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## **Marxian Ontology, Today**

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Let us go straight to the heart of the matter, and propose that we read Marxian ontology from the standpoint of workers' struggles, the resistance of the multitude, and the insurgencies of the proletariat. From this angle, ontology means planting your feet on the ground. We could endlessly discuss, as philosophers do, what 'ontology' means – echoing the *Thesis on Feuerbach*, we will instead repeat that until now philosophers have thought about ontology as an idea of being but that today one must construct the ontology of revolutionary praxis. What then is this ontology we are laying claim to, and which draws its meaning and orientation from struggles? It is *the ontology of workers' history*, namely of that being which is constructed – always and continuously – by the labouring human being, by 'living labour', by the multitudinous subjectivation that produces and reproduces the world of life through cooperation. This is the framework in which Marxian ontology operates. It describes the world, recognising, on the one hand, the productive forces of labour, on the other, the forms and relations of production. And, from within this relationship between forces and relations, it both recognises and denounces a stupid and unjust order organised on the basis of exploitation in the domain of production and on hierarchy in the experience and exercise of power. Marxian ontology is constituted by and ceaselessly renewed by class struggle, by the material antagonism that distributes the consistencies of real being. Through these entanglements and clashes there emerges a landscape made up of productions of subjectivity and figures of emancipation that match the material forces that express them. Antagonism and class struggle are therefore not powers that inscribe themselves on a surface whose foundation is static: they are powers and movements of 'everything that is' and they mark it on a surface that is also a dynamic and subjectivising foundation – they are expressive powers of desiring multitudes. Without this Machiavellian and Spinozist image, it is impossible to understand Marxian ontology, or to grasp how class struggle can happen and unfold. From our point of view then, Marxian ontology is a

theory of class struggle founded on the subjectivation of 'living labour' – a constituent ontology rather than a dialectical ontology, be it an 'inverted' one. Inversion or reversal alone rarely produces effects that go beyond the unmasking of the ideology of the class adversary; and that dialectic, refusing as it does a subjectivising horizon of conflict and a constituent figure of the project of transition, advances a Ricardian objectivism in the theory of production and a transcendental/transhistorical viewpoint on valorisation. I remain wedded to that aspect of Marx's ontological approach that was incisively underscored, in the wake of Lukács, by Hans-Jürgen Krahl.

At this juncture, we can pose two questions. First: what is the ontological fabric of class struggle such as we can describe it *today*? Second: did Marxian ontology – as present in his historical writings, the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* – prefigure these later developments?

If we choose to insist on the centrality of class struggle to any definition of the ontology of the present we must underscore the transformations undergone by the structure of capitalism from the mid-nineteenth century to now. The concepts of labour and exploitation, and consequently the very nature of capital, have in fact experienced a significant mutation.

The first moment in our consideration of the present ontology of capital will thus be the analysis of the transformation of living labour and the clarification of how its productivity has been intensified in the growing cooperation that characterises the mode of production. If labour-power manifests itself in *Capital* as 'living labour' that augments its own productivity within simple and/or expanded cooperation, and then in the organisation of manufacture and large-scale industry; and if the capitalist organisation of labour reinforces cooperation, increasingly defining its character until it subsumes it as social activity – then, when we enter the 'cognitive' phase of capitalist development, that of the *General Intellect*, social and cooperative labour is no doubt enormously enhanced, immersed as it is in a world of communication networks and digital connections that criss-cross industrial assets, agricultural systems along with each and every economic form. Capital is valorised by cooperative flows in which muscles, languages, affects, codes and images are subsumed into the material process of production. And it is the neoliberal counter-revolution which – in the wake of the *trente*

*glorieuses* of post-World War II workers' struggles and the defeat of the 1970s – has brought us to this pass. Over this half-century, the spheres of capitalist production and society have been radically transformed by the extension of the primary sites of production from the factory to society. Automation has played the pivotal role in this transformation – not only from a political point of view (destroying the power of the working class and expelling workers from factories in the dominant parts of the planet) but also from a technical one (by intensifying the rhythms of production). In order to recover profitability, which could no longer be extracted from the factories, capital has put the social terrain to work, and the mode of production has become ever more closely entangled with forms of life. While industrial automation meant the production of ever more material goods, outside the robotised factories we now see the growth of ever more complex integrated productive services, linking together heavy technologies and fundamental sciences with industrial and human services. In a second phase, information becomes more important than automation – it is in fact information that distributes throughout society a transformation in the technical composition of living-labour that was previously fashioned within the factory.

Secondly, our attention will turn to the concept of exploitation, insisting on the change it has undergone as it turns into an extractive function of social valorisation.

