment. What makes Dante threatenable also shelters him from what is threatened. As a living body, he cannot belong in the world of shades. That he has descended there means there is hope. That Hell must threaten him means he is safe from its threats. That he is a body means he cannot become stone.

Likewise in Marx, it is materiality itself that will preserve us against the paralysis threatened by the appearance of reified relations of production. There is an admonition that runs throughout Marx's corpus: don't judge an individual, a class, an era, or a social formation by what it says or thinks about itself; judge it by what it does.⁷⁹ Therefore, as much as the phenomena encountered within political economy may say to us, Marx is not primarily concerned with this saying, with this way the phenomena set themselves forth in speech. There is a level of effectivity or happening that exceeds the phenomenology of capitalism. Marx's aim, in escorting us through political economy, is to open us to the trace of this materiality. The appearance of bourgeois wealth—whether as the monstrous accumulation of commodities or as the animated monster of capital—is a petrifying appearance. It threatens to paralyze

⁷⁹ See, e.g., DDE, MECW 1, p. 84; HF, MECW 4, p. 37; GI, MECW 5, p. 62; CPE 21.

communal action with fear and suspicion. (This is the Hobbesianism that always haunts modernity.)

But, just as Dante's body can always preserve him from the ever imminent, but never present, paralysis, so also in our relation to political economy, so long as we are the laboring natural bodies that capital subsumes, it is never quite too late for us to avert our eyes from the always impending capitalist fantasia towards the coming force of transformation within ourselves. The emboldening of a hope based in the *poiēsis* of the living body is the empowering transformation promised by Marx's *katabasis* through political economy. Our Virgil holds out to his readers the prospect of founding a fourth empire—to succeed the Roman, Catholic, and modern empires—a counter-empire of materiality, of revolution, of the multitude.

2. *The Gravity of Idealism*

At this point, I recognize that my assertion of this material power beyond capital remains obscure. In order to clarify and explicate my gesture, I would like to turn to the work of John Bell and Thomas Sekine.⁸⁰ Emerging from the Japanese school of Marxist economics centered around Kozo Uno, their idiom is markedly different from my own. Nonetheless, with a little translation, I think a profitable interchange is possible.

Bell and Sekine picture the socio-historical dynamic of capitalism as a coordinate system of conceivable “use-value spaces,” concrete social contexts in which useful things are produced and consumed. As they write, “An enormous variety of use-value spaces have existed throughout our history, and it is evident that not all of them

⁸⁰ “The Disintegration of Capitalism: A Phase of Ex-Capitalist Transition,” in *Phases of Capitalist Development: Booms, Crises and Globalizations*, ed. Robert Albritton, et al., (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 37-55.

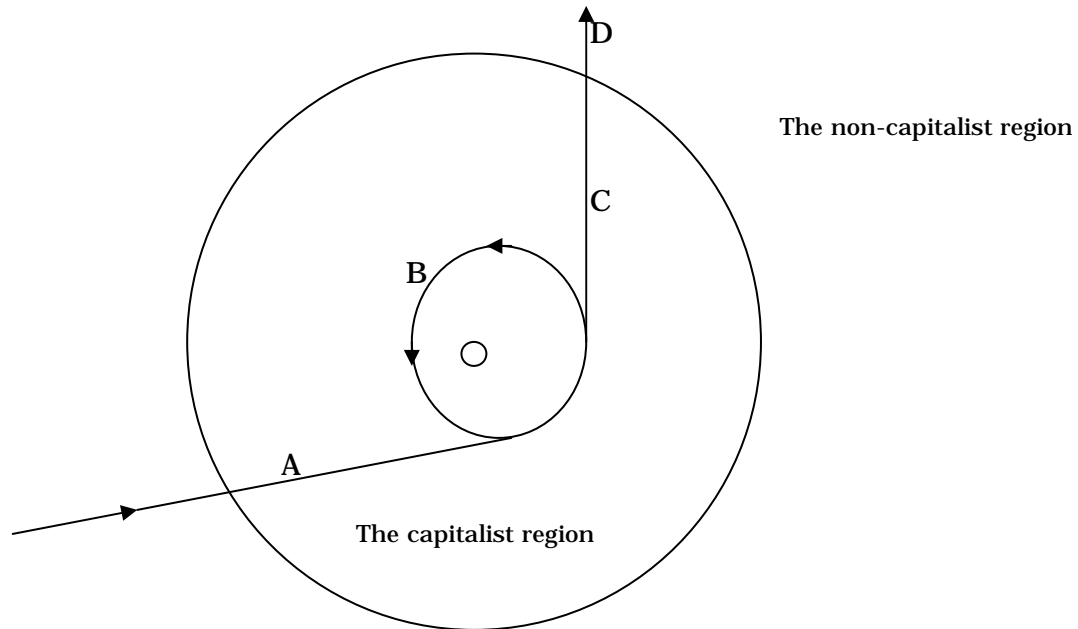
can be organized or integrated by the logic of capital.”⁸¹ They mark a point on this plain of use-value spaces as the hypothetical “pure capitalism” (O), “an ideal use-value space which is perfectly ‘commodifiable.’”⁸² Around this O are arrayed use-value spaces that are more or less—but not perfectly—subsumable under capital. Up to a certain distance from O, these socio-historical spaces represent possible capitalist societies, complexes of social life that are subsumable enough to warrant the name “capitalism.” Beyond this central region are those human societies that cannot be so-called, since the capital form is not capable of subsuming their particular configuration of the production of useful things.⁸³ In the quasi-Aristotelian language I have used throughout this dissertation, we can say that this figure represents the possible permutations of social material, with the central area representing matter that is amenable to the capital form, and the periphery representing matter that cannot be appropriated by that form. Bell and Sekine’s figure looks like this:

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 38.

⁸² The notion of a pure capitalism comes from Sekine’s *An Outline of the Dialectic of Capital*, vol. 1, (Basingstoke & New York: Macmillan Press & St. Martin’s Press, 1997). Basically, Sekine, following Uno, reads *Capital* as an (imperfect) attempt on Marx’s part to theorize capitalism in the absence of any admixtures or externalities; thus, pure capitalism.

⁸³ Ibid., pp. 38f.

[Figure 2: Bell and Sekine's model of society's trajectory through capitalism]



The arrow represents what Bell and Sekine take to be the actual trajectory taken by “our” society through the social space described by the figure (I’ll return below to the specificity of this society). Point A represents a mercantilist society, point B a liberal industrial society, point C an imperialist society, and point D an “ex-capitalist transition” society, in which Bell and Sekine believe we are currently living. Thus, they argue that we have already passed beyond the boundary between use-value spaces that are subsumable under capital and those that are not; they believe we are entering a post-capitalist society.⁸⁴

I think there are a number of serious difficulties with the schema laid out by Bell and Sekine. They are certainly too glib, for example, about our post-capitalist existence, and likewise too vague about which society’s trajectory they are actually plotting. Some discussion of uneven development, in other words, would have served

⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 39f.

them well. Likewise, the concept of use-value space is utterly homogeneous, an abstraction as flat as the Cartesian coordinate plane that represents it. But the gravest problem with their model is also, at the same time, the truly promising element of it. What their coordinate system does not tell us, but what it simultaneously begs for us to fill in—like a jigsaw puzzle with only the most important piece missing—is the identity of actual forces that would cause a society to *move* along the trajectory they describe. Why, their figure screams out, would a society move towards pure capitalism, swing around it like a satellite, and then slingshot away again? What forces are at work here? How can this static representation become a model for a dynamic historical process?

I think filling in the blanks requires us to take the diagram from two-dimensional Cartesian/Euclidean space into multi-dimensional Einsteinian space. Bell and Sekine acknowledge in their diagram that pure capitalism, the zero-point, cannot be occupied by any actual society. What they don't tell us is why. On the basis of Chapter Two, we can say why, however; capital requires the support of a material "outside," even as it systematically destroys this outside. "Pure capital," the zero-point, is like a black hole; it has both a strong gravitational attraction and will destroy any society that approaches it too closely. In reference to the physical universe, gravity can be conceived as the distortion of the linear and planar dimensions of Euclidean space; the common representation is a heavy weight placed in the center of a stretched sheet of cloth. "Gravity" is just the name we give the tendency of mass to pool together in space, illustrated by a second weight, when placed on the above described sheet, rolling into the depression created by the first. A black hole is an infinitely massive body, which so distorts the dimensions of space and time in its vicinity that anything coming within its event horizon will be pulled down its gravity well. In the human

social universe, similarly, capital exerts an immense pull on concrete labor and its products. What I want to argue is that this “gravity” is the pull of an absolute, infinite idealism on every lesser idealism. Capital draws *tekhnē* towards it because of *tekhnē*’s own idealism. Like attracts like.

In Chapter Two we saw that, once it has really subsumed labor under itself, capital becomes the paradigm of productivity, in comparison with which an artisan’s purely technical mode of making seems only marginally productive, or even counter-productive. I claimed that this indicates an inability of *tekhnē* to overcome capital, since *tekhnē* can, at best, goad capital to renewed activity and expansion. But it is one thing to say that artisanry, as a mode of economic existence, can never overpower developed capitalism; it seems to be something else entirely to say that *tekhnē*, as a logic of making, is always inclined towards capital, always tending to be drawn into its orbit. We may not be able to turn our society into one of independent craftspeople and farmers, but won’t any post-capitalist society—and, indeed, the overcoming of capital itself—necessarily involve material activity carried out according to the structure of making I detailed in Chapter One? Revolutionary activity seems to depend upon experience, choosing the right time and place, using the proper means, etc., in just the same way as cabinetry depends upon experience, choosing the right wood, using the proper tools, etc. To think otherwise is to adhere to a “spontaneism” both fantastically utopian and far removed from Marx’s own practices and recommendations.

But the experiences of the Twentieth Century ought to make us consider the matter a bit more closely. Recall that *tekhnē* can only anticipate and plan for what we have already experienced; it can only seek to reproduce a result we have encountered before. This structure of anticipation and repetition remains the same, whether one is trying to make a table or a community. We might take the 1999 “Battle of Seattle” as

an example. What happened there—the violence of the confrontations with police, the coming together of so many disparate groups, the attention it brought to bear on the internationalization of capital—was unanticipated. Certainly, many people worked very hard to plan the marches and demonstrations; just as certainly, the police and public officials carefully planned their response. But if things had gone as planned, Seattle would have been a minor story. What made Seattle a “defining event” for leftist activists was what happened despite all of the planning. It became a defining event precisely because it “got out of hand.” And, because it became a defining event, activists around the world strove to repeat it at almost every WTO, GATT, G-8, and World Bank gathering over the next three years. But when it ceased to be unexpected, it also ceased to be an event; it became a choreographed series of diminishing echoes, attended by nostalgia, disillusionment, boredom, and the eventual “commodification of dissent.” Enterprising young radicals sought to meet the felt need for the Seattle experience by producing magazines, books, documentaries, CDs, and T-shirts that recalled people to that moment, that provided a taste of the “beyond” that had been palpable amidst the tear gas.

This is not an isolated incident. The revolt against capitalism has always carried with it a powerful current of romanticism, and the object of that romantic longing is frequently the earlier successes of the revolt. This is just as characteristic of radicalism as it is of conservatism. It is quite natural to respond to the nihilistic leveling operation of capital—the profanation of everything sacred,⁸⁵ the propensity of commodities “to exchange not only soul, but body, with each and every other commodity”⁸⁶—by seeking out and trying to cling to anything with concrete meaning, with emotional resonance, in short, anything with a material specificity that cannot be

⁸⁵ CM, LPW 4

⁸⁶ C1 179

indifferently metamorphosed into its opposite.⁸⁷ After all, no matter how well we may embody and act out the abstract categories of capital, we cannot fully eliminate our more earthy aspect. There must always be some tension between our bodily existence and our roles as the organs of a social abstraction.

Experientially, this tension presents itself as a feeling that there is more to life than working and making money. The technical moment appears as soon as we respond to this felt need for “something else” by trying to consciously reproduce an experience, one that we know will meet our need because it met it once before. This attempt is technical regardless of whether we are trying to produce an experience of God or of nature, of tranquility or of adrenaline. As soon as we orient ourselves toward capital’s outside in this way, we make our experience of that outside into a need that can be met if we go through the right steps. We have delimited a space that can be filled by something useful, something that will help us meet the need. This new use-value may be a drug, it may be a church, it may be a band; whatever may have acted as the conduit for our experience before can become the aim of our activity in the present.

The tragic frustration in all this is that *any* use-value whatsoever is susceptible to becoming the bearer of exchange-value. Whatever conduit to the outside we choose can be commodified. Traditionally, of course—and still in Marx’s day—commodities were largely concrete particular objects, the stereotype of Aristotelian substances. Thus, Marx points out in “Theories of Surplus Value” that Smith vacillates between

⁸⁷ This response is attributed to Marx by Scott Meikle, among others; it is implicit in his claim that “Marx sought to reclaim the human realm from the form of exchange value” (“History of Philosophy: The Metaphysics of Substance in Marx,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Marx*, ed. Terrell Carver, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 317). I disagree, because: 1) Marx doesn’t seem to believe there is anything left to reclaim, given the technical constitution of humanity and the real subsumption of that techno-humanity under capital; and 2) the quest to reclaim is a fundamentally romantic one, and Marx is an inveterate critic of romanticism, seeing in it nothing but the conjoined twin of bourgeois liberalism, destined, as he says, to accompany the latter to its blessed end.

thinking of productive labor as labor that produces capital and as labor that produces material objects.⁸⁸ This ambiguity in Smith Marx diagnoses as an expression of the difficulty of commodifying services and other “insubstantial” use-values. Nonetheless, Marx recognized that this difficulty was purely circumstantial, and that, for example, entertainment and education were being rapidly capitalized.⁸⁹ Thus, he writes in *Capital* that “a schoolmaster is a productive laborer when, in addition to belaboring the heads of his pupils, he works himself into the ground to enrich the owner of the school.”⁹⁰ The abstraction of labor is attended by the abstraction of use-value. Exchange-value not only attaches to useful objects indiscriminately; it also comes to permeate use-value with its own abstract quality.

If the first commodities are easily delimited “things”—crops, animals, pottery—the commodity-form comes eventually to encompass not only services—prostitution, medicine, waiting tables—but also lifestyles and personal identities.⁹¹ The use-value of an Abercrombie & Fitch shirt is not protection from the elements so much as it is an image, a mantle of identification, and the personal and social acceptance that go with it. What was once a metaphorical and moralistic lament—that beauty, friendship, and wisdom can be bought and sold—is now verging on the literal truth, as anyone who watches “reality” television can tell you. The commodification of personal qualities and social relations is a very real tendency of contemporary capitalism, and this affects our needs for rebellion and release as much as it does our needs for acceptance and care.

⁸⁸ MECW 31, p. 21.

⁸⁹ “[T]hat surplus value has to express itself in a material product is a crude view which still occurs in A. Smith. Actors are productive workers, not insofar as they produce a play, but insofar as they increase their employer’s wealth” (G 328f).

⁹⁰ C1 644

⁹¹ Thus, I think Norman Livergood’s complaint is misplaced, for he claims that, “Marx’s mistake was in over-emphasizing one kind of activity to the exclusion of all others: economic activity” *Activity in Marx’s Philosophy*, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967), p. 11). My response would begin by endorsing George Brenkert’s correct observation that, “Marx’s concept of self-objectification is not limited to productive labor in this narrow economic sense” (*Marx’s Ethics of Freedom*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), pp. 91f). I would then go further to note that it is *capitalism*, not Marx, that posits all forms of human objectification as at least potentially economic.

By approaching capital's outside technically, therefore, we act as vectors by which capital can colonize new arenas.⁹²

Switching back to Bell and Sekine's idiom, the space of technical use-values is always destined to be attracted to capital. *Tekhnē* is an idealism, an attempt to determine the world that is blind to materiality, and, as such, it is essentially inclined towards capital's absolute idealism. It is this tendency of idealism to pool together—this gravity of idealism—that explains the trajectory of society towards the sphere of capitalist influence. It is only the original accumulation that levers society into the region of capitalist subsumption—that transforms society into capitalism—but the growth of *tekhnē* prepares the way by creating a commercial society, on which soil alone can capital grow.⁹³ *Tekhnē* makes the social matter ready to receive the form of capital.⁹⁴

3. Centrifugal Resistance

At the same time that the technical aspects of a society are pulled towards capital, however, there are also centrifugal forces that counter the centripetal pull of

⁹² It is for this reason that I disagree with the interpretation of revolution put forward by Eric Voegelin (among many others). According to Voegelin, Marx “demands a transition from speculative philosophy to a ‘radical’ critique which can be no less than the embodiment of the idea in reality through revolutionary activity” (“The Formation of the Marxian Revolutionary Idea,” *Review of Politics*, 12, 1950, p. 278). The “embodiment of the idea” is nothing other than technical production, however, the very thing that prepares the way for capital.

⁹³ Marx's story of original accumulation supports this claim, for he calls attention to the motive force provided to the expropriation of the peasants by the growing wool market in Flanders, and the transformation of traditional authority into the power of money (C1 878f). Feudalism is the highest expression of technical society—the guild system, the divine model of sovereignty, and the conservatism of its social structure all indicate this—and it is the “dissolution” of this society that *tekhnē* built that “set free the elements” of capitalism (C1 875). Feudalism gives rise to commodities and to money, but these “need to be transformed into capital” (C1 874). Expropriation worked this transformation.

⁹⁴ The pessimism implicit in this statement, and also the hopefulness, is expressed by Christopher J. Arthur when he writes; “Although *no existing social form* represents the determinate negation of capitalism, Marx's presentation nevertheless does point toward the *possibility* of such a negation” (*Dialectics of Labor: Marx and His Relation to Hegel*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 358; my emphasis). I don't know of any comparative work on the global spread of technical production, but my argument entails the conclusion that such a study would be essential to any theory of uneven or global development.

capital's gravity. These centrifugal forces I have been summing up under the heading of "the multitude," which I borrow from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. However, I do not think it is sufficient merely to posit such centrifugal forces as an existence to be factored in as a constant. In order to explain even the possibility of a historical dynamic like the one indicated by Bell and Sekine, we must say that the approach to capital, the pressure with which its absolute density is felt, is responsible for freeing and intensifying these centrifugal forces. The model must be one in which the intense gravity of capital's idealism acts like a shearing force, allowing a critical counter-mass to develop within the *poiēsis* formerly ruled by *tekhnē*. Capital disaggregates *poiēsis* and *tekhnē*, making possible a global resistance that no more wants to return to concrete labor than it wants to remain within capital. I think this line of thinking is both true to a certain tendency in the work of Hardt and Negri, and offers an advance over their formulations by specifying with greater precision the ontological and historical existence of the multitude. But I must first review their use of the concept, before I can elaborate upon my own redeployment.