We have described how the capitalist counter-offensive targeted the accumulation of resistances and revolts that took place over the 1960s and 70s. Now it is possible for us also to recognise the passage to the society of the *General Intellect* in terms of an increasing economic role for social production, which leads to a new phase in the relation between capital and labour – from Fordism to post-Fordism. While in the Fordist period, capitalist production was structured by disciplinary regimes and accumulation was centrally directed by profits generated from the planned cooperation of industrial labour, in post-Fordism – at a time when productive knowledge and the social capacities of cooperation are ever more widely diffused throughout the whole society – capital exploits the emergent forms of labour-power in a new fashion, by extracting social wealth produced in common and, in a way, by subsuming the entire social field. The new centrality of *extraction* thereby transforms the nature of *exploitation*. In particular, the quantities of surplus-labour and surplus-value, defined in

keeping with a temporal analytic, take on a new quality, meaning that exploitation must now be analysed according to different criteria. The Marxian concept of exploitation – focussed on the different ‘times’ of the working-day of the individual labourer – seems very distant now. When Marx pedagogically explains that in a regime of waged labour workers receive the wealth produced during the initial hours of the working day and the capitalist expropriates the value produced in the remaining hours, he establishes an intimate relation between exploitation and the organisation of production. Today instead these realities diverge and the distance between the two grows ever larger: finance abstractly considers productive subjects as a mass and extracts value at a distance, while productive subjectivities enjoy an ever-greater capacity to cooperate and to plan cooperation autonomously. Capitalist entrepreneurs no longer organise labour, nor do they forge new combinations and generate productive forms of cooperation, as Schumpeter had once theorised. They are now consumed by financial activities and their attention is drawn to stock-exchanges, dividends and market fluctuations.

This takes us to a third moment, in which we must consider the transformation of capital into a financial-extractive force. When finance emerges as a crucial component of the capitalist mode of production in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it constitutes a powerful supplement to industrial capital, helping to define the latter’s dominant role in the economy and over the whole social formation. Finance offered instruments of abstraction and centralisation that eased the passage from manufacture to the commanding role of large corporations and their monopolies, while it was also employed as a weapon in the arsenal of imperialist projects. As the twentieth century wore on, however, this relation was inverted, to the extent that today finance dominates industry, setting some of the fundamental conditions for production and exploitation. Within the rule of finance and its ever more complex instruments, capital accumulates above all through the *capture* and *extraction* of a value that appears as something found, a natural gift, *terra nullius*. Financial capital extracts value from the common, whether we are dealing with material values hidden in the earth or those germinating within society. Now, it is clear that the transition to the commanding role of financial capital can be explained by the formation of global markets and the decline of national industrial economies, marked by the recurrence of crises and the deepening of speculative operations, but its centre of gravity, which concerns the very definition of

finance, must be referred back to the mode of production, in the sense that finance functions as an apparatus of capture of social and natural values and of extraction of the common. Extraction follows in the tracks of the common. By contrast with industry, extraction develops on the basis of forms of wealth that in great part *pre-exist* capital investment. While the automobile is produced in the factory, oil and coal exist in the earth – though of course extraction is itself a process of production, refining and distribution. The distinction becomes clearer if we turn to social intelligence, social relations and the territories of sociality. While in the factory workers cooperate on the basis of frameworks and disciplines dictated by the capitalist here in society value is produced through social cooperation that is not directly organised by capital. Social cooperation is in this respect relatively autonomous. This all goes to underscore once again how much the capital-relation has been destabilised – in the face of the relative autonomy of cooperation finance appears as an extractive industry.

The totalisation of the world of work, the absorption of production into reproduction, the financial sublimation of value within the framework of the real subsumption of productive society into capital – this was famously the definitive theoretical conquest of the Frankfurt School. Whence, however – on the basis of what we've argued up to this point – the need to move 'beyond'.

To define this beyond means advancing on three terrains that we have begun to explore and disclosing their 'subjective' facets.

First of all, the terrain of work. This is where the cooperative association of labour-power redefines the concept of working class, revealing it as a multitudinous ensemble of labouring (working-class) singularities, as a multiplicity of immaterial (and/or material) powers. In cooperative associations, these singular powers virtually configure a plural recomposition of the labouring class – a recomposition that is criss-crossed by flows of subjectivation. We call this new figure of class 'multitude'.

Secondly, with regard to the conception of exploitation. To go beyond the alienation or reification of labour means making room for the effects of subjectivation in the relation between variable and fixed capital. Where exploitation targets the cognitive, social and

cooperative components of living labour there is a rupture in the dialectic of capture and appropriation of labour-value by capital. And alienated labour, appearing as the second nature of labour-power, is able in its turn to break the order of exploitation – at a second level of the latter’s operations. But we will return to this development later.