Contrary to the idealist, anti-productivist tendency of Critical Theory, there has occurred, since Althusser, a renewal of self-proclaimed revolutionary materialism, which draws upon Spinoza and Nietzsche in order to restage the question of overcoming capital on a frankly *poiētic* plane. The persistent figure of this neo-materialism is Antonio Negri. His writings—with or without his frequent collaborator Michael Hardt—return time and again to what he refers to as the need for a revolutionary subjectivity of the multitude. In this vein, Hardt and Negri write; "One initial approach is to conceive the multitude as all those who work under the rule of capital and thus potentially as the class of those who resist the rule of capital."⁹⁵ In

⁹⁵ *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 106.

part this is an outgrowth of a Troskian and *Operaio* theme; every move that capital makes can ultimately be reduced to a mere reaction on its part to the struggle and initiative of the working class.⁹⁶ Read in conjunction with Nietzsche, this emphasis on the continuous and dynamic productivity of working class struggle makes it easy to see the masses as the seat of a healthy will to power, an overabundance of life drawn upon by the weak and leach-like bourgeoisie.⁹⁷ Regardless of how vociferously Nietzsche's own political sympathies would oppose this appropriation of his work, Negri presses the genealogy of morals into the service of the Dionysian tumult of the multitude.⁹⁸

Negri's privileging of the multitude over capital also parallels Nietzsche's uncovering of the war among the affects and drives that underlies the apparent unity of the human subject. Capital is the Hegelian substance *cum* subject of modern life, and Negri wants to reveal that "subject" to be a mask worn by a substance that is not and cannot be a subject, the multitude.⁹⁹ This helps explain the Negri's other distinctive move, the return to Spinoza; the monism of the Jew of Amsterdam presents us with a substance that can never be a subject. This was precisely Hegel's criticism of

⁹⁶ One of the clearest examples of this strand of Marxism can be found in Harry Cleaver's *Reading Capital Politically*, 2nd ed., (Leeds & Edinburgh: Anti/Theses & AK Press, 2000). See also the works of Mario Tronti. Compare also Felton C. Shortall, *The Incomplete Marx*, (Aldershot, UK: Avebury, 1994), p. 128: "The dialectic of capital can only function insofar as it can impose itself as a second order mediation of human praxis; that is, only insofar as it can subordinate human labor to its own ends and purposes and thereby impose the ontological inversion whereby capital becomes the object/subject. But there is no guarantee of this subordination. Capital can never be certain of imposing its logic on human society. It must always and repeatedly confront the potential class subjectivity of the working class."

⁹⁷ As a reading of Marx, this gains much from the metaphors of *Capital*, which continuously counterpoise "living labor"—"the form-giving fire"—to capital, which is "dead labor," a vampire with a purely parasitic existence (e.g., C1 342). See Terrell Carver, *The Postmodern Marx*, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), Ch. 1, for an analysis.

⁹⁸ See, e.g., the Introduction to Hardt and Negri's *Labor of Dionysus: A Critique of the State Form*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

⁹⁹ Contrast this with the Hegelian desire that the subject become self-conscious. Jean Hyppolite is a clear example: "Whereas, in the *Phenomenology*, it is the absolute spirit, once it has become its own object, that raises itself to self-consciousness, in *Capital*, it is man's alienated social being, the gross product or, rather, the *communal labor of men*, namely, Capital, which, so to speak, *objectifies itself* and confronts the consciousness of the proletariat" (*Studies on Marx and Hegel*, tr. John O'Neill, (New York & London: Basic Books, 1969), p. 103).

Spinoza, and it is also the reason his name was a password and epithet for pantheism and atheism for two hundred years. In Negri's recitation of Nietzsche and Spinoza, the multitude is the substance and will to power of the modern world, that which both gives rise to and exceeds every form and every subject, including capital. As Hardt and Negri write; "the flesh of the multitude is an elemental power that continuously expands social being, producing in excess of every traditional political-economic measure of value. You can try to harness the wind, the sea, the earth, but each will always exceed your grasp."¹⁰⁰

For this reason, Negri worries at times that Marx himself posits capital as too powerful, too complete in itself. In particular, *Capital* seems, to Negri, to make capital out to be a closed system of self-referentiality.¹⁰¹ But any such closure would deny the constituent power of the multitude and present the hegemony of the capital form as an unstoppable runaway train. In other words, Negri worries that, in Marx's *Capital*, "the critique of the law of value, insofar as it presents itself as the law of surplus value, leads to catastrophism."¹⁰² This has led, in his estimation to certain counter-revolutionary uses of *Capital*, uses in which it "served to reduce critique to economic theory, to annihilate subjectivity in objectivity, to subject the subversive capacity of the proletariat to the reorganizing and repressive intelligence of capitalist power."¹⁰³ Hence, Negri turns to the *Grundrisse* in order to find a "Marx beyond Marx," a Marx

¹⁰⁰ *Multitude*, op. cit., p. 192.

¹⁰¹ See also Shortall, op. cit.

¹⁰² *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*, tr. Harry Cleaver, et al., ed. Jim Fleming, (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia/Pluto, 1991), p. xv.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 18f. This is clearly a negative reaction to the same conclusion that Geert Reuten presents as a neutral fact: Systematic dialectics, which is what Negri sees in *Capital*, "can present *extant* contradictions and conflicts and the way they are settled within the system, but it is unable to present transitions from one system to another" ("The Interconnection of Systematic Dialectics and Historical Materialism", *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory*, 7, Winter 2000, p. 151). Negri repeatedly refers to the *Grundrisse* precisely as a theory of the transition.

who “justifies communist hope”¹⁰⁴ by situating capital’s edifice on the ever-shifting “ground rifts” of the multitude.¹⁰⁵

We can see that Negri’s affirmation of a material power that both posits and undermines capital does not, however, solve the problem of revolution on its own, even if it poses it in a more fruitful way than did Critical Theory. The difficulty can be seen in the following discussion from *Multitude*, which begins with the admission that Hardt and Negri “have used the concept of the multitude in this book and elsewhere in two different ways to refer to two different temporalities.”

The first is the multitude *sub specie aeternitatus*, the multitude from the standpoint of eternity. This is the multitude that, as Spinoza says, through reason and passions, in the complex interplay of historical forces, creates a freedom that he calls absolute: throughout history humans have refused authority and command, expressed the irreducible difference of singularity, and sought freedom in innumerable revolts and revolutions. [...] Perhaps rather than eternity we should say this multitude acts always in the present, a perpetual present. This first multitude is *ontological* and we could not conceive our social being without it. The other is the historical multitude or, really, the not-yet multitude. This multitude has never yet existed. [...] This second multitude is *political*, and it will require a political project to bring it into being on the basis of these emerging conditions.¹⁰⁶

The ontological multitude is the materiality of every social body, and thus of the capitalist social body as well.¹⁰⁷ But the existence of this multitudinous body without organs does not in any way guarantee that the human *socius* will emerge from the capitalist region.¹⁰⁸ *Something* will emerge from the capitalist region, but it might only be a lifeless hunk of rock spinning through the void, or an empire of ants and grass,¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ *Marx Beyond Marx*, op. cit., p. xv.

¹⁰⁵ This theme is further developed in *Labor of Dionysus* op. cit., Introduction; *Empire*, (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2000); and *Multitude*, op. cit., Pt. 2.

¹⁰⁶ *Multitude*, op. cit., p. 221.

¹⁰⁷ Marx, quoting one Dr. R. Price, constructs precisely this relation between multitude and social body near the end of *Capital*: “a multitude of little proprietors and tenants’ [...] ‘will be converted into a body of men who earn their subsistence by working for others’” (C1 887).

¹⁰⁸ My terminology here begins to borrow from that of Deleuze and Guattari, from whose work Hardt and Negri draw much sustenance. See *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, tr. R. Hurley, M. Seem, and H. R. Lane, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

¹⁰⁹ I got this phrase from somewhere, but I don’t recall where.

or a neo-feudalism. The affirmation of the always-already multitude is not itself sufficient to create a practical affirmation of the not-yet multitude.¹¹⁰ The existence of centrifugal forces, in other words, does not tell us whether or how those forces might intensify precisely in and through an undergoing of the gravitational pull of capital. What does capitalism make possible? Marx's *katabasis* must bring us into contact with an intensification of the multitude that itself is only possible because society has entered into the region of capitalism. Capitalism must itself be *poiētīc* in some way, a *poiēsis* that Marx is leading us to affirm in our practice, even as we rebel against capital as such.

I believe this practical affirmation to be what Negri means by "revolutionary subjectivity." It is clear that, despite Negri's unfortunate phrasing, this subjectivity cannot be a revolutionary *subject*, in the sense of the Hegelian Marxists. It also cannot be the intentional subjectivity of *tekhnē*, which Negri seems to lump among the "voluntarist and terrorist solutions to the problem."¹¹¹ As he writes, "Use value, taken by itself, can resolve nothing."¹¹² As part of the autonomist, "no work" movement within Italian communism, Negri has no inclination to conceive the revolution along the lines of labor; "We can find no concept of work in Marx that is not that of waged work, of work that is socially necessary to the reproduction of capital, thus no concept of work to restore, to liberate, to sublimate, only a concept and a reality to suppress."¹¹³ These themes are not restricted to the works of Hardt and Negri, either,

¹¹⁰ I cannot help but think Hardt and Negri's affirmation of the always already multitude is a reversion to the materialism of the pre-Socratic physicists. There is a danger here of one-sidedly insisting upon the being of the *hypokeimenon*, and the consequent reduction of all form to a mere quality. In other words, if everything is already really the multitude, how can different historical configurations of this multitude be identified? The question of form reasserts itself as the question of the cause of change. Aristotle's critique of the physicists in the *Metaphysics* must be taken seriously, lest the multitude as *hypokeimenon* becomes eternalized. As Aristotle puts it, "the *hypokeimenon* itself does not make itself change" (see 983b5-20).

¹¹¹ Op. cit., p. 173.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 173.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 10.

but can be found, in varying degrees of clarity and completeness, in other post-Althusserian Marxist writers of many stripes. There is a growing critical mass of writers who would agree with Chris Arthur; “Marx’s analysis of the trajectory of capital does not in any way point toward the possible self-realization of a socialist society of the proletariat as the true Subject of history. On the contrary, it points to the possible abolition of the proletariat and the labor it performs as a condition of emancipation.”¹¹⁴

The difficulty confronting this dawning consciousness is one of moving beyond these negative judgments, towards a positive characterization of revolutionary practice, the practical affirmation of the not-yet multitude. That this move has not yet taken place is evidenced by the tendency of the very writers who articulate the critique of all hitherto existing labor to fall back into the language of concrete labor whenever they begin to speak of the post-capitalist mode of production. Thus, for example, Arthur still anticipates the “reappropriation by people of the use value dimension of labor,”¹¹⁵ and “the historically generated possibility that people might begin to control what they create rather than being controlled by it.”¹¹⁶ And Arthur can hardly be blamed for this tendency; while Marx wrote dozens of pages about concrete labor, and thousands of pages about abstract labor, his own positive elaborations of the productivity that he thought would overthrow and replace capitalism amount to a handful of scattered comments that would, if collected in one place, hardly fill a single page. Moreover, some of these comments are themselves open to the “recovery of use-value” reading, and many are vague, or obscure, or both. Indeed, I am very conscious of the fact that since I turned to address the question of how society might move out of

¹¹⁴ Christopher Arthur, *Dialectics of Labor: Marx and His Relation to Hegel*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 357. Compare Postone, op., cit., Ch. 9.

¹¹⁵ Arthur, op. cit., p. 364.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 373.

the orbit of capital, I have hardly cited Marx at all. This might be taken as an implicit acknowledgement on my part that Marx has nothing to say to us about how to escape the system he diagnosed, that he has failed to lead us out of Hell after all.

I don't believe this, however, even if I have, up to this point, felt compelled to elaborate the possibility of revolution by reference to others. I will take the words of Hardt and Negri as my own: "Put simply, to follow in Marx's footsteps one must really walk beyond Marx and develop on the basis of his method a new theoretical apparatus adequate to our own present situation. [...] Strangely, however, as we will see, after beginning to walk ahead of Marx in this way we continually have the haunting suspicion that he was already there before us."¹¹⁷ I believe that Marx *did* leave us a substantial indication of the *modus operandi* of Negri's sought-after revolutionary subjectivity—in his own activity of writing. Marx himself, I hope to demonstrate, engaged in a *poiēsis* beyond labor and beyond capital.

In a sense, the past two chapters have already been devoted to this possibility. But they have focused more on prying open a space within which this possibility can appear than they have on explicitly laying out Marx's own mode of production. By "mode of production" in this context I mean the operational structure of Marx's making, the activity whereby he makes his life out of the given materials, the transformative matrix that gives rise to his own distinctive products. I think there is a peculiarly Marxian *Stoffwechsel*, a metabolic process that Marx both calls attention to and tries to perform throughout his career. I think, further, that he first attempts to cultivate this mode of production in his very earliest philosophical text, his doctoral dissertation on the differences between Epicurean and Democritean philosophies.

¹¹⁷ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, op. cit., pp. 140f.

In tracing Epicurus' philosophical operations, I find Marx giving voice, for the first time, to a way of approaching material production that not only presages his later epigrams about revolution and communism but provides something of a commentary *avant le lettre* on his entire output of revolutionary writings—journalistic, polemical, or scientific. According to Marx, Epicurus succeeded in doing what *tekhnē* and capital both fail to do; Epicurus' philosophical operation grasped and lived the contradiction between form and matter, between the essence of the world and externality of the world to that essence. It is this simultaneously philosophical and practical operation that explains Marx's attraction to the Hellenistic's atomistic ontology and ethics of *ataraxy*, despite the vast gulf that seems to separate Marx and Epicurus, in both ontology and mode of life. I will therefore use the next chapter to outline Marx's investigation into Epicurus' operation, and then attempt to show how this operation persists in—and gives rise to—Marx's own writings.

Five

Labor's Purgatory: The Divine Comedy

...communism [...] is the *declaration of the permanence of the revolution* [...] The scope of this exposition does not permit of developing the subject further.

Class Struggle in France, 1848-1850
from *Neue Rheinische Zeitung Revue* (1850)¹

If the scope of *Class Struggle in France* was too narrow to permit the further development by Marx of this equation of communism and permanent revolution, this is not so surprising. After all, the scope of his entire corpus, running into the tens of thousands of pages, was apparently also too narrow to permit such a development. Marx, a revolutionary communist and prolific writer for almost forty years, never wrote down a description of the workings of a communist mode of production. Capitalism gets the full treatment, a richly developed and intricately detailed phenomenology of its organs and mechanisms. But communism is a cipher, a vague promise, which is never given any institutional elaboration. Even in those texts where Marx engages in polemics over proposed or provisional “revolutionary” institutions—*The Civil War in France*, the “Margin Notes on Bakunin,” and the “Critique of the Gotha Program”—he remains either critical or defensive, never venturing positive prescriptions. He made a joke out of this reticence in the Postface to the Second Edition of *Capital*, poking fun at a French positivist reviewer for wanting him to move beyond “critical analysis” to what Marx characterized as “writing recipes [...] for the cook-shops of the future.”²

I think my reconstruction of Marx’s account of *tekhnē*, and what I called the gravity of idealism, makes it clear why Marx could not, without betraying his own

¹ CSF, MECW 10, p. 127.

² C1 99

insights, provide any such recipes. In a marginal note to *The German Ideology* he gives an explicit reason for his future silence on this matter: “Communism is for us not a *state* to be produced, an *ideal* to which actuality must conform. We call communism the *actual* movement [*wirkliche Bewegung*] that overcomes the present state.”³ If we think of the permanent revolution as an “actual movement that overcomes the present state,” then we can see why an extended discourse *about* it would be impossible. Such a movement must be differentiated from both the ideal that rules over *tekhnē* and the abstract subject and substance of capital. The former can be grasped easily by what Hegel called “picture thinking.” Capital, like *Geist* cannot be so depicted, but is nonetheless susceptible to a phenomenological presentation, a discourse that is “all process.” But revolution resists both of these strategies stubbornly. The movement of the passing away of the present is not itself presented easily.⁴

But if a movement like this cannot be presented simply, it might nonetheless be possible to indicate instances of its happening, to trace its overcoming of a present state. I believe I have already done something like this in my rereading of *Capital*, since the systematic argument of that book is nothing but the coming to presence of the logic of capitalist production, while Marx’s descent through that logic keeps us always turned toward its absence, its failure to fully manifest itself. However, the resistance highlighted by my reading was a resistance to an arriving threat. Capital is

³ GI, MECW 5, p. 49; translation modified.

⁴ Norman D. Livergood both glimpses this consequence and fails to see that Hegel and Marx also appreciated it; he writes: “If the forward-moving action of the dialectic is a necessary element, then how can the process stop? How can the Prussian state of Hegel’s day or the communistic society of Marx’s vision be the end?” (*Activity in Marx’s Philosophy*, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967), p. 47) They cannot, of course, be “the end” in the sense that Livergood intends (the sense, also, that appears in Kojève’s discourse on Hegel, or in Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man*). The most proper “end” is not the moment when a process stops, but the point where the process is most fully and freely at work—the *entelekheia* of Aristotle. In this regard it is also worth noting that Marx does not claim that history will end with the overcoming of capitalism, but rather that “prehistory” will come to a close (CPE 21). The motion proper to history will finally come into its own. I will discuss this motion in greater detail in Part B, below.

never as fully here as it says it is. But it is nonetheless impending as if out of the future. What I want to do now, in this final chapter, is to address myself instead to the recession of that threat into the past. I want to ask whether Marx does anything not only to stave off the threat's approach, but to overcome the threat as such.

I will conduct this investigation through three "case studies." First, I will turn to Marx's dissertation on Epicurus, where I locate Marx's first recognition of and attempt to understand something like revolutionary practice. In this section, I will argue that Epicurus' transmutation of philosophy into a novel practice of living provided Marx with a crucial example of presenting the death of presence. This will allow me to jump ahead to *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, one of Marx's most self-referentially intricate texts, wherein he wrestles with the apparent failure of revolution to take hold in France only to affirm, in the end, the productivity of the revolution in its death. Here Marx tries to make the necessary temporal shift. It is too late for capital, Marx seems to say; even the counter-revolution is revolutionary now. The revolution's inevitability ends up being reaffirmed precisely because its death is its life, and those who act against it further its own work. This impression will be deepened and refined, finally, by a reading of Marx's satirical character assassination of Karl Vogt. This universally ignored political tract is remarkably revelatory of Marx's own activity, precisely because Marx is setting himself off from Vogt, who appears as a sort of negative *Doppelgänger*. This will also, incidentally, bring us back to Dante, since Vogt turns out to be a very particular denizen of our modern Hell, the counterfeit revolutionary. Countering or counterfeiting the revolution does in fact further the work of the revolution, for it saps the containing power of the social forms it takes up, leaving them fragile and tenuous. Nonetheless, it is like the "unproductive workers" of capitalism, an inefficiency in the revolution's purgation. Marx's valorization of

revolutionary practice, then, amounts to an effort to intensify what cannot be avoided, to embrace the redundancy of allowing, even encouraging, becomings to become.

A. “...that something in its breast that can fight back and resist...”

The safest thing is always to try to convert
everything that is in us and around us into action;
let the others talk and argue about it as they please.

Goethe
Letter to Zelter (October 30, 1828)

While many commentators have approached Marx’s dissertation, few have attempted to delve into its actual philosophical content, and, among those who have, fewer still have agreed on even a basic outline of that content. There is not even agreement on whether Marx *likes* Epicurus or not—a fact that ought to be readily ascertainable from a single reading⁵—much less on such substantive questions as what attracts Marx to Epicurus or what effects the dissertation had on Marx’s development. I think this general uncertainty about the dissertation is, to some extent, understandable; Marx’s discussion is conducted in an extremely dense Hegelian idiom, made more obscure by Marx’s own penchant for both polemics and poetry. There is certainly no clear thematic continuity with his later work like the one that exists in the case of the “1844 Manuscripts.” There doesn’t seem to be any bridge by which a Marx scholar can pass into this strange land.

⁵ Oddly, it is otherwise philosophically savvy Marxologists like Scott Meikle and Patrick Murray who portray Marx’s dissertation as a critique of Epicurus. In both cases, it seems that prior convictions about Marx’s philosophical loyalties intrude into the otherwise respectable hermeneutics of these readers. Thus, for Meikle, it is Epicurus’ atomism of which Marx—an Aristotelian essentialist—*must* be critical. For Murray, Epicurus runs afoul of Marx’s opposition to idolatry, transcendence, conservatism, and subjectivism. See Meikle, *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx*, (London: Duckworth & Co., 1985), pp. 8f & 15, and Murray, *Marx’s Theory of Scientific Knowledge*, op. cit., p. 11.

Nonetheless, I think it is critically important to find a way in. The dissertation, besides being Marx's first sustained attempt to wrestle with Hegel, is also the clearest link between Marx and the history of "materialist" ontologies.⁶ Even more importantly, it is centrally concerned with a knot of problems surrounding subjectivity, change, and the relation between form or essence and externality, the same problems that confront us so insistently in the question of how to transition out of capitalism. I must be clear up front about what the dissertation does *not* provide. The dissertation is not the key to Marx's ontology in any traditional sense, for it is not on the ground of "ultimate reality" that Marx meets Epicurus. In other words, I have no interest in revealing an esoteric Epicureanism to be the heretofore unrecognized origin of Marx's thought. Nor should we look in the dissertation for the source of Marx's political practice; I see no substantive homology between Epicurus' ethics of self-sufficient equanimity and Marx's revolutionary activity. Hellenistic Epicureans were not class warriors tragically born long before their proper time.

Instead, I want the dissertation to reveal a certain operation that Marx's Epicurus performs, an operation that mediates ontology and ethics. According to Marx's reading, practice does not follow from theory for Epicurus; that is, Epicurus does not identify an *arkhē* and then proceed to deduce both a physics and an ethics from that *arkhē*. In normal philosophical practice, a principle is both a beginning point and a ruler over all that follows from that beginning. But what is remarkable about Epicurus, according to Marx, is that his principle is afflicted from the very beginning

⁶ I put scare-quotes around "materialism" because the word is so prone to very particular interpretations. For example George L. Kline denies that Marx was a materialist at all, but for him this means only that Marx did not propose an ontology "asserting the ontological primacy of matter and explaining whatever appears to be non-material (e.g., thoughts, feelings, values, ideals, structures, laws) as manifestations, functions, or relational properties of 'matter in motion'" ("The Myth of Karl Marx's Materialism", in H. Dahm, T.J. Blakeley, and G.L. Kline, ed., *Philosophical Sovietology*, (Dordrecht, NL: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1988), p. 158). The devil is in the details, of course, for everything hinges on what one means by "manifestations, functions, or relational properties."

by the difference between itself as beginning and that of which it is the beginning. As in Hegel, there is immediately a dialectic established, for the origin is, as such, impure. But rather than allow this dialectic to be resolved in any final synthesis, Epicurus is true to the contradiction⁷—between form and matter, essence and existence, time and space—to the extent that his ethics is one of denying the rule of the very principle with which he began. In other words, rather than be ruled as much as possible by his principle, Epicurus proceeds by attending always to the irreducible difference between ruler and ruled. Tracing this operation in some detail will provide us with a positive articulation of what Marx will call, much later, revolutionary practice.

1. Objectifying Contradiction

Marx begins the main body of his dissertation by troubling the traditional identification of Democritean and Epicurean atomism. He does so by pointing out that the two philosophers “stand diametrically opposed in all that concerns truth, certainty, application of this knowledge [i.e., physics], and all that refers to the relationship between thought and reality in general.”⁸ From this diametric opposition in all facets of ethics and epistemology, Marx reasons backwards to the conclusion that Epicurus cannot be, as tradition would have it, a mere disciple of Democritus in ontology.⁹ Given the differences between the two philosophers, the only way to make

⁷ I am aware of Deleuze’s efforts to establish a difference between “difference” and “contradiction.” The former contains a negativity that is irreducible and cannot, therefore, be overcome by a dialectical *Aufhebung*, while the latter is precisely already ruled by the identity of its two moments (see *Difference and Repetition*, tr. Paul Patton, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), Introduction and Chapter One). I think there is an unfortunate conflation at work in Deleuze’s insistence that where there is a dialectic, there is also a presumed identity, which need only be re-established. It seems to me that there might be real contradictions, and dialectics arising from these, which never establish an identity.

⁸ DDE, MECW 1, p. 38; translation modified.

⁹ This tradition of identification persists, however, even among Marxologists studying the dissertation. Tony Burns, for example, calls Epicurus a “later disciple” of Democritus (“Materialism in Ancient Greek

Epicurus into a disciple is, as Marx indicates, to attribute to him a “puerile” and “disgraceful” inconsistency, as Cicero does.¹⁰ If we, on the other hand, adhere to even the slightest principle of charity, we must ask whether we have properly understood Epicurus’ ontology when we assimilate it to that of Democritus.¹¹ It seems that a fresh investigation of Epicurus’ philosophy is called for, and this fresh investigation is what Marx undertakes. What Marx’s investigation reveals, however, is not so much that Democritus and Epicurus have different starting points; “The principles—atoms and the void—are indisputably the same.”¹² Rather, it is their method of approaching the *arkhai* that are fundamentally opposed. An *arkhē* is a beginning that rules over that which it begins. The difference between Democritus and Epicurus will show itself in how each subjected himself to this ruling origin.

The atomism of Democritus is defined by the claim that what is real and true is a whirl of imperceptibly small atoms falling through the void. Atoms are the essence of the world of appearances; they are “the absolute, essential form of nature.”¹³ In this determination, they are accessible only by thought, which can consider them as existing separately in the void, moving individually. This has its modern analogue in the representation of the atom in any basic physics textbook, where it is illustrated in its essential character as composed of a nucleus of small spheres of different colors, surrounded by orbits, or perhaps clouds, of electrons. The atom is thus grasped by thought in its essence. However, the atom is *also* the material basis of everything

Philosophy and in the Writings of the Young Marx”, *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory*, 7, Winter 2000, p. 4).

¹⁰ DDE, MECW 1, p. 46.

¹¹ In a much later letter to Lassalle (May 31, 1858), Marx characterized his task in the dissertation as “the presentation of a total system out of the fragments, a system which [...] existed only *in itself* in the writings of Epicurus, but not in any known system.” So perhaps the charity is not a due owed to Epicurus (considered as a person and author) so much as it is a principle by which one approaches any text, including Marx’s own.

¹² DDE, MECW 1, p. 38.

¹³ DDE, MECW 1, p. 62.

around us, submerged in the properties and characters of everyday objects. Nowhere in our experience of the apparent world do we run across the atoms illustrated in the textbook, and it would be vain to look in the illustrations for some indication of the book as we sense it. Despite the differences between the atoms of the ancients and those of modern physics, this same gulf—between the essential characteristics of the atom as *arkhē* on the one hand, and its disappearance in the material base of things on the other—is just as present in Democritus as it is in the modern textbook.

For Democritus, knowledge of the truth—that everything is atoms in the void—does not help one to navigate the sensuous world, and knowledge of the sensuous world is not the truth.¹⁴ This absolute difference between truth and appearance, essence and existence—because the terms of the difference are “divided into two worlds”—is an “antinomy,” which “Democritus does not escape.”¹⁵ He, therefore, both denigrates sensuous experience as mere seeming and runs after empirical knowledge nonetheless.¹⁶ He also dismisses chance as an illusion, since the true cause of any phenomenon must be the necessary movement of the atoms.¹⁷

All of this stems from the chasm that separates Democritus’ rational principles from the world of appearance. All he can do is flip back and forth, from the world of principles to the world of sense, learning nothing from the one that would be of any help in the other. The contradiction between the atoms and the sensuous world of which they are the *arkhai*—a world in which we find no atoms—eludes Democritus, even as he cannot elude it. According to Marx, this “contradiction between existence

¹⁴ “The knowledge that he considers true is without content, the knowledge that gives him content is without truth” (DDE MECW 1, p. 41).

¹⁵ DDE, MECW 1, p. 39.

¹⁶ DDE, MECW 1, pp. 40f.

¹⁷ DDE, MECW 1, p. 42.

and essence, between matter and form,” “is inherent in the concept of the atom.”¹⁸ Indeed, it is inherent in any ontology or epistemology—and, arguably, every epistemology conceals an ontology—that posits a separation between what is immediately present to us and what is real or true. And—again, arguably—every ontology and epistemology does posit such a separation.¹⁹ Marx’s dissertation is an extended argument for grasping this separation as a contradiction, and for making the contradiction itself the object of thought by allowing it to develop itself dialectically. The difference between Democritus and Epicurus is that the latter does what the former did not, namely, “objectify the contradiction between concept and existence.”²⁰ Epicurus presents us with the impossibility that his *arkhē* could ever present itself as sovereign of this world. The atom, according to him, is a self-abdicating king.

Because Epicurus not only sees the contradiction between the atom as a formal principle grasped by thought and as the material building block of the world of sense, but also makes this contradiction itself the object of his thought, Marx writes; “He thus gives us the science of atomistics.”²¹ I want to follow Marx as he develops the various moments of this dialectical science, beginning with the swerve of the atom, passing through the distinction between atoms as *arkhai* and as *stoikheia* (elements), and ending with Epicurus’ anti-theory of the heavens. In this ending, Marx identifies Epicurus’ practical principle as “abstract-individual self-consciousness.” The Epicurean wise man refuses to be ruled or disturbed by any pure theoretical principle

¹⁸ DDE, MECW 1, p. 61.

¹⁹ The “Consciousness” section in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* proceeds from the insufficiency of any attempt to posit absolute immediacy as known, just as the *Logic* proceeds from the insufficiency of any attempt to posit the immediate as real. The former, however, *attempts* to overcome the separation in its final sub-section, “Force and the Understanding—The World of Appearance and the Supersensible World,” the crux of which is that 1) the essence must appear and 2) the appearance must be the appearance of the essence. Hegel argues, therefore, that the essence is nothing but the sum total of all appearances. But not every appearance counts; as the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right* shows, some appearances are mere *Dasein*, and, as such, have no bearing on *Wirklichkeit*.

²⁰ DDE, MECW 1, p. 54.

²¹ DDE, MECW 1, p. 58.

that would display anything other than his own contradictions. “Epicurus has thus carried atomistics to its final conclusion, which is its dissolution and conscious opposition to the universal.”²² Having followed the course of this dialectic, we will then be in a position to draw its lessons for Marx.

2. Epicurus’ Operation

The concept of the atom, as Marx tells us, contains two moments that contradict one another. First, it is a body, and the elemental body, of which all other bodies are made. As such, its existence is outside of, and hence relative to, all other bodies. Second, it is self-sufficient [*autarkhos*]. In this determination, it is pure form; relying on nothing else for its being, it is its own origin.²³ As matter, the atom is externality; as form, it is pure presence. As a relative, material existent, the movement proper to the atom is falling in a straight line, wherein it is completely lost in its relativity. But since it is equally self-sufficient, Epicurus must also adduce to the atom a minute swerve, which occurs “*Nec regione loci certa, nec tempore certo.*”²⁴ This declination, whereby the atom swerves away from “its relative existence,” Marx calls “that something in its breast that can fight back and resist.”²⁵

Far from being the arbitrary embarrassment that commentators have treated it as, the *clinamen* of the atom is, on Marx’s account, absolutely necessary if Epicurus is to maintain both moments of the contradiction between form and matter.²⁶ Marx writes:

²² DDE, MECW 1, p. 73.

²³ DDE, MECW 1, p. 48.

²⁴ “In no certain place, in no certain time” (DDE, MECW 1, p. 49).

²⁵ DDE, MECW 1, p. 49.

²⁶ According to Ernst Bloch, “Marx detects [in this doctrine of the swerve] a contact with his own ‘innovations’ in opposition to mechanism and fatalism” (*On Karl Marx*, tr. John Maxwell, (New York: Herder & Herder, 1971), p. 154).

The declination of the atom from the straight line is, namely, not a particular determination which appears accidentally in Epicurean physics. On the contrary, the law which it expresses goes through the whole Epicurean philosophy, in such a way, however, that, as goes without saying, the determination of its appearance depends on the domain in which it is applied.²⁷

The first consequence is the absence in Epicurus of the necessity that was such a prominent feature of Democritus' system. The "repulsion and collision of the atoms" is, for Democritus, "the substance of necessity."²⁸ For Epicurus, however, because repulsion arises out of and unifies the fall and the swerve, it cannot produce any fatality or necessity.

Chance is, therefore, the first objectification of the form/matter contradiction. And it is everywhere for Epicurus, to the extent that he does not seek to explain the phenomena of the world at all, but rather affirms any and all *possible* explanations (in the sense of "possible to think, given what we perceive").²⁹ Even the necessity of disjunctions—either A or not-A—is denied by Epicurus.³⁰ More particularly, it is to the implications logical necessity might have for the world that Epicurus objects. Marx quotes Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*: "[The logicians'] accepted doctrine is that in every disjunctive proposition of the form '*so-and-so either is or is not*' one of the two alternatives must be true. Epicurus took alarm; if such a proposition as '*Epicurus either will or will not be alive tomorrow*' were granted, one or the other alternative would be necessary. Accordingly he denied the necessity of a disjunctive proposition altogether."³¹ Epicurus resists anything that would suggest that the necessity of logic

²⁷ DDE, MECW 1, p. 50.

²⁸ DDE, MECW 1, p. 52.

²⁹ DDE, MECW 1, p. 44-5.

³⁰ DDE, MECW 1, p. 43.

³¹ DDE, MECW 1, pp. 82-3, n42.

might be determinative in the world, for this would be to think the world in only its formal determination.³²

If chance is the first expression of the contradiction between essence and existence, it is only the first. This contradiction “reaches its harshest realization” when we shift our attention from the atom as such to the world of appearances which it creates and sustains.³³ At first glance, it might seem that, because the atom “sinks down to the material basis” in the world of appearance,³⁴ the contradiction that Epicurus holds onto in the concept of the atom is reduced to one of its sides—the material one—in the sensuous world. However, this would be too hasty a conclusion, for it would collapse Epicurus back into Democritus.³⁵

It is indeed true that the spatial composition of appearances reflects only the relativity characteristic of matter; nothing stands on its own, but all things *are* only in relation to what surrounds them. In this sense, the sensuous world corresponds to the atom’s fall through the void. However, there is more to appearance than spatial composition; namely, there is also *time*. As *arkhai*, the atoms are timeless, so time has an existence only in appearances. This does not mean, however, that time is unreal. Rather, appearance is the objective appearance of the atom, and time is the “*absolute form of appearance*.”³⁶ In other words, time is that aspect of appearance that points beyond appearance to the atom which is its essence. It does this by marking appearance as non-essential, as dependent on something which it is not. The atoms do not change; all change is accidental as far as the essence is concerned. But this accident *as accident*, this change *as change*, is time. Seeing time—which we do in our

³² According to Livergood, one of the first writers to devote attention to Marx’s dissertation, “It is the concept of free activity which Marx considers Epicurus’ most significant contribution to materialism” (*Activity in Marx’s Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 1).

³³ DDE, MECW 1, pp. 61-2.

³⁴ DDE, MECW 1, p. 62.

³⁵ DDE, MECW 1, p. 62.

³⁶ DDE, MECW 1, p. 63.

every experience of the world—is seeing the accidents of the world as *accidents*. We thus *sense* the difference between the appearance and the essence whenever we sense the flux of the world.³⁷ This difference, embodied in sensation, is time, the active form of appearance, and this is what leads us back to the essence by way of manifesting the contradiction between essence and existence.³⁸

But if spatiality is the appearance of the material moment of the atom, and time is the appearance of the formal moment, we must still understand how Epicurus objectifies the contradiction between them at the level of the sensuous world. The question we must ask is: In what aspect of appearance are both sides of the contradiction grasped together? The answer, given by Marx in the final paragraphs of the chapter on time, is decay or dissolution, the passing away of all sensuous things. In Epicurus' terms, things pass away because they send forth "images" (*eidōla*) of themselves, images that "penetrate into the senses and in precisely this way allow the object to appear."³⁹ The object must constantly give of itself if it is to appear, for appearance itself must be atomic. It must send out envoys destined never to return. This continuous giving of its substance is the price of appearance, but it is also a suicidal act; since the gift is never recouped, the object must pass away. This "diremption"—the condition of the possibility of appearing in the world—rules out any redemption of the object. Objects, by appearing in the *eidōla*, "by constantly separating themselves from the bodies and flowing into the senses, by having their sensuous existence outside themselves as another nature, by not returning into themselves, that is, out of the diremption, dissolve and pass away."⁴⁰

³⁷ Hegel makes a similar point in "Sense Certainty: The 'This' and 'Meaning,'" the opening of the *Phenomenology*.

³⁸ DDE, MECW 1, pp 63-4.

³⁹ DDE, MECW 1, p. 65.

⁴⁰ DDE, MECW 1, p. 65.

All received Greek philosophy—whether of Plato, Aristotle, or Democritus—takes the vocation of thought to be turning away from the passing away of all things towards the eternal *arkhai*. Epicurus' thought, in opposition to all this received wisdom, engages actively in the same diremption that it diagnoses in sensuous things. The doctrine of atomistics, in order to appear as such, must disintegrate into a practice of *ataraxy*. The heavens, where every previous Greek philosopher had seen the divine order of thought most prominently displayed, are for Epicurus as transitory and mutable as the human things. This is all the more remarkable, argues Marx, because the planets ought to be the highest realization of Epicurus' atomic principles:

The heavenly bodies are eternal and unchangeable; they have their own center of gravity in, not outside, themselves. Their only action is motion, and, separated by empty space, they swerve from the straight line, and form a system of repulsion and attraction while at the same time preserving their own independence and also, finally, generating time out of themselves as the form of their appearance. The heavenly bodies are therefore the atoms become real.⁴¹

But rather than allow the contradiction to be resolved in a pure space of cosmological metaphysics, Epicurus takes the atom's contradiction into his own practice. He refuses to theologize his principle in the heavenly bodies. Instead, he conceives the apotheosis of the principle to be at odds with the human world. Marx calls this move "the profoundest knowledge achieved by his system, its most thorough consistency."⁴² The contradiction between form and matter became the animating spirit of Epicurus' life and thought to the extent that, rather than allow it to be resolved in an affirmation of the divinity of the planets, he contradicted his own ontological principle by denying that divinity in favor of a ethos of human equanimity.

⁴¹ DDE, MECW 1, p. 70.

⁴² DDE, MECW 1, p. 71.

Epicurus thereby makes the contradiction that is inherent in his principle into a practice of contradiction.⁴³

The Epicurus of Marx's dissertation is not so much a metaphysician or ontologist, therefore, as he is a performer. What he performs is the contradiction that each of his key concepts—the atom, chance, decay—objectifies. The performance of this contradiction is nothing but Epicurus' *ataraxy*, the equanimity that refuses to be ruled by any *arkhē*. This ethos is itself the dissolution of his own thought into a form of life opposed to its own onto-theological former being. Epicurus is content in philosophy precisely to the extent that philosophy ceases to be philosophy.

But now, I think, we can see that Epicurus' situation, and his response to it, prefigures Marx's in significant ways. Marx bears the same relation to Hegel and political economy that Epicurus bore to Democritus. These two may be collapsed into one, since, as Marx wrote in 1844, "Hegel adopts the standpoint of modern political economy. He sees *labor* as the *essence*, the self-confirming essence, of man."⁴⁴ In accord with his usage in the "1844 Manuscripts," "labor" here means "estranged labor," the abstract, value-positing labor that forms the heart of self-valorizing value, of capital. The "man" of which this labor is the essence is the modern homunculus of capital, the monadic bearer of all our contemporary relations of production. But this productive organ of capital is beset by contradiction. Marx reveals his orientation to this contradiction very nicely in those first manuscripts on political economy:

⁴³ Therefore, I disagree with Burns' judgment; "Marx strongly approves of the views of Epicurus despite their obvious logical inconsistencies" (op. cit., p. 22). On the contrary, Marx approves of Epicurus precisely because he is so consistent that he is willing to contradict himself in order to honor the contradiction that is the true heart of his thought and life. Likewise, I think Jonathan Pike's conclusion—that "the transcendence of the contradiction between essence and existence through the agency of a radical subjectivity" is the lesson of the dissertation (*From Aristotle to Marx: Aristotelianism in Marxist Social Ontology*, (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishers Ltd., 1999), p. 27—is problematic, for transcendence leaves contradiction behind. Marx's Epicurus, however, transcends nothing; indeed, he teaches precisely the impossibility of transcendence, the impossibility of leaving the contradiction behind.

⁴⁴ EPM, EW 386

Political economy starts out from labor as the real soul of production, and yet gives nothing to labor and everything to private property. Proudhon has dealt with this contradiction by deciding for labor and against private property. But we have seen that this apparent contradiction is the contradiction of *estranged labor* with itself and that political economy has merely formulated the laws of estranged labor.⁴⁵

This contradiction expresses itself in the absolute idealism of political economy in that the world known by this science is both already capitalist and always in need of capitalization. What is actual is rational, but not everything that is actual—yet. Like Democritus, the theorist of capital can only flip back and forth. For example, all human behavior is already market-driven; thus you can have a marriage market, a religion market, etc. At the same time, however, economic rationality must be inculcated and spread through, e.g., military interventions. The ideal essence is constitutive of the world, but it is also a normative goal we must pursue. This contradiction is not, however, grasped as a contradiction.

Marx takes off from the same beginning, but sees in it the contradiction between form and matter. Having dogged this contradiction to its apotheosis—the impossible global social form of capitalism—he takes the contradiction into his own practice. His revolutionary activity directly opposes the system of political economy that was its matrix. Marx is content in political economy precisely to the extent that it ceases to be political economy, and becomes, instead, an ironic Hell through which he might educate us in the finer points of embodiment. As he will write regarding commodity circulation in *Capital*, contradictions are never transcended, but are only overcome insofar as they come to occupy a “form wherein they can be set in motion. This is, in general, the method whereby actual contradictions are resolved.”⁴⁶ The

⁴⁵ EPM, EW 332

⁴⁶ C1 198, translation modified. Compare Daniel Brudney's attempt to articulate what he calls Marx's “simultaneity model” of material activity; he writes, “for human beings, the fundamental relation to the world is that of an agent continually changing and being changed by it, and a correct understanding of

contradiction between capital and the material world it has incorporated can only be resolved in a practice that takes up that contradiction and makes it productive by giving it space to move.

To return to the Dantean idiom of the previous chapters, we can note that there is no revolution in Hell, there is no change. Likewise in science, at least as it conceives itself. In political economy, abstract labor has always been, and will ever be, the immanent measure of exchangeable value. Capital has always been, and will ever be, a self-founding, self-sufficient system. But history, as opposed to science—for, “There is no history of [...] science”⁴⁷—is the realm of Purgatory, not of Hell. In Purgatory there is still sin, but laboring under the weight of it is not an eternal paralysis, as it is in Hell. Instead, it is a hopeful trajectory of motion.

Enthralled by the absolute idealism of political economy, we are out of touch with the contradiction between form and matter that is the actual source of our productivity. We make and remake our own Hell by subjecting our productivity to the idea, which we then take to be the origin of our activity itself. In this subservience to the idea, we behave like those subjects of whom Marx writes in *Capital*; “one man is only king because other men stand in the relation of subject to him. They, on the other hand, imagine that they are subjects because he is king.”⁴⁸ But the materiality of our activity—its *producere*, its bringing-forth—is always with us even as we forsake it. This is revealed to us in the history I outlined in Chapter One, and although political economy would contend that “there has been history, but there is no longer any,”⁴⁹ Marx assures us that our history continues. Having seen Hell, Marx wants us to turn

this fact is to be attained in and through the process of changing the world” (*Marx’s Attempt to Leave Philosophy*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 237).

⁴⁷ GI, MECW 5, p. 92.

⁴⁸ C1 149n22

⁴⁹ PP 181

ourselves decisively towards Purgatory. This does not entail simply casting aside the *Vorstellungen* that threatened to enthrall us, but rather laboring through and beyond them in hope. Purging ourselves of idealism, we can begin to “make history” in a much more direct manner by grasping and objectifying of the contradiction between form and matter in our every activity. This is the significance of Marx’s statement in the “Theses on Feuerbach”: “The coincidence of the alteration of circumstances and of human activity or self-alteration can be grasped and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*.”⁵⁰

This conjunction of the alteration of circumstances and the alteration of human activity consistently marks Marx’s attempts to characterize human historicity. In *The German Ideology*, for example, he writes; “History is nothing but the succession of the separate generations, each of which exploits the materials, capitals, forces of production given over to it by all preceding generations, and thus, on one side, continues the inherited activity in completely altered circumstances and, on the other side, modifies the old circumstances with a completely altered activity.”⁵¹ History is thus nothing but the succession of revolutionary practices, the fitful and broken chain of conjunctions between changing the world and changing ourselves. In the next two sections, I’d like to interrogate Marx’s efforts to take up this broken chain, and to forge new links in it, to make it stronger and more continuous.

I will begin by focusing on the circumstances, old and altered, that furnish the means and materials for revolutionary productivity. Through a reading of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, I will show that, for Marx, our situation is never a stable ground for our activity, but is constantly being upset by the purgatorial

⁵⁰ TF3, MECW 5, p. 4; translation modified. Ernst Bloch has claimed that “the First and Third Theses on Feuerbach are already present *in statu nascendi* in [Marx’s] references to Epicurus” (op. cit., p. 156).

⁵¹ GI, MECW 5, p. 45; translation modified.

workings of revolution, which we can neither escape nor see, but which interrupt and disrupt us at every moment anyway. Having felt the way revolution works on and through us all, I will then turn to the difference between its unconscious dupes and its conscious practitioners. Marx insists that even the counter-revolution is revolutionary, so I want to examine, side by side, the activity of counter-revolutionaries—I'll take as my examples Karl Vogt and Louis Bonaparte—and Marx's own activity. What differentiates a true revolutionary from a counterfeit, according to Marx, is the way in which the former amplifies her own historicity by re-doubling the motions of others in her historical situation.

B. The work of undermining

Those that Hobgoblin call you, and sweet Puck,
You do their work, and they shall have sweet luck.
Are not you he?

Shakespeare
A Midsummer Night's Dream, II.1.40-2

Although communism is the movement of the overcoming of the present, Marx also insists that “The conditions of this movement arise from the presuppositions present at hand.”⁵² The question therefore naturally arises: What are these presuppositions, and how do the conditions of communism arise from them? How does the movement of the overcoming of the present arise from the present itself? It seems to me that the only way the present can contain the presuppositions of communism is if the present isn't really “all here.” Just as every development of Epicurus' dialectic presented itself as an objective contradiction, our “present” is really

⁵² GI, MECW 5, p. 49; translation modified.

an always contradictory situation, set over against us as the means and materials for revolutionary production.

That the present is always shot through with contradictions is hardly a novel postulate within Marxism, but it is not clear to me that orthodox approaches to this situation of contradiction do justice to it. In *Capital*, Marx writes of the means of labor:

A machine that is not serving in the labor process is useless. In addition, it falls prey to the destructive power of natural processes. Iron rusts; wood rots. Yarn with which we neither weave nor knit is cotton wasted. Living labor must seize on these things, awaken them from the dead, change them from merely possible into actual and working [*wirkliche und wirkende*] use-values.⁵³

Most of our notions of revolution treat the revolutionary situation as if it were a machine or a bunch of yarn that must be seized and awakened from the dead if it is not to rot away. The revolutionary imperative would be to make something from one's situation by giving life to the passive potentialities at hand, actuating them. This is clearly inadequate, however, for making a revolution is, as we've already seen, very different from making a use-value. To be schematic for a moment, we could say that 1) *tekhnē* is making that relates to its materials as living activity to dead passivity, and 2) capital is making that relates to its materials as "undead" structure to living tissue, and 3) revolution, therefore, cannot possibly relate to its material in either of these ways.

I think Marx tried to enact—and suffer—a third relation to his situation in the long series of manifestos, reports, and observations he produced in the anticipation, moment, and wake of the revolutions of 1848. These political and social upheavals were the proving ground where academic and romantic notions of The Revolution were tried and found wanting. Marx's efforts to digest the lessons of this period come to a

⁵³ C1 289; translation modified.

head in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, written after Bonaparte's coup has apparently brought the curtain—or the guillotine—down on the most recent installment of the revolutionary drama. Confronting the frustration of the moment, Marx writes: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves; rather they make it in present circumstances, given and inherited. Tradition from all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.”⁵⁴

As pessimistic as this proclamation seems, however, I think it holds the secret of Marx's enactment of a revolutionary engagement with his circumstances. The crux is that revolution is itself a constitutive part of the circumstances given to us by the dead. Revolution has occurred; it is part of our inheritance. But as part of our inheritance, revolution is itself “dead.” Marx does not shy away from the strongest possible formulation of this revolutionary dilemma. Chronicling the run-up to Bonaparte's coup in *Class Struggle in France*, he proclaims, “*The revolution is dead!—Long live the revolution!*”⁵⁵ This living-dead revolution is a persistent—and, yes, haunting—feature of Marx's writings from the *Manifesto* to the *Brumaire* and beyond. There is a movement, always already underway, between revolutionary communism as threat or prophesy—“the red specter”—and revolutionary communism as something dead, as a ghost that haunts the scene, and continues to act precisely as a dead body, that works underground, like the ghost of Hamlet's father.

But if the tradition that weighs on our brains is, in part, the tradition of revolution, then we must investigate carefully how Marx copes with this inheritance. I will first turn to the ways in which Marx figures the revolution's buried action, before

⁵⁴ EB, LPW 32

⁵⁵ CSF, MECW 10, p. 70.

returning above ground to critically examine the modes in which the actors on history's stage respond to the emanations from below.

1. *Specters of Revolution*

Of course, it is impossible to address, or even mention, the themes of death, inheritance, and specters without also addressing the specter of Derrida, and his *Specters of Marx*.⁵⁶ Although Derrida's reading of Marx elicited loud protests from many Marxists and Marxologists,⁵⁷ the reservation I would register with Derrida's line of questioning is that it does not go so far as it might. It is marked by a frustrating hesitancy, even as it explores and connects texts that traditional Marxology passes over in silence. In order to go further than Derrida, I want to take up his reading in connection with the work of Martin Harries, who has filled in some of the textual backstory for Derrida's interweaving of Marx and Shakespeare.

Derrida's refiguring of the revolution as always spectral—as the “to come”—was brusquely answered by Terry Eagleton's sarcastic characterization of “a perpetual excited openness to the Messiah who had better not let us down by doing anything as determinate as coming.”⁵⁸ But if Eagleton would dismiss Derrida as a half-hearted imitator and bastardizer of Marx, there is more to Derrida's reading of the revolution in Marx's texts than he himself enters into evidence. There is, in fact, a wealth of textual material on the specter of communism from Marx's post-1848 writings, including explicit textual comparisons of the communist revolution to the ghost in

⁵⁶ *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, tr. Peggy Kamuf, (New York & London: Routledge, 1994).

⁵⁷ See, for example, Terrell Carver's criticisms in Chapter One of *The Postmodern Marx*, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998); and three contributions in particular to Michael Sprinker's edited volume, *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specter's of Marx*, (London & New York: Verso, 1999): Terry Eagleton's “Marxism without Marxism” (pp. 83-87), Aijaz Ahmad's “Reconciling Derrida: ‘Specters of Marx’ and Deconstructive Politics” (pp. 88-109), and Tom Lewis' “The Politics of ‘Hautology’ in Derrida's *Specters of Marx*” (pp. 134-167).

⁵⁸ Eagleton, op. cit., p. 87.

Hamlet. But Marx figures the revolution in other ways, as well, and these various figurations conspire to present a very different iconography of revolution than the one given us by either the anxious friends or the anxious enemies of communism. I want to trace these figures, rapidly, before turning to the question of how Marx—and we—might enact them.

Near the beginning of the *Brumaire*, Marx refers to “the social republic” as “the general content of modern revolution.”⁵⁹ A couple pages earlier, he had claimed that, in the “social revolution of the nineteenth century,” “content goes beyond phrase.”⁶⁰ I think it is reasonable to insert “the social republic” in the place of “content,” and conclude that “the social republic” is just another name for communism, or the revolution in permanence. Indeed, Marx also claims that the social republic is the outcome of “the proletariat set[ting] its stamp upon” the republic,⁶¹ which “signifies in general only the political form of revolution [*Umwälzungsform*] of bourgeois society, and not its conservative form of life [*Lebensform*].”⁶² The social republic, in other words, is the political form of communism.⁶³ Thus, when Marx writes, “The social republic appeared as a phrase, as a prophesy on the threshold of the February revolution [of 1848],”⁶⁴ we ought certainly to recall the *Manifesto*, published in February 1848, and its opening phrase and prophecy: “A specter is stalking Europe—the specter of communism.”⁶⁵ It is nothing other than communism, the revolution in permanence, that was prophesied at the start of the 1848 revolution. And it was communism that, in June of that same year, “was drowned in the blood of the *Paris proletariat*.” And it was communism that “stalked the succeeding acts of the drama as

⁵⁹ EB, LPW 37

⁶⁰ EB, LPW 34; translation modified.

⁶¹ EB, LPW 37

⁶² EB, LPW 39; translation modified.

⁶³ Marx will later call the Paris Commune “the positive form of that [social] republic” (CWF, LPW 183).

⁶⁴ EB, LPW 111

⁶⁵ CM, LPW 1; translation modified.

a specter.”⁶⁶ This is Marx’s text itself testifying to the rudiments of Derrida’s thesis, though Derrida does not himself cite these passages.

But there is more. The death of the revolution, and its ensuing spectrality, does not prevent the revolution from continuing its work. It stalks the drama as a specter, but not as a spectator; it continues to act. Indeed, on Marx’s account, the revolution seems to direct the action of the other players only as a ghost. The revolution is *most effective*, most *wirklich*, precisely because it hovers elsewhere. The losses of 1848-1851 are taken by the short-sighted as signs of the revolution’s death *simplicitur*. Many of its friends are dejected, believing their hopes to be irretrievably lost. Its enemies are content, believing the threat to be vanquished for good. “But,” writes Marx, “the revolution is thoroughgoing [*gründlich*].”

It is still preoccupied with journeying through purgatory. It does its work methodically. By 2 December [1851] it had completed [*absolviert*] half its preparation, and now it is completing [*absolviert*] the other half. First it developed parliamentary power so that it could be overthrown. Now that this has been attained, it is developing *executive power*, reducing it to its purest expression, isolating it, confronting it as sole challenger in order to concentrate all its powers of destruction against it. And when it has brought this second half of its preparatory work to completion the whole of Europe will spring from its seat and cheer: Well undermined, old mole! [*Brav gewählt, alter Maulwurf!*]⁶⁷

As Martin Harries has documented, Europe’s anticipated cry is—or will be—a recitation of Hamlet’s cry of admiration and frustration at his father’s ghost.⁶⁸ Certainly Shakespeare’s prince thought his father’s death constituted a finality. Even more certainly, King Hamlet’s murderer never imagined his brother would do anything other than remain quietly in his grave. And yet, here is the dead father and brother showing up in the middle of the night to draft his son into a program of revenge. After

⁶⁶ EB, LPW 111

⁶⁷ EB, LPW 115; translation modified.

⁶⁸ *Scare Quotes from Shakespeare: Marx, Keynes, and the Language of Reenchantment*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), especially pp. 79-86.

speaking with the ghost, Hamlet attempts to confer with Horatio and Marcellus, to obtain their silence regarding the ghost's appearance and Hamlet's interaction with it. But every time Hamlet proposes an oath of silence, the ghost pipes up from beneath the stage—Hamlet calls attention to its presence in the cellarage—impatiently commanding the trio to swear. Hamlet tries to get away from the ghost, since the impatience of its demand is continually disrupting his proceedings with Marcellus and Horatio, but the ghost is always there, wherever they stand. Eventually, Hamlet cries out: “Well said old mole! Canst work i' the earth so fast? A worthy pioneer!”⁶⁹

Marx cites only the beginning of the line, and makes a noteworthy change. Where King Hamlet speaks, the revolution undermines [*wühlen*]. Harries surmises that Marx must have been working from A. W. Schlegel's translation of *Hamlet* into German.⁷⁰ Schlegel translated the line as: “*Brav, alter Maulwurf! Wühlst so hurtig fort?*” I have followed Harries' suggestion in translating *wühlen* as “to undermine,” but “to subvert” would also work; Harries points out that “Grimm's dictionary counts a passage from an 1848 letter of Engels to Marx among its examples for *Wühlerei*, or subversive political activity.”⁷¹ This makes much more sense of the passage than the standard “Well grubbed.” The revolution is not simply slinking around down there, out of sight, waiting in the wings—or in the cellarage, as the case may be—for the proper moment to return to the stage. Like the ghost of Hamlet's dead father, communism works from beyond the grave, and under the ground, asserting itself upon us as an ever-shifting subterranean—*gründlich*—source of instability and call to action. No matter how we might seek a peaceful interlude in which to plan, deliberate, and implement a strategy, Marx seems to say, the revolution is always moving about

⁶⁹ *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, Act 1, scene 5.

⁷⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 80.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 81n39.

beneath our feet, keeping up with our every move, upsetting the stage on which we try to act.

This brings us, also, to Marx's other figures for the revolution. In 1856, in his "Speech at the Anniversary of *The People's Paper*," Marx repeats the citation of Hamlet, but with a twist: "In the signs that bewilder the middle class, the aristocracy, and the poor prophets of regression, we do recognize our brave friend, Robin Goodfellow, the old mole that can work in the earth so fast, that worthy pioneer—the Revolution."⁷² What do Puck and the ghost of King Hamlet have in common such that Marx can identify them with one another, and both of them with the revolution? I think the answer lies in the upsetting, disruptive quality just identified. It is worth quoting Puck's self-introduction from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

I am that merry wanderer of the night.
I jest to Oberon, and make him smile
When I a fat and bean-fed horse beguile,
Neighing in likeness of a filly foal;
And sometimes lurk I in a gossip's bowl
In very likeness of a roasted crab,
And when she drinks, against her lips I bob
And on her withered dewlap pour the ale.
The wisest aunt, telling the saddest tale,
Sometimes for a three-foot stool mistaketh me:
Then slip I from her bum, down tumble she,
And "tailor" cries, and falls into a cough...⁷³

Although the pranks of Robin Goodfellow seem remote from the dark pathos of *Hamlet's* opening scenes, it is worth recalling that there is a certain comedy in the way the ghost pursues and interrupts his son, and in Hamlet's anti-illusionist proclamation that the ghost is in the cellarage. Both Puck and the ghost upset what appears to be stable, and both love to hide as much as Heraclitus' nature.⁷⁴ Puck

⁷² MECW 14, p. 656.

⁷³ Act II, scene 1, lines 42-54

⁷⁴ See, in this regard, Derrida's discussion of the "visor effect," whereby the ghost in *Hamlet* can see without being seen and identified (*Specters*, op. cit., pp. 6-9).

causes the best laid plans to go ridiculously awry, even his own. Hamlet's ghost comically interrupts the movement of the plot, preventing the prince from extracting the oath, prolonging the scene by chasing the other characters about the stage. The revolution's apparent absence from the stage of history is likewise a disguised presence, an always impatient proximity, an ever-disruptive demand and impertinent contrariety.

The third figure I want to mention comes from the same 1856 speech, which Marx begins thusly:

The so-called revolutions of 1848 were but poor incidents—small fractures and fissures in the dry crust of European society. However, they denounced the abyss. Beneath the apparently solid surface, they betrayed oceans of liquid matter, only needing expansion to rend into fragments continents of hard rock.⁷⁵

This one, at least, is not cribbed from Shakespeare—but from an anonymous “English journalist,” whom Marx cites in the *Brumaire* comparing the counter-revolutionary factions in France to housemaids “clearing away the glowing lava of revolution with old brooms and bickering amongst themselves while they do their work.”⁷⁶ Here the sense of disruption remains, and the fluid mobility of the lava has clear affinities with the ghost's movement and Puck's instability. But these analogous features are coupled with a sense of danger missing from the other figures. The comic scene of sweeping away lava with old brooms will come to a sudden end should the stage itself collapse into the cellarage, the abyssal ocean of liquid matter.

Here we can return to our points of departure, the *Brumaire's Hamlet* citation and Derrida's refiguration of revolution. One of Derrida's concerns is that Marx evinces discomfort with the spectrality of communism, and with specters in general. The spectral—in its neither-here-nor-there quality—seems to smack of capital, after

⁷⁵ MECW 14, p. 655.

⁷⁶ EB, LPW 81

all, of fetishism, reification, and irrationality. The figure of “liquid matter” shattering the solid crust conspires with that of the old mole completing its purgation to produce the certainty that Marx wants to conjure away the spectrality of the revolution by acting on its demand, calling communism into full and continuous presence, destroying the stage and its illusions for good. All of this preparatory work, this purgation, must surely end. Eventually, the revolution will have purified itself of all admixture with dead things. The whole logic of Purgatory demands that purgation is finite, that it will someday produce the absolution that will signal the advent of paradise. The eschatology is implacable.

And yet, I cannot help but think Derrida’s concern here is itself a symptom and a sign to be queried. On the one hand, Derrida maintains that “Marx continues to want to ground his critique or his exorcism of the spectral simulacrum in an [...] ontology of presence as actual reality and as objectivity.”⁷⁷ On the other hand, he also writes; “The ‘permanent revolution’ supposes the rupture of that which links permanence to substantial presence, and more generally to all onto-logy.”⁷⁸ I think Derrida’s vacillation is remarkable, but also explicable. His anxiety about an ontology of presence lurking in Marx’s call for revolution is attendant upon Derrida’s own forgetting. As Harries puts it, Derrida, reading Marx, sometimes “forgets his usual attention to intertextuality.”⁷⁹

There is a crucial example of this forgetting near the end of *Specters of Marx*. Derrida calls attention to Marx’s injunction to the revolution to “let the dead bury the dead.”⁸⁰ This is the point at which he seems to be most critical of Marx. He worries that Marx “perhaps should not have chased away so many ghosts too quickly. [...]

⁷⁷ *Specters of Marx*, op. cit., p. 170.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁷⁹ Harries, op. cit., p. 74.

⁸⁰ EB, LPW 34

Even if one wanted to, one could not let the dead bury the dead: that has no sense, that is *impossible*. Only mortals, only the living who are not living gods can bury the dead.”⁸¹ But not once does Derrida note that Marx’s injunction itself refuses to let the dead bury the dead in the way Derrida supposes. Marx is instead engaged in an active having to do with the dead, for he is conjuring a spirit. And not just any spirit, either. Marx is citing Christ’s injunction to one who wishes to follow him, but who pleads that he must first attend to the body of a dead father; “Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father.” Jesus replies; “Follow me, and let the dead bury their dead.”⁸² In other words, Marx says to those who would follow him in revolution, “let the dead bury the dead,” but his very saying contravenes what is being said. Derrida is a careful reader of Marx’s *statements* about the dead, but passes right by this and other prominent examples—to which I shall turn in the next section—of Marx’s actual *dealings with* the dead.⁸³ Marx does not simply enact Christ’s commandment regarding the dead because the “dead” are not so dead after all, and, indeed, are full of revolutionary fervor.

2. *Some Grave Remarks*

The hermeneutic difficulty of the *Brumaire* seems to arise as soon as Marx turns from discussing the historically locatable revolutions of 1789 and 1848 to speaking of the rather more diffuse “social revolution of the nineteenth century.” Marx proclaims that this revolution “cannot create its poetry from the past but only from the future.”

⁸¹ *Specters of Marx*, op. cit., p. 174.

⁸² Matthew 8:21-2

⁸³ This is hardly an uncommon situation. Mark Reinhardt, writing about a different text, advises us; “[T]he *Manifesto* appears inert only if we concentrate exclusively on what it ‘says,’ paying no attention to what the text ‘does;’ the text is dead, closed to us, only if we ignore its rhetorical dimension and fail to examine how the writing works” (*The Art of Being Free: Taking Liberties with Tocqueville, Marx, and Arendt*, (Ithaca, NY & London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1997), p. 118). This is itself easier *said* than *done*.

It cannot begin with itself till it has stripped off all superstition from the past. Previous revolutions required recollections of world history in order to dull themselves to their own content [*Inhalt*]. The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury the dead in order to arrive at its own content. There phrase went beyond content, here content goes beyond phrase.⁸⁴

The overture, the central chorus, and the final refrain of Marx's composition against making poetry from the past are themselves, however, invocations of the dead. He begins the *Brumaire* by citing Hegel on the necessity of repetition in world history.⁸⁵ His call to "let the dead bury the dead," as we've just seen, is a recitation of Jesus' demand to those who would follow him. He closes his characterization of social revolutionaries by claiming that "relations themselves [will] cry out: *Hic Rhodus, hic salta! Hier ist die Rose, hier tanze!*"⁸⁶—quoting from Hegel at his most conservative.⁸⁷ It requires a singular lack of charity, therefore, to read Marx as an advocate of some irrevocable break with the past, whatever that might look like. Whatever it means to make one's poetry from the future, it must be reconcilable with the fact that we make our history in given and inherited circumstances.

Eight years earlier, Marx had already presented historical passing in terms that both prefigure the *Brumaire* and help to elucidate the way in which revolution works on the phrases, figures, and costumes in which human activity sallies forth to tread the boards of history. In "Towards a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction," discussing the need to struggle against the German state, Marx had written:

The struggle against the German political present is the struggle against the past of modern nations, which continue to be harassed by

⁸⁴ EB, LPW 34; translation modified.

⁸⁵ Furthermore, the entire first paragraph is itself an unacknowledged citation of Engels, from a letter of December 3, 1851. For details, see Bruce Mazlish, "The Tragic Farce of Marx, Hegel, and Engels: A Note," *History and Theory*, 11:3, 1972, pp. 335-7.

⁸⁶ EB, LPW 35

⁸⁷ *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen Wood, tr. H.B. Nisbet, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), p. 21-22.

reminiscences of this past. It is instructive for them to see the *ancien régime*, which in their countries has experienced its *tragedy*, play its *comic* role as a German phantom. [...] History is thorough [*gründlich*] and passes through many stages while bearing an ancient form [*Gestalt*] to its grave. The last stage of a world-historical form is its *comedy*. [...] Why does history take this course? So that mankind may part *happily* from its past.⁸⁸

This is so far in line with the text of the *Brumaire* that it reads almost like a rough draft. The 1844 version has “history” where the 1852 text has “the revolution,” but this is an elaboration more than an alteration; we’ve already seen that, for Marx, history and revolution are basically coextensive. Running the two texts together, one finds a fairly consistent, if rather vague, dramaturgy of history. Revolutionary history’s thoroughness consists in its undermining of stable presences, bearing these shapes to their graves. In the end, the revolution’s undermining operation makes every form or phrase seem comical, at which point, we cease to be gripped by it. The forces it previously contained now go beyond it.

If we inscribe Marx’s recitations of Hegel within this dramatic schema, it seems to me that his repetitions perform the thorough, purgatorial work of revolutionary history by allowing the revolutionary *Inhalt* to go beyond Hegel’s phrases. Look at the *Brumaire*’s opening citation. For Hegel, the repetition of world-historical events is the way *Geist* forces us to take these developments seriously. Hegel claims that:

in all periods of the world a political revolution is sanctioned in men’s opinions when it repeats itself. Thus Napoleon was twice defeated, and the Bourbons twice expelled. By repetition that which at first appeared merely a matter of chance and contingency, becomes a real and ratified existence.⁸⁹

In Marx’s repetition of this analysis, repetition becomes, instead, the passage from seriousness to laughter. Rather than taking the French Revolution more seriously because of the way the ‘48ers repeat it, the laughable citation allows us to

⁸⁸ EW 247f

⁸⁹ *The Philosophy of History*, tr. J. Sibree, (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1991), p. 313.

get over 1789 and happily leave it behind. And the same goes for Hegel himself. Marx conjures Hegel in a simultaneously mocking and self-deprecatory manner. He can't help but cite him, any more than France can help but cite 1789. In this sense, Marx admits his inheritance. But if he thereby acknowledges the power of Hegel's phrases over him, he acknowledges them precisely because they are Hegel's attempts to contain real disruptions that interrupt the recitation, that pursue Marx around the stage, blurring out their revolutionary content whenever he opens his mouth.

When he repeats Hegel's claim about historical repetition, Marx sanctions the *Wirklichkeit* of Hegel's phrase—and of the French Revolution—only in order to demonstrate the inability of form and phrase to contain *Wirklichkeit*. Similarly, the recitation of Hegel's Rosicrucian piety from the *Philosophy of Right* voids the fatalism of the philosopher's equation of the real and the rational, allowing it to mutate into a call to revolutionary action proffered by the inherited circumstances themselves, those very same circumstances that weighed on our brains two pages earlier. Yes, the rose is here, but the dance is very different. The circumstances are neither the presence of rationality nor the dead weight of the past, but the ghostly tremors of history's continuing revolution.⁹⁰

Thus, when Marx addresses the would-be revolutionaries, who insist that they must first bury their dead fathers—they must first have done with Christianity, say—before they can follow after him, Marx responds, shovel in hand, that we must let the dead bury the dead. But, Marx insists, as he continues digging and decaying, it is the

⁹⁰ This trust in the revolutionary development of society means that, for Marx, not every obstacle to "freedom" or "equality" needs to become a site of anxious attention. Thus, for example, communists can "leave the dissolution of the Prussian state in the hands of bourgeois society." After all, however antediluvian such a state apparatus might be, it is only an example of "ephemeral phenomena," "a brief stopping place," "the task of toiling away at" which can "be left to the petty narrow-minded democrats." At times, Marx writes, the revolutionary "can only be said to conspire against the *status quo* in the sense that steam and electricity conspire against it" (*Revelations Concerning the Communist Trial in Cologne*, MECW 11, pp. 427f).

revolution itself that is dead. And if we laugh at all this funerary work, then this laughter, too, is a sign of history's thoroughness, and a bit of spade-work itself.

By way of contrast, take Hegel's own citation of the ghost scene from *Hamlet*. In the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel writes of spirit:

It often seems to have forgotten and lost itself, but inwardly opposed to itself, it is working away internally [*innerliches Fortarbeiten*]*—as Hamlet says of the spirit of his father, “Well done, valiant mole! [Brav gearbeitet, wackerer Maulwurf!]”—until, grown strong in itself it bursts asunder the crust of the earth which divided it from its sun, its concept, so that the earth crumbles away. At such times, when the encircling crust, like a soulless decaying building, crumbles away, and spirit displays itself arrayed in new youth, it has put on the seven leagues boots.*⁹¹

This appropriation of Hamlet's line seems to me a remarkable instance of that rather violent hermeneutics that characterizes much of Hegel's assimilation of history to the “true theodicy” that is philosophy.⁹² The disruptive ghost becomes, in Hegel's phrase, a figure of Manifest Destiny. The spirit will end up dissolving the earth that entombs it, reborn as a youth who will race forward into the sun in some evangelical cartoon version of Plato's ascent from the cave.

Even when Marx does portray the revolution breaking through the crust of the earth—as in the opening of the 1856 speech—it does so precisely as earth. It breaks up what is frozen, and fragments what appeared to be a seamless whole, but it is no less earthy for that. It is important to realize that Marx does not just invert Hegel, he inverts Dante as well. The Purgatory of revolutionary practice is underground, in the earth, while its Hell is up here, on stage. So long as the latter realm of forms and figures succeeds in masking what is going on in the cellarage, the phrase flows over and beyond what it holds within [*ging die Phrase über den Inhalt*]. But when what is

⁹¹ Part III, Section 3.E, “Final Result,” *Hegel's Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, abridged student edition, tr. E. S. Haldane and F. H. Simson, (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996), pp. 697f; translation modified.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 697.

held within these forms and phrases—the specter of revolution, that old mole, Puck—overflows its containment, then the stage trembles, characters fall down, and we laugh. The Purgatory of the revolution is not a purgation of our earthly, material, bodily existence, a purification that will leave spirit basking in the sun of its concept. It is instead a movement into and through our materiality, a destabilization and fragmentation of our roles and expectations, a quickening of contradiction.

The ghost of the revolution, *sive* history, slowly undermines forms and phrases—*eidai* and *logoi*—and bears them to their grave. The dead (revolution) buries its dead (forms and phrases). The forms and phrases of the modern world are like the forms assumed by Puck. They will begin to collapse or withdraw at the very moment we take them most seriously, much to the raucous amusement of Oberon. Marx's revolutionary poetry, then, works its mischief in the same way. Like the “wisest aunt, telling the saddest tale,” we mistake his text for Hegel's “three-foot stool,” only to have it slip from beneath us when we try to sit down.

The difficulty with this theatrics of revolution, as I have so far presented it, is that it does not yet take account of the other two dramatic forms Marx famously discusses in the *Brumaire*: tragedy and farce. Placing Marx's comedy in relation to these other two modes of inheritance seems especially crucial because Marx both inscribes his revolutionary comedy within *Hamlet*, that apotheosis of modern tragedy, and famously vituperates and fulminates against the farce of 1848. That Marx inherits Shakespeare's tragedy as fodder for comedy makes a certain sense, given the testimony of his 1844 theatrical scheme. Differentiating his comedy from France's farce, on the other hand, promises to be rather more difficult, especially since Marx does not himself seem to rigorously distinguish between comedy and farce in his texts. We must examine the drama in more detail.

3. Acting Lessons

In order to make sense of Marx's situation vis-à-vis tragedy and farce, we must return to what he says about inheritance at the beginning of the *Brumaire*. Picking up the thread on the heels of his remark about the nightmarish weight of tradition, the text continues:

And just when they [the living] appear to be revolutionizing themselves and their circumstances, in creating something unprecedented, in just such epochs of revolutionary crisis, that is when they nervously summon up the spirits of the past, borrowing from them their names, marching orders, uniforms, in order to enact new scenes in world history, but in this time-honored guise and with this borrowed language.⁹³

We reach for our inheritance, Marx claims, out of anxiety at the appearance of revolution on stage. Something “unprecedented [*nie Dagewesenes*]” appears in our making, either in ourselves or in our circumstances—literally, things [*die Dinge*]—and this appearance marks such a moment as a crisis. We cover over this appearance, and this crisis, by hiding it behind the words and costumes of the past. We do indeed enact the revolutionary scene, but unconsciously, for we have hidden the revolution under a bushel, as it were. It happens without appearing to have happened.

According to Marx, we assuage our anxiety about revolution in two modes. First, there is the tragic mode of, e.g., the French Revolution of 1789. The heroes of that revolution “accomplished the business of the day in Roman costumes and with Roman phrases,” only to discard these phrases and costumes as soon as “the new social formation was established.”⁹⁴ They found in Rome “the self-deceptions that they needed [...] to keep themselves emotionally at the level of high historical tragedy. [...] Thus the resurrection of the dead in those revolutions served to glorify new struggles,

⁹³ EB, LPW 32

⁹⁴ EB, LPW 32

[...] to magnify fantastically the given task, [...] to recover the spirit of revolution.”⁹⁵ Tragic times, Marx seems to be saying, are distinguished by the need for a “noble lie.”⁹⁶ An apparition recovered from the past hides from us the actuality of our practice, but this hiding makes it possible for us to do what is called for. When the deed is done, the need for the illusion disappears, and the discrepancy between what the actors intended and what they did, between the specters they have conjured and the institutions they have made, appears as a tragic diremption.⁹⁷ The tragic hero knows not what he does. He is an unconscious agent of history, in that, taking his mask too seriously, he is unaware that he is on stage.

By contrast, there is also a “parodic” or “farcical” mode of summoning the past, as displayed by the revolutionary period of 1848 to 1851. Here the resurrection serves “to parody the old” struggles, “to evade a real resolution,” and “to relaunch [revolution’s] specter.” “A whole people, believing itself to have acquired a powerful revolutionary thrust, is suddenly forced back into a defunct era.”⁹⁸ Rather than drafting the past into the service of our activity, this mode of repetition drags our activity back into the past. The remembered phrases and figures it conjures are stronger than the context of their citation, and so they overwhelm our situation and our action. Thus, the Napoleon and *montagne* of 1849 were “lifeless caricatures of the great actualities whose names they bore [*trugen*].”⁹⁹ Rather than operating underneath

⁹⁵ EB, LPW 33

⁹⁶ The phrase “noble lie” is, of course, taken from Plato’s *Republic*, 414c1. The classic Twentieth Century analyst of the necessity for the noble lie is Leo Strauss; see his “On Plato’s Republic,” in *The City and Man*, (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1964), pp50-138.

⁹⁷ Several years earlier, Marx had offered, in *The Holy Family*, a concrete example from the first French Revolution. “The illusion [of the French Terrorists about instituting ancient politics in modern society] appears tragic when Saint-Just, on the day of his execution, pointed to the large table of the *Rights of Man* hanging in the hall of the *Conciergerie*, and said with proud dignity: ‘*C’est pourtant moi qui ai fait cela* [Yet it was I who made that].’ It was just this table that proclaimed the *right* of a *man* who cannot be the man of the ancient commonweal any more that his *economic* and *industrial* conditions are those of ancient times” (HF, MECW 4, p. 122).

⁹⁸ EB, LPW 33

⁹⁹ CSF, MECW 10, pp. 81f.

the cover of a noble lie, farcical times are marked by a regressive attachment to forms that lack the power to heighten emotions or galvanize action. If tragic heroes don't think their acting, farcical figures only think they're acting. The specters they conjure don't merely hide their activity, they stultify it, for they are more real than the flesh and blood people who invoke them.

But these two modes of repetition are not related by a simple either-or. Tragic citation, Marx suggests, gives rise to farcical re-citation. The success of tragedy forges the bond to the past that farce helplessly redeploys. This seems clear when the discussion is put into the context of the previously cited opening of the *Brumaire*: "Hegel observes somewhere that all the great events and characters of world history occur twice, so to speak. He forgot to add: the first time as high tragedy, the second time as low farce."¹⁰⁰ The farcical mode is thus a repetition *of* repetition; it repeats the tragic repetition as a parody. The tragic repetition imparts force and life to figures that, because of that very forcefulness, will eventually overwhelm the pseudo- and counter-revolutionaries who flounder in their wake.

Marx appears to differentiate proletarian revolutions from both tragic and farcical revolutions by a simple marker; proletarian revolutions are able to cope with the appearance of revolution, and do not need to hide their content behind old phrases and figures. The proletarian revolution will be honest about itself, and to itself. As the *Manifesto* brags—and as its very title announces—"Communists disdain to make their views and aims a secret."¹⁰¹ As we've seen, this is not a statement of high-modern "avant-gardism"—shun the past, obliterate memory, abandon the dead—but an insistence that all phrases and figures contain revolutionary forces that can, in the right setting, overflow their containers. The revolution will appear on stage, but it

¹⁰⁰ EB, LPW 31

¹⁰¹ LPW 30

cannot appear “as itself.” It will appear in and through the fracturing and withdrawal of masks, costumes, and phrases currently in play.

But if Marx avoids the charge that his revolutionaries constitute a futurist avant-garde, doesn't he, thereby open himself up to the threat of collapsing into the farcical figures he so disdains? The difficulty is this: the era of farce is precisely the time when old institutions and social forms become ripe for destruction. That is the context of Marx's introduction of the revolution's purgation. The farce of 1848-1851 is, according to Marx, the preparation, first, of parliamentary power, and then, of executive power, to be overcome by the revolution.¹⁰² Likewise, in the “Introduction” to his critique of Hegel, Marx had said of the German state; “The modern *ancien régime* is merely the *clown* of a world order whose *real heroes* are dead.”¹⁰³ Its clownishness is what prepares us to happily allow revolution to overflow the bounds of that form. This applies to Bonapartism, as well, for “the parody of the empire was necessary to liberate the bulk of the French nation from the weight of tradition.”¹⁰⁴

This collusion of revolution and farce also confronts us in the fact that there are two specters. Besides the specter of revolution we have already encountered, the one that moves beneath the stage, there are also specters appearing as characters on the stage, and these specters are figures of farce. Thus, as opposed to the “spirit [*Geist*]” of revolution at work in tragic history, farcical history sees “only the specter [*Gespens*] of the old revolution on the move.”¹⁰⁵ Likewise, the “Napoleonic ideals” that Bonaparte espouses are “an absurdity” in contemporary France; they are “words transformed into phrases, spirits into specters.”¹⁰⁶ In other words, not only does the farce do the work of

¹⁰² EB, LPW 115

¹⁰³ EW 247

¹⁰⁴ EB, LPW 123

¹⁰⁵ EB, LPW 33

¹⁰⁶ EB, LPW 123; translation modified.

revolution, it seems to be the adaptation of revolution for the stage, the very appearance of revolution.

The difficulty in drawing a sharp distinction between Marx's comic revolutionary movement and the counter-revolutionary farce of Bonapartism manifests itself in other ways, as well. Marx evinces, in the *Brumaire*, an odd admiration for Bonaparte, for that "cunning old *roué*" was politically effective against the French bourgeoisie. Moreover, his success seems to result from the fact that "he conceives popular history and high politics and finance as comedies in the most vulgar sense."¹⁰⁷ As Harries puts it, "*The Eighteenth Brumaire* presents the dilemma of a homology between the historical critic, Marx, and his putative subject, Bonaparte. Bonaparte, it seems, has already mastered and put into practice the generic criticism of history which Marx uses against him."¹⁰⁸ This homology between revolution and counter-revolution is elsewhere openly admitted by Marx. Examining an earlier scene in the drama of 1848, he wrote that, when the Prussian government "abandoned the false pretense of a legal basis" for its actions against the '48ers, it in fact took "its stand on a revolutionary basis, for the counter-revolutionary basis, too, is revolutionary."¹⁰⁹

We could certainly insist on the sharpest possible distinction between revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries if we allowed ourselves an appeal to consciousness. After all, Bonaparte did not *intend* to further the work of the revolution. He was as unconscious of his actual furtherance of the revolution as any tragic hero, even when he "took his comedy straight."¹¹⁰ And, in fact, Marx does at times seem to rest the peculiarity of revolutionary activity on consciousness. For example, he characterizes the activity of the Communist League as a "self-conscious

¹⁰⁷ EB, LPW 78

¹⁰⁸ Op. cit., pp. 66f.

¹⁰⁹ "The Bourgeoisie and the Counter-Revolution", NRZ 165, Dec. 1848, MECW 8, p. 154.

¹¹⁰ EB, LPW 78.

taking part in the historical revolutionary process of society going on before our eyes.”¹¹¹ But it would be strange now—at the end of an investigation that has insisted at every step on looking to what actors are doing, rather than what they think they’re doing—to attempt to solve a difficulty concerning effectivity by appealing to consciousness as a trump card. What does it matter what Bonaparte thought he was doing, so long as he actually aided the revolutionary overcoming of the present? The question we must confront is whether the unconscious dupe of the revolution is more effective at doing the work of the revolution than are its conscious advocates.

In order to unravel this meeting of opposites, I want to turn to one of Marx’s most neglected texts, his polemic against Karl Vogt, a minor figure in the post-’48 *émigré* scene.¹¹² The major political point of the book is to reveal Vogt as a perhaps conscious agent of Bonapartism, and the association of farce and counter-revolution runs throughout. Moreover, Marx goes into great detail about Vogt’s *modus operandi*, and I believe Marx’s characterization of Vogt’s activity will allow us to clarify the different productivities of revolution and counter-revolution.

C. Revolutionary stomachs¹¹³

Falstaff: ...never call a true piece of gold a counterfeit:
thou art essentially mad, without seeming so.

Shakespeare
King Henry IV, II.4

It is easily forgotten that Marx’s critique of political economy is actually a chain of more- and less-finished texts extending from his excerpt notebooks on James Mill all the way through *Capital*. Scholarship and commentary focus now on one, now on

¹¹¹ HV 60; translation modified.

¹¹² Besides Marx’s book, the only other memorial to Vogt of which I am aware is a street named in his honor by his hometown of Geneva.

¹¹³ “Confessions of a Noble Soul,” NRZ 145, November 17, 1848, MECW 8, p. 30.

another of these texts, as fashions change, but rarely is an effort made to read the whole chain as one continuously developing or mutating project. The situation is similar with Marx's commentaries on the life, death, and life-in-death of the 1848 revolutions. The *Brumaire* has received fairly continuous attention, perhaps because it—along with *Civil War in France*—was mined early on for a “Marxist theory of the state.”¹¹⁴ The *Manifesto* has obviously always been much studied, but almost exclusively as a theoretical statement, and not as a historical, political document.¹¹⁵ What gets lost in this acontextual focus on a couple of privileged texts is that these are merely two prominent outposts in an archipelago of articles, pamphlets and broadsheets that Marx wrote regarding the revolutionary action, its run-up, and its long aftermath.

In 1860, Marx took almost a year off from his work on what was then still to be a second installment of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* in order to write and publish another chapter in this serial account: *Herr Vogt*, a withering assault on the person and actions of one Karl Vogt. Vogt, in a pamphlet entitled *Mein Prozess gegen die Allgemeine Zeitung*, had accused Marx of all manner of conspiratorial and illegal dealings, and of being a tin-pot dictator to boot. Marx responded with a book-length demonstration of the falsity of Vogt's charges, the incompetent perfidiousness of Vogt's person, and the Bonapartist pedigree of Vogt's politics.

Read in conjunction with the *Brumaire*, this under-appreciated text is a remarkable showpiece of Marx's activity, which is displayed precisely in his dissection

¹¹⁴ Lenin's *State and Revolution* (New York: International Publishers, 1932), was decisive here, though I cannot say to what extent he was merely recognizing an already developed attention to these texts within Marxist circles.

¹¹⁵ See, however, Hal Draper, *The Adventures of the Communist Manifesto*, (Berkeley: Center for Social History, 1994).

of Vogt's activity. Marx both describes the character of Vogt's activity and manifests the character of his own activity. What emerges from this centrifuge of self-reflexivity is—in line with the conjunctions already noted in the *Brumaire* between revolution and counter-revolution—a certain degree of similarity between the two antagonists. Both are book-makers who compile material from others, put it into a new form, and, in Marx's words, "throw [it] onto the dunghill of history." But—as with the Democritus and Epicurus of Marx's dissertation—the similarity itself reveals the most minute, and most fundamental, divergence. The difference between Marx's revolutionary book-making and Vogt's counter-revolutionary hack-work—as also between Bonaparte's farcical pretense of action and Marx's ironic comedy of patience—is the efficiency and honesty with which Marx undertakes his acts of production.

1. *The Character of Bonaparte's Steward*

In his preface to the work, Marx justifies the polemic against Vogt as an "opportunity" for "characterizing such an individual, who represents a whole tendency."¹¹⁶ Marx was a great fan of Balzac, for the reason that Balzac captured so very perfectly the characters that populate bourgeois society.¹¹⁷ In *Herr Vogt*, Marx takes a page from Balzac, and produces a character study that will, effectively, capture the flesh and blood Karl Vogt, hemming in his political activities by guaranteeing that his reputation precedes him, while simultaneously recapturing his productive energies for the revolution he sought to counter.

In order to accomplish this goal, Marx draws upon a dizzying array of literary, historical, and cultural references. Even more so than in the youthful polemics of *The Holy Family* or *The German Ideology*, Marx piles pun on allusion on innuendo with

¹¹⁶ HV 2

¹¹⁷ See Kemple, *op. cit.*, pp. 137-50.

such abandon as to make it quite impossible to rigorously sort it all out—especially 150 years later, and in translation. Perhaps it was always impossible, however, for the whole tone is one of gratuitous excess. The first sentence of the tract sets the tone:

The “rounded nature”—as the advocate *Hermann* tactfully described his rotund client, the hereditary steward of Nichilberg, before the district court at Augsburg—the “rounded nature” begins his Horrendous Contortions of History as follows...¹¹⁸

“Hereditary steward” translates *Erb-Vogt*, and *der Erb-Vogt von Nichilberg* is a character in Johann Fischart’s *Contortions of History and the Grandmother of All Practice*, a German “adaptation” of Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. So, according to Marx’s practice, Vogt’s name inscribes him within Fischart’s satire. Further on, pushing the reference beyond the obscure into the realm of the mystifying, Marx will refer to Vogt as “our imperial Gorgellantua.”¹¹⁹ Marx cultivates an impression of erudition, but one that always seems to be on the verge of collapsing into nonsense.

Let’s take a closer look at this tropically fecund characterization of the *Erb-Vogt*. As always, Marx draws a distinction between his object’s *Wirklichkeit* and its self-profession or immediate appearance. As the representative of a tendency, Vogt “really represented” [*wirklich vertrat*] certain views, views that may be quite distinct from “the views he *claimed* to represent and which he represented in the *imagination* of an injudicious mob.”¹²⁰ This does not mean, however, that Marx will disregard Vogt’s claims. Rather, Vogt’s characteristic motion can only be discerned by means of a symptomatic reading of his writings—primarily his “magnum opus,” *Mein Prozess gegen die Allgemeine Zeitung*, but also his *Studien zur gegenwärtigen Lage Europas*—a reading that will uncover Vogt’s “manner” of *Buchmacherei* (“book-making,” but also “hack-work”).

¹¹⁸ HV 5, translation modified.

¹¹⁹ HV 11

¹²⁰ HV 3

That manner is essentially to compile plagiarized untruths. Marx “illustrates” with a bit of minutiae; Vogt “transforms the British Admiral *Sir Charles Napier* into a ‘*Lord*’ *Napier*.”¹²¹ The alteration of “Sir” into “Lord” gives it all away, says Marx, for it is not just an inaccuracy, but an inaccuracy with a lineage. This alteration is characteristic of the French Bonapartist press, for “The literary Zouaves attached to Decemberism know from the Theatre of the Port St. Martin that every English gentleman is at least a Lord.”¹²² The Bonapartist press is deluded by taking its education about the British from the theatre. The result is a very particular error. Vogt, by reproducing this error, reveals that his “Studies of the Current Situation in Europe” are really only studies of the Bonapartist propaganda machine.¹²³ Vogt, like all students of Bonaparte, takes his cues from the stage, rather than from what is moving about beneath the stage.

This same manner of proceeding can also be seen in his attack on Marx. Vogt doesn’t simply lie about Marx’s involvement in “the Brimstone Gang,” he also conflates the Brimstone Gang with the unrelated “*Bürstenheimers*,” with whom Marx *also* was not involved. Plus, the *Bürstenheimers* are themselves an invention of a certain Herr Abt, whom Vogt himself characterizes as “the lowest of the low.” For this reason, when Vogt published anonymously his first accusations against Marx, the editors of *Das Volk* attributed them to Abt.¹²⁴ In this manner, Vogt’s lack of truthfulness is constantly attesting to both his lack of creativeness and his lack of judgment. All of these traits stem from Vogt’s absolute inability to respond to the specter of communism. Vogt—like so many ‘48ers—lives in a world of superstition, where every

¹²¹ HV 121

¹²² HV 121

¹²³ Thus, “in everything that he half hints at and half lets slip, a watchword passed out by the Tuileries is being obeyed” (HV 138).

¹²⁴ HV 16f

bewildering sign points, not to our friend Robin Goodfellow, but—in Vogt’s case—to Marx. According to Vogt’s tales, Marx is everywhere, involved in everything, behind every plot, scheme, and mishap. Vogt equates Marx with all circumstances, for example, that promoted the formation of secret societies after the failure of the revolution in 1849; there are no “circumstances,” but only Marx.¹²⁵ In other words, Vogt confounds the revolution, beneath the stage, for Marx, one of his fellow personages on stage. There is no ghost, only a mad prince.¹²⁶

Hand in hand with this superstition, as the conspiracies arrayed against him grow, so, too, does Vogt’s own imagined greatness. Thus, Vogt “contributed [his] essentials” to foiling the counterfeit banknote plot in Geneva.¹²⁷ Thus, he thwarted the plot of the conspiratorial faction at the Central Festival of the German Workers’ Education Association at Lausanne.¹²⁸ Thus, it was only a drawing of straws that kept him from taking Robert Blum’s place on the trip to Vienna whereby the latter became a martyr for the ‘48ers.¹²⁹ “Falstaffian natures all have the feature that their actions are as inflated as they are.”¹³⁰

This misidentification of levels is also the trap that Vogt’s emperor, Bonaparte, falls into. Bonaparte’s initial successes flowed from his recognition that the stage is a stage, and the play a comedy. Because he grasped “popular history and high politics and finance as a comedy,” he was able to out-manuever the French bourgeoisie, which

¹²⁵ The text to which Vogt refers for Marx’s “confession” reads: “After 1849 just as before 1848, only *one path* was open to the proletarian party—that of *secret association*. Consequently after 1849 a whole series of clandestine proletarian societies sprang up on the Continent, were discovered by the police, condemned by the courts, broken up by the gaols and continually resuscitated by the force of circumstances” (*Revelations Concerning the Communist Trial in Cologne*, MECW 11, pp. 399-457).

¹²⁶ As a consequence of this misrecognition, Vogt’s lies necessarily grow exponentially, to keep up with the multiplication of circumstances. They pile up on one another, connecting unconnected events and people, metastasizing. As Marx says, a Vogtian lie is “compounded,” “a *lie* to the power of four, ‘fat as he that fathered it’” (HV 16, 25).

¹²⁷ HV 38

¹²⁸ HV 49-51

¹²⁹ HV 54

¹³⁰ HV 38, translation modified.

“was playing an utter comedy, but in the most serious way in the world.” But although he knew enough Shakespeare to know all the world is a stage, Bonaparte thought all the acting served merely “to mask the most trifling pettiness,” rather than recognizing in the movements on stage the characters’ attempts to respond to the “worthy pioneer” under the floor. Eventually, he loses even what insight he had, and, after defeating the bourgeoisie, becomes “a victim of his own world-view, a straight comedian who no longer sees world history as a comedy, but his own comedy as world history.”¹³¹ Vogt never shared Bonaparte’s moment of genius, but he shares Bonaparte’s moment of absurd earnestness.

2. Vogt’s Representations

Vogt, therefore, seems to be almost the ideal type of the Bonapartist “agent.” Trapped in stage effects like a fly in amber, his manner of acting is like that attributed by Marx to the “Society of December 10,” in which Bonaparte “collected 10,000 rascals [*Lumpenkerls*] who must portray [*vorstellen*] the people as Nick Bottom portrays the lion.”¹³² In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Bottom and the other “rude mechanicals” are preparing to play their ridiculous tragedy of Pyramus and Thisby, and Bottom is eager to play all the roles. Nominating himself to play the lion, he enthuses; “I will roar that I will make the duke say, ‘Let him roar again, let him roar again.’” But the other players fear that Bottom’s lion “would fright the duchess and the ladies, and they would shriek; and that were enough to hang us all.” Bottom tries again: “I will aggravate my voice so that I will roar you as gently as any suckling dove; I will roar an ‘twere any nightingale.”¹³³ And so, in order to establish the relationship Vogtian natures bear to

¹³¹ EB, LPW 78

¹³² EB, LPW 78; translation modified.

¹³³ I.2.64-76

the revolution, we can say that it is Bottom against Puck, the lion that roars like a suckling dove against the ghost that cries "*Hic Rhodus, hic salta!*"

Marx wants to define some other relationship to the revolution besides the one defined by Nick Bottom. Marx cannot *be* Puck, or the ghost. The revolution does not appear on stage as its own character. Whenever it seems to walk the stage, we are really presented with nothing but a farcical specter, a ridiculous, decaying figure. Therefore, Marx and his compatriots must represent the revolution indirectly, responding to its movements without falling into the trap of believing they simply embody it. But, in their efforts to walk this line, they confront people like Vogt, who appear to all the world like the revolutionary politicians Marx and company would be. The stakes are revealed by the fact that Vogt presented Bonaparte as a "*proletarian dictator*," "*giving the workers work and ruining the bourgeoisie.*"¹³⁴ In other words, Marx must deal with Nick Bottom, playing Marx. I want to look at how Marx attempts this confrontation, though it will involve a shift from the rhetoric of theatricality to one of digestion, and our transport from Shakespeare's stage back to Dante's *Inferno*.

Some of the otherwise apparently inexplicable references in *Herr Vogt* start to hang together in a peculiar way when one notices that Marx's reading of Dante—*Herr Vogt* followed hot on the heels of the *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*—is a recurrent source of invective. Marx quotes five passages from *Inferno* in the course of his attack, but there are also more subtle references. I'd like to chase down one of these leads, for I think it will help make sense of Marx's over-all strategy and concern.

¹³⁴ HV 176. This same conflation can be read in all the Twentieth Century "workers' parties" and "socialisms" that were really nothing more than counter-revolutionary buffoons. The horrors wrought by such figures is no argument against their farcicality; Bonaparte himself presided over horrors, though of a much smaller scale than those of future "workers' dictators."

The major themes of Marx's polemic are Vogt's rotundity and his lies. Marx connects the two by claiming that Vogt's "Urtype" is Falstaff.¹³⁵ But Vogt's lies and his size are also linked, for Marx, in Vogt's relation to sulphur. One of Vogt's lies, and the one with which Marx begins, is that Marx is associated with a group of *émigré* radicals called "The Brimstone Gang." For Marx, this is revelatory. Sulphur appears everywhere. Beginning already in the epigraph—"He spreads false words; ...he has smeared himself with sulphur ointment"¹³⁶—it symbolizes the odor of Vogt's lies. It also represents Vogt's cowardice, since Marx supposes that he "is averse to sulphur because the smell of gunpowder terrifies him."¹³⁷ But "perhaps," Marx surmises, sulphur also has another, more obscure meaning:¹³⁸

does he, like other sick people, hate the specific remedy for his disease? The doctor of occult medicine, *Rademacher*, as we know, classifies diseases according to their remedies. Thus, under the heading of sulphur diseases would come what the advocate, Hermann, calls his client's 'rounded nature' at the district court in Augsburg, what Rademacher calls a 'stomach wall distended like a drum,' and what the even greater Doctor Fischart calls the 'vaulted belly of France.' All Falstaffian characters thus suffer from the sulphur disease in more than one sense.¹³⁹

What is the sulphur disease, and why does Vogt's type suffer from it in more than one sense? I believe that, in one sense, Vogt's sulphur disease is that he always stinks of lies; we'll see more on this theme below. But another sense emerges when Marx claims, without explanation, that Vogt is "a person with dropsy."¹⁴⁰ While I have not seen the full edition of Johann Gottfried Rademacher's *Rechtfertigung der von den*

¹³⁵ HV 6

¹³⁶ HV 5; the lines are from Calderon.

¹³⁷ HV 11

¹³⁸ It actually has one other meaning, as well, but one that seems to me to in the realm of mere name-calling. Marx writes: "Or did Vogt's zoological conscience remind him that sulphur is death to the itch-mite (*sarcoptes scabiei*), completely and utterly odious to those itch-mites who have already frequently changed their skins. For, as recent research has shown, only those itch-mites that have molted are capable of reproduction and have thus achieved self-consciousness. What a nice contrast: on the one hand *sulphur* and on the other the *self-conscious itch-mite!*" (HV 11)

¹³⁹ HV 11; translation modified.

¹⁴⁰ HV 104

Gelehrten misskanten, verstandsrechten Erfahrungsheillehre der alten scheidekünstigen Geheimärzte und treue Mittheilung des Ergebnisses einer 25 Jährigen Erprobung dieser Lehre am Krankenbette, the condensed version does indeed mention dropsy among the sulphur diseases.¹⁴¹ But why dropsy? Here is where Dante is instructive.

In the thirtieth canto of *Inferno*, Virgil and the pilgrim encounter, in the final sub-circle of the Malebolge—which is reserved for “falsifiers of nature”¹⁴²—a counterfeiter named Master Adam. Master Adam’s punishment is to suffer from “heavy dropsy,” a liver dysfunction that dehydrates his face and limbs, even as it bloats his belly so greatly that, when he is struck by a neighboring sinner, his stomach “resounded as if it were a drum.”¹⁴³ Since Marx both diagnoses Vogt with dropsy and uses very similar language to describe Vogt’s “stomach wall distended like a drum,” I think Dante’s Master Adam may instruct us about Marx’s Herr Vogt.

Within the *contrapasso* of Dante’s Hell, “the pains of the damned are more revelation than retribution.”¹⁴⁴ The distorted motions of the soul are manifested in the distortions of the body. If dropsy is the punishment for counterfeiting, then this disease must make manifest to us the workings of counterfeiting itself. As Robert M. Durling writes:

Dante’s treatment of Master Adam rests on a technically precise parallel between the minting of coins and the digesting of food. In both cases, the cooking of raw material breaks down its form, allowing the separation of impurities and at last the shaping of the purified material. After the so-

¹⁴¹ Interestingly, Rademacher is still considered a pioneer of homeopathic medicine, and his remedy for dropsy persisted into the Twentieth Century, at least. See, e.g., G. Madan’s article in *Heal Thyself* (formerly *The Homeopathic World*), 69:824, August 1934: “The most powerful remedy [for dropsy], which produces severe rigors if injected intravenously, and which should be used in cases of extreme severity on patients who are apparently bound to die, is Sulphur.”

¹⁴² Jeffrey T. Schnapp, “*Lectura Dantis*: Inferno 30,” in *Sparks and Seeds: Medieval Literature and its Afterlife: Essays in Honor of John Freccero*, ed. Dana E. Stewart and Alison Cornish, (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2000), p. 75.

¹⁴³ Inf. 30.52, 103

¹⁴⁴ Kenneth Gross, “Infernal Metamorphoses: An Interpretation of Dante’s ‘Counterpass,’” in *Modern Critical Views: Dante*, ed. Harold Bloom, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), p. 183. Gross’ entire article is quite illuminating in this respect.

called first digestion in the stomach, according to the received theory, the second digestion, in the liver, converts the useable food, now liquid, into blood that it then shares out to the members, each of which assimilates what it needs [...] The moment at which Master Adam adds three carats of base metal to the purified gold corresponds closely to the second digestion, and, in fact, the dropsy of which Master Adam complains results from the liver's not properly converting liquid food into blood.¹⁴⁵

Master Adam's action on earth was like that of a diseased liver; thus he suffers from a diseased liver in Hell. But what this reveals is that Master Adam's fraud was, above all, a disease of the social body.¹⁴⁶ Adam inserted himself into the conduit whereby wealth is circulated through society, in order that he might siphon off some of that wealth for himself by substituting dross for gold. He is no simple thief, for he commits his crime by stamping false coins with the seal of Florence—the lily and John the Baptist. This is not “a simple deceptive reshuffling of surfaces and appearances,” but “an act of violence against Being and Being's Supreme Creator, performed via the substitution of the real by its simulacrum—the substitution of *logos* by *mimos*.”¹⁴⁷ Through his act of false stamping, Adam perverts the whole flow of meaning. His own substance becomes swollen at the expense of the wasting away of other members of society, but there is at the same time a disproportion introduced into the propagation of signs, and of truth itself. This breakdown in the re-presentation of the sign is itself re-presented in Adam's grotesque body; “the face does not answer to the belly.”¹⁴⁸

Marx's Herr Vogt does not answer to every detail of Dante's Master Adam—after all, Vogt is characterized primarily as Falstaffian, and also according to numerous other literary models—but Marx's procedure nonetheless follows the same rules as Dante's. Vogt's entire appearance—in word, deed, and body—is portrayed as a

¹⁴⁵ “Canto XXX: Dante Among the Falsifiers,” in *Lectura Dantis: Inferno*, ed. Allen Mandelbaum, Anthony Oldcorn and Charles Ross, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 398f.

¹⁴⁶ “The individual souls in these *bolge* suffer punishments that correspond to the effects their sins have had on the body politic; thus they are figures of the body politic individually as well as en masse” (Durling, *ibid.*, p. 397).

¹⁴⁷ Schnapp, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

¹⁴⁸ *Inf.* 30.54.

manifestation of his “tendency,” his characteristically flawed motion. This tendency, moreover, is flawed because it fails to re-present properly; Vogt is a falsifier, a counterfeiter, a plagiarizer, and a hack.¹⁴⁹ And his failures of re-presentation constitute Herr Vogt as a disease of the social body, one that poses a serious enough danger that Marx must attempt an inoculation.

The greatest difference between Herr Vogt and Master Adam is that, while the latter’s failure to re-present the coin unabased introduces a dangerous flaw into what ought to be a regime of stable and unproblematic representation, what Vogt misrepresents is revolutionary practice, which is itself the impossibility of re-presentation. The stamping that Adam corrupts, as Jeffrey Schnapp writes,

is a process by which the *logos* imprints its form on all created beings and things: a process which leaves the traces of divinity everywhere in creation, thereby guaranteeing that all signs and all of creation, however fractured, will hearken back, however distantly, to their supernal origins.¹⁵⁰

Of course we’ve already seen that Dante himself plays the dangerous game of irony in the *Inferno*, so I would be less categorical than Schnapp about Dante’s ontology of imitation. Nonetheless, the point stands that, for Dante, a true re-presentation of one’s divinity is the unproblematic ethical ideal. The perfection of one’s own motion is nothing but the re-presentation of God’s motion in the best manner of which one is capable.

For Marx, however, the story is—and must be—different. The ethic of perfecting one’s motion is just as much a part of Marx of any other Aristotelian, but the perfection of motion takes its measure and impetus from “the real movement that overcomes the present.” But to re-present in one’s own actions the overcoming of the

¹⁴⁹ I think it is significant that every citation of the *Inferno* in *Herr Vogt* refers to the passage through the Malebolge, the circle where fraud is punished.

¹⁵⁰ Schnapp, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

present is to re-present the impossibility of re-presentation—just as, in Epicurus, the re-presentation of the atomic principle is the *denial* of the planets' atomic divinity in favor of human *ataraxy*. Instead of re-presentation being the means by which fractured signs are shown to cohere in the presence of God, it is the means by which the liquid matter that fractures everything stable overflows a given sign, absencing its apparent presence.

And yet, Marx insists, this impossibility of re-presentation does not mean that anything goes, or that all re-presentations are thereby rendered equal. Namely, there are productive and unproductive re-presentations. There are re-presentations that honestly and efficiently respond to the ghost under the stage, and there are re-presentations that ignore and forestall that ghost. Vogt and Bonaparte are, if not dangerous, at least annoying in their non-responsiveness, because they are inefficiencies in the production of poetry from the future. It will be instructive, therefore, to look briefly at the contrasting productive powers of Vogt and Marx, before turning, in conclusion, to consider how Marx represents the logic of capitalism as an education in the productivity of excess, overflow, discharge, and waste.

3. Marx's Mode of Production

If, as Harries notes, there seems to be a homology between Marx and Bonaparte, there are also a number of easily apparent similarities between Marx's method of re-presentation and the compilation and excretion of Vogt's vaulted belly. As I mentioned above, Vogt's method is one of compiling plagiarized untruths. We can get more specific by examining Vogt's address to the Central Festival at Lausanne. Concerned to dispel rumors that he was a Bonapartist agent, Vogt rises to address the assembly, and remembers, says Marx, "Demosthenes' admonition that 'action, action

and once more action is the soul of rhetoric.” “But,” asks Marx, “what is action?” He then proceeds to tell his German audience of the strange American creature, the skunk. “Powder and lead can defend one against wolves and tigers,” explains Marx, “but there is no remedy against the *a posteriori* of the skunk.” “That is action, this naturalized citizen of the ‘Animal Kingdom’ [Vogt] said to himself.” Thus, Vogt used his speech to warn “the worker” against “a small handful of desperate men” who, by “involving him in conspiracies and communist activities,” distract “the worker from his profession” and live “off his sweat.”¹⁵¹

Vogt’s *modus operandi*, as this episode reveals, is to inflate his own importance by spreading shit on everyone else. He ingests all manner of falsehoods—defined here by the error of taking characters on stage to be the source of their own performances—combines them together, and then spews them out again as an attack on other characters. Thus, Marx calls him “the kind of master-singer of whom Dante said: ‘And he of his ass had made a trumpet.’”¹⁵² He pulls his proclamations from that “wretched bag that makes shit of what is swallowed.”¹⁵³ When he is perplexed, he “lets off a few of his natural steam and stink bombs.”¹⁵⁴ Finally, in its least literary form; “And what he says is—shit.”¹⁵⁵

¹⁵¹ HV 50

¹⁵² HV 55; Inf. 21.138-9

¹⁵³ HV 56; Inf. 28.26-7

¹⁵⁴ HV 46

¹⁵⁵ HV 92. Vogt is hardly the only exile politician to come in for such a characterization from Marx. The digestive and excretive natures of democrats, reformers, and cranks are popular topics for Marx. For example, take the following characterization of Arnold Ruge (written many years after their collaboration on the *Deutsche-Französische Jahrbucher*): “As he does not care to study overmuch, or as he puts it ‘to transfer ideas from one library into another,’ he prefers ‘to gain his knowledge fresh from life.’ He means by this to note down conscientiously every evening all the witty, novel or bright ideas that he has read, heard or just picked up during the day. As opportunity arises these materials are then made to contribute to Ruge’s daily stint which he labors at just as conscientiously as at his other bodily needs. It is this that his admirers refer to when they say that he cannot hold his ink. The subject of his daily literary production is a matter of complete indifference; what is vital is that Ruge should be able to immerse every possible topic in that wonderful stylistic sauce that goes with everything just like the English who enjoy their Soyer’s relish or Worcester Sauce equally with fish, fowl, cutlets or anything else. This daily stylistic diarrhea he likes to designate the ‘all-pervading beautiful form’ and he regards it as adequate grounds for passing himself off as an artist” (*The Great Men of Exile*, MECW 11, p. 266).

The whole reason that people like Bonaparte and Vogt unwittingly promote the revolution through their counter- and counterfeit revolutionary actions is that they weaken our attachment to the re-presentation of our present ideas, ideals, and prejudices. Thus, for instance, Marx writes; “To have the people lose its last illusions and break completely with the past, it was necessary that the customary poetic trimmings of French uprisings—the enthusiastic bourgeois youth, the students of the *ecole polytechnique*, the *tricornes*—should join the side of the suppressers.”¹⁵⁶ They further the overcoming of the present only to the extent that they encourage the rest of us to be good-natured about the passing of “pre-revolutionary traditional appendages, [...] persons, illusions, conceptions [*Vorstellungen*], projects.” If we are to constitute a “revolutionary party,” we must be freed from the felt need to re-present these *Vorstellungen*, but sometimes we can be so freed “only by a series of *defeats*.”¹⁵⁷ In relation to the revolutionary mode of production, then, Vogt and Bonaparte stand as the “unproductive laborers” stand to Smith’s capitalist. They are an indirection, a *faux fris* in the production of revolution.

Marx’s own re-presentation of Vogt attempts to redirect this indirection by fragmenting Vogt’s weak and empty form. He takes what little and dispersed energy Vogt contains, and augments and directs it towards shattering his façade. To do so, he employs a method that is indisputably quite similar to Vogt’s own ingestion, compilation, and excretion. *Herr Vogt* is basically a compendium of the literary remains of Shakespeare, Dante, Schiller, Cervantes, Rabelais, and many minor, or even obscure, poets and novelists (e.g., Fischart). What does not come from these authors consists of transcribed letters from other members of the refugee community, speaking to the details of Vogt’s accusations. Indeed, many of the important

¹⁵⁶ “The June Revolution” *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, June 1848, MECW 7, pp. 144ff

¹⁵⁷ CSF, MECW 10, p. 47.

characterizations Marx employs come from these reproduced letters or from other sources. It was, for example, an anonymous worker at the 1859 Robert Blum celebration in Geneva who first called Vogt “Falstaff.”¹⁵⁸ The puns on “sulphur” and “brimstone” originate in letters from Herr Schilly and Johann Philipp Becker.¹⁵⁹ The same goes for numerous smaller details.¹⁶⁰

And this phenomenon is hardly limited to the book at hand. When one compares *Capital* to the excerpt notebooks and manuscripts that form its basis, it is striking the extent to which Marx’s individual points and analyses may be traced back to some earlier author whom Marx had excerpted. It is not surprising, then, that Marx is constantly being reduced to one predecessor or another. Marx is a Hegelian, or a “minor Ricardian,” or an Aristotelian, or perhaps a combination, more or less elegant, of two or three “sources.”

And if what Marx re-presents to us is a compilation, he himself characterizes the product thus re-presented as dung. Eight years after his polemic against Vogt, Marx wrote a letter to his daughter Laura, who was just married and living in France. After going on at some length about a number of books of economics, Marx apologizes:

You’ll certainly fancy, my dear child, that I am very fond of books, because I trouble you with them at so unseasonable a time. But you would be quite mistaken. I am a machine, condemned to devour them and throw them, in a changed form, on the dunghill of history.¹⁶¹

Marx, too, is merely taking the material others have provided, changing its form, and externalizing it again as dung. Since all production, as we’ve seen, proceeds by changing the form of some material, it would appear, indeed, that adding to the dunghill of history is the universal result of our productive activity. But if Marx, the

¹⁵⁸ HV 54; but see also the anonymous letter to Marx reproduced on p. 187.

¹⁵⁹ HV 21-5, 42

¹⁶⁰ Remember, in this regard, that Marx’s quip about tragedy and farce at the beginning of the *Brumaire* was originally Engels’ quip, passed on to Marx in a letter.

¹⁶¹ Karl Marx to Laura Marx, 11 April, 1868.

machine, devours the waste of others and reprocesses it as his own, the most important thing is that this re-digestion and re-presentation makes the dunghill of history productive again. Vogt's process of digestion and excretion saps the forces present in his material because it doesn't ever sense those forces. Vogt, like his master Bonaparte, knows only the superficial interactions of the characters on the stage of history. Being dead to the contradictions of material activity, he doesn't understand anything about the collisions and collusions taking place around him. Therefore, he ingests a bit of this, a bit of that, but never feeds the material processes that could happen through him; digesting only shadows, he produces only shadows.

Marx, on the other hand, senses that forces beyond him have "condemned" him to his digestion. Having made the shape of decay his guide at the time of his dissertation,¹⁶² he has cultivated a sense for the contending forces pregnant in every form.¹⁶³ Way back in Chapter One, I called *tekhnē* the flower on the dunghill of history, and also suggested that Marx was waiting for something else to grow there. But the next thing to grow was capital, which, as we saw in Chapter Two, is basically a perfect machine for turning the whole earth into one giant dunghill. The transubstantiation of bodies into values is extremely wasteful; it reconstitutes all materiality as waste. Marx takes that waste and turns it back against the form that expelled it, responding to the forces set free by the decomposition of the forms capital digests. As Marx says in 1856, modernity is characterized by coexistent realities. "On the one hand, there have started into life industrial and scientific powers, which no epoch in the former human history had ever suspected. On the other hand, there exist symptoms of decay, far

¹⁶² DDE, MECW 1, p. 35

¹⁶³ As George Brenkert puts it; "Since Marx is concerned with the objectification of humans in certain ways, he is concerned with the creation of certain attitudes, dispositions, and ways of seeing reality—not simply with momentary occurrences or individual actions" (*Marx's Ethics of Freedom*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 108).

surpassing the horrors recorded of the latter times of the Roman Empire.”¹⁶⁴ The only way to grasp this coextension of power and decay is to grasp the productive power of decay, of dissolution. Marx does “not mistake the shrewd spirit that continues to mark all these contradictions.”¹⁶⁵ It is the revolution, his contradictory *arkhē*, which he can only obey by objectifying it in unstable and fertile products.

¹⁶⁴ “Speech at the Anniversary of *The People’s Paper*,” MECW 14, p. 654.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 656.

Conclusion

The Stealing School of Labor

We know that to work well the new-fangled forces of society, they need only be mastered by new-fangled men—and such are the working men.

“Speech at the Anniversary of *The People’s Paper*”
The People’s Paper, No. 207 (April 19, 1856)¹

“Post-Marxist” Marxology suffers from a curiously persistent dysphoria with regard to the *Brumaire’s* relationship to Marx’s critique of political economy, a dysphoria with which I fear my own presentation might be misdiagnosed. Obeying some obscure signal, commentator after commentator responds to Marx’s writings as if the *Brumaire* comes after *Capital*, or, at least, after Marx had completed his investigation and presentation of the logic of capitalism. For example, Jeffrey Mehlman claims that Bonapartism creates a crisis and a “scandal” for Marx’s understanding of capitalism because Bonaparte’s dictatorship “entails a break with the notion of class representation.”² Similarly, Dominick LaCapra writes; “In *The Eighteenth Brumaire* one does not have the two-class society projected on the basis of an extrapolation from a market ‘model’ in *Capital*, and little seems to indicate that this society was in the offing.”³ It is as if *Capital* were already written, and classic Marxist analysis fully elaborated, when Bonaparte’s coup suddenly upset the meticulously arranged tableau of Marx’s categories. This would appear to be the force of Peter Stallybrass’ claim that “Bonapartism unsettles Marx’s concept of the dialectic.”⁴ Even in highly sympathetic discussions of Marx’s politics, it often seems as if the formulations of Marx’s critique of

¹ MECW 14, p. 656.

² *Revolution and Repetition: Marx/Hugo/Balzac*, (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), p. 15.

³ *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language*, (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 278.

⁴ “Marx and Heterogeneity: Thinking the Lumpenproletariat,” *Representations*, 31, Summer 1990, p. 81.

political economy had to be importantly complicated or modified by the concrete political situation in France.

Of course, the chronology implicit in this approach makes no sense. It is far more plausible to surmise that Marx's descent into the categories of capital was occasioned by the collapse of tragic and romantic notions of revolution in 1848 than to suppose that descent to be the basis of a simplistic and easily frustrated picture of the workers casting off their chains and storming the Bastille. Because my own presentation of Marx's revolutionary labor has moved from his descent into capital to his theatrics of revolutionary purgation, it might appear that I, too, think texts like the *Brumaire* provide the answers to the practical questions raised but not resolved by *Capital*. In fact, however, I believe just the opposite. The overwhelming question that lingers after a reading of the *Brumaire*, *Herr Vogt*, and Marx's other polemical, political interventions is the eminently practical question of how one learns to respond to the unsettling motions of the old mole, or of how one learns to be a revolutionary stomach. *Capital* is Marx's answer to that question. If our material forces are to overflow the containment of the capital form, he responds, we must allow ourselves to be digested by capital.

In *Inferno*, the anatomical structure of Hell dictates that Satan is located at the anus, as I have already mentioned in Chapter Three.⁵ Since Virgil and Dante are, it seems, the first among the countless beings that have entered the Hellmouth to actually exit Hell via the anus, we can recast the paralysis appropriate to Hell as a nearly infinitely severe case of constipation. Compacted and contained by the intestinal blockage that is Satan, the poor damned souls spend eternity lodged in the guts of the world. Hell's inability to have done with its denizens is identical with their

⁵ See Robert M. Durling's "Additional Notes" 2 and 13, in *Inferno*, pp. 552-5, 576-7; see especially p. 554.

inability to have done with their irregular motions. As the example of Master Adam vividly demonstrates, Hell is bad digestion. Given the parallels with *Capital*, I would reframe Marx's task in that book as leading his readers on a journey through the logic of modern production that ends only when we are able to throw *ourselves*, in a changed form, on the dunghill of history.

This is why the proletariat is so invested with revolutionary potency, according to Marx. The wage worker, the human body whose productivity has been totally subsumed by the capital form, is actually in the position, not only to go beyond that form, but to act in response to the ghostly call of the movement that overcomes all forms. The rule of capital over labor is the rendering farcical of all our technical ideals, all our attempts to engineer the future according to some stable figure drawn from the past. It makes sense that the proletariat should absorb the lessons of this farce before and to a greater degree than other members of society.⁶ As we saw in Chapter One, our activity had to be dominated by *Vorstellungen* in order for there to be an "us" in the first place. Now, insofar as our labor is subsumed by capital, we must bear up through the tumultuous destruction of the very *Vorstellungen* that "kept watch over [our] cradle."⁷ Our discrete functions are exploded and abstracted. Our humanity is fragmented and dispersed, commodified and mechanized. This is "a hard school," Marx tells us, "but it is the preparatory school for a *complete revolution*."⁸ And Marx is convinced that wage workers, more than anyone else, are enrolled in this school. Therefore, when Marx writes of the proletariat in *The Holy Family*—"Not in vain does it

⁶ In *The Holy Family*, Marx made education through laughter a central theme of his attack on the Young Hegelianism of Bruno Bauer and Co.; "The more completely Critical Critique distorts reality into an obvious comedy through philosophy, the more instructive it is [...] even the broad public can be enlightened on the illusions of speculative philosophy" (MECW 4, p. 7).

⁷ EB, LPW 35

⁸ "Counter-Revolution in Berlin", *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* 141, November 12, 1848, MECW 8, p. 14

go through the stern but steeling school of *labor*⁹—I think we should understand this school to be the distortion of labor’s tragic effort to appropriate materiality into an obvious comedy by capitalist subsumption. When the proletariat can laugh at the notion that material productivity might obey and remain contained within form, then its education is complete.

If this reading of Marx is compelling, then his efforts to differentiate Bonaparte’s dictatorship of the lumpenproletariat from the communist rule of the proletariat does not necessarily betray, as Mehlman and Stallybrass would have it, a problematic denigration of heterogeneity in favor of homogeneity.¹⁰ The problem with the lumpenproletariat is not that it names the waste of modern society, but that it is the *undigested* waste of society. Marx refuses to romanticize the transformative potential of lives outside of or marginal to capitalism. As in Nietzsche’s Trinitarian figure of the camel, the lion, and the child, Marx’s scatological project insists that the only way to overflow and fracture capitalism is by suffering to go through it.

This need to suffer capitalism, to undergo it, manifests itself in Marx’s address to the Communist League in 1850. Seeking to quell what he regarded as a dangerous idealism that would substitute “a *mere effort of will*” for attention to “the real conditions,” he spoke directly to the faction in question:

Whereas we say to the workers: ‘You will have to go through 15, 20, 50 years of civil wars and national struggles not only to bring about a change in society but also to change yourselves, and prepare yourselves for the exercise of political power’, you say on the contrary: ‘Either we seize power at once, or else we might as well just take to our beds.’ Whereas we are at pains to show the German workers in particular how rudimentary the development of the German proletariat is, you appeal to the patriotic feelings and the class prejudice of the German artisans, flattering them in the grossest way possible, and this is a more popular method, of course. Just as the word ‘people’ has been given an aura of sanctity by the democrats, so you have done the same for the word

⁹ HF, MECW 4, p. 37.

¹⁰ See Mehlman, *op. cit.*, and Stallybrass, *op. cit.*

'proletariat'. Like the democrats you substitute the catchword of revolution for revolutionary development."¹¹

This project of education and development seems traditional in its emphasis upon discipline and formation. For Aristotle, instruction is, like corporeal reproduction, a process of informing matter, even if the matter is practical and mental. The city inculcates habits in the bodies of its young, communicating patterns of practice until the body is so deeply held by those patterns that it returns to them as if to a place of rest. Similarly, a demonstrative or rhetorical proof introduces a logical form into the beliefs present in the mind of the audience, quite literally shaping the thoughts of the student. This eidetic notion of education retained its centrality in the Germany of Marx's youth, as is reflected in the German *Bildung*, which is education as formation, as a process of introducing arrangement and order into an unordered soul.

Where Marx's education—and Nietzsche's, for that matter—departs from this well-trod path is in its conviction that formation culminates in, and is undertaken for the sake of, disrupting and overflowing the form to which one is subjected. We descend into science in order that we might hone our bodily constitution to the point where we can break out into a productive life that could never be contained by any science. The only way to redeem the subsumption of our living, revolutionary matter by capital's absolute logic is become so efficiently productive that the relational logic becomes a "fetter" too weak to contain our growth and mutation.

Thomas Kemple has attempted to summarize this "educational" quality of Marx's writings as follows: "Marx's discourse does not try to say everything, but neither does it simply reserve its ultimate meaning for pedantic statements of definitive reasons that must always be explained later. Instead, it suspends final

¹¹ Included by Marx in his *Revelations Concerning the Communist Trial in Cologne*, MECW 11, pp. 427f (The original address took place on September 15, 1850).

closure enough to allow, anticipate, and even require some as yet unknown and foreign element to disrupt it, or to supplement it with a strange and revolutionary sign.”¹² In other words, there is no question, in relation to Marx, of simply understanding and repeating what has been understood, of taking on the form of his argument. Marx’s writings do not comprise a systematic or non-systematic catalogue of propositions which might be read, interpreted, and re-presented in some other form, leaving their content undisturbed. Marx’s writings are an act, and a demand to act. The only way to read them is to turn them against themselves, inside out, to produce some new act, and some new demand. The Eleventh Thesis turns back, of its own accord, to bite its own tail: The philosophers have only interpreted Marx; the point is to change him.

¹² Kemple, *op. cit.*, pp. 81f.

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¹ The books enclosed under this heading are not necessarily *simply*, or even *primarily* works of Marxology. Rather, I have considered works to be "secondary works on Marx," first, if that is how I use them in the body of the dissertation. For example, I only cite Foucault's *The Order of Things* for its characterization of the relation between Marxism and Nineteenth Century political economy; therefore it is listed as a secondary work on Marx. Second, books in the Marxist tradition are *generally* (there are some exceptions) included here, even if they are neither primarily Marxological, nor solely cited as such. The justification is that I have treated the Marxist works included here largely as attempts to elaborate upon or further develop Marx's own line of thinking.

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Vita

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