Thirdly, the new nature of capital and of its extractive mechanism is answered ontologically by the social dynamic of the *common*. Once the relations of discipline and control that characterise mass-work have broken down and its measure of value has collapsed, extractive expropriation is countered by the dimension of the common. At this point, we can draw a preliminary conclusion. In varying forms and degrees, social production has become ever more central both in the activity of production (employing social and scientific knowledges, cooperative frameworks or relations of care) and in the product (which conversely incorporates shared social components). Within the horizon of capital, as we’ve noted, these products appear as gifts, manna from heaven. But we must keep in mind that the very features of social production that constitute the key to the extraction and accumulation of wealth by finance also constitute the seeds and foundation of the social existence of revolt. Both sides of this ambivalence or tension between exploitation and resistance are contained in the increasingly abstract nature of social production. We are all familiar with Marx’s analysis of abstract labour as the key to understanding capitalist exchange-value. In many respects, the abstract nature of labour and the value it produces increase dramatically within social production. When workers interiorise knowledge, for instance, and develop it socially within cooperation, their labour and the value they produce is ever more abstract. But the greater abstraction of the process of production and valorisation – as it is implemented in languages, codes, the immaterial articulations of collective life, cooperation, affective elements, etc. – also offers an extraordinary potential of resistance and autonomy from capital. The abstraction that we are acknowledging here corresponds directly to the common which, as we have said, tends to be both the foundation and the result of contemporary production. And the common too comes to be qualified here in a twofold sense – namely as the substance of capitalist extraction and the potential basis of autonomy and resistance.

Following Marx's arguments, we can conceive this dual character by developing it in terms of a three-level logical process – from abstraction to social production, and from social production to subjectivity. First, abstraction. The economic relation between capital and labour, writes Marx: INSERT QUOTE

But Marx does not have a nostalgic view of this loss of 'art' on the part of the craftsman in the performances of his trade. The loss of a trade or an art is also a gain. 'Labour is not this or another labour', Marx goes on to say, 'but *labour pure and simple*, abstract labour, absolutely indifferent to any particular determination but capable of all determinations'. The abstraction of labour is not empty but entirely full – it is full, in particular, with the social character of production.

The progressive general capacities of labour – this is the second move – presuppose the social, which is to say common nature of production. Individual, specific labour is externally qualified as social labour, 'it is mediated by the social conditions of production within which the individual is active'. The increasing abstraction of productive processes thus rests on networks of social relations, on the social conditions that make production possible. It stands, in other words, on the foundation of the common, which includes the shared knowledges, cultural forms and circuits of cooperation that constitute our collective existence.

Marx's third move consists in putting this social basis in motion from the standpoint of subjectivity. Against the totality of capital stands a labour that is equally total and abstract. The fact that labour is abstract and social harbours a potential of subjectivation, albeit one that is often not realised.

[...]

From an ontological perspective, the concept of *capital* is given as a figure and product of *class struggle*. This means that the concept incorporates a relation that involves, in and against capital, the continual recomposition of development; capitalist command (constant capital) and the resistance of subjects put to work (variable capital, living labour) present themselves as asymmetrical and intransitive powers engaged in a

continuous conflict. What we witness here is a true dialectic, a dialectic shorn of *Aufhebung*, a dialectic that knows no teleology and which is kept constantly open by class struggle.

Allow me a brief pause here, an intermezzo of sorts. I think it is important at this juncture to recall the thought of Gramsci. In Gramsci, we find a concept of capital that is always open to class struggle. Gramsci's Machiavelli is not a rhetorical device aimed at translating the Leninist party into Italian, nor an analogical fiction intended to actualise a new proletarian Risorgimento. For decades, these metaphors were inculcated into the militants of the Italian Communist Party, thus debasing the image of Gramsci, together with that of the revolutionary process of the working class. On the contrary, it is by recovering the Machiavellian image, the one which sees the political as split in two, which looks upon it from below and from above as the entanglement of antagonistic forces – it is in this light that the concept of capital must be politically defined. 'The revolution against *Capital*', the Bolshevik revolution against Karl Marx that Gramsci affirmed in 1918 in *Il Grido del Popolo*, was a slogan targeted at the positivist interpretation of Marxism and its reformist use by the Italian Socialist Party, against the ideology of 'lorianesimo' (after the ideas of Achille Loria), namely against the superstition of economism – but it is also and above all the revelation of the 'rebellious content' of the economic fabric, of capital as that within which class struggle unfolds. Twenty years later, in 'Americanism and Fordism', the reading of the concept of capital as a frame wrested away and reconstructed by class struggle will corroborate the intuition first voiced in *Il Grido del Popolo*. It is perhaps unnecessary to highlight here that the ontology of Marx's historical writings corresponds entirely to this Machiavellian and Gramscian definition of capital.

We now need to answer the second question that was posed at the outset. Namely whether the ontology of *Capital* prefigured these developments of Marxian theory. The reply cannot but be a positive one. It is obvious from what we have been saying up till now that Marxian ontology presents itself as an ontology of the power of labour, with no break between the early *Manuscripts* and the final articles on Wagner. Particular importance needs to be accorded here to the *Grundrisse*, because they are not just preparatory notebooks for *Capital*, but the text in which Marx's philosophical and

economic writings finds their highest synthesis, while they also weave the historical writings into their fabric. An ontology of power and not just production, a Spinozist and not just a materialist ontology. It suffices here to refer you to the final chapter on 'metaphysics and production' of Franck Fischbach's book *La production des hommes. Marx avec Spinoza* [The Production of Human Beings: Marx with Spinoza].

The other central and enduring element of Marxian thought – an element strongly emphasised by Western Marxism, from Lukács to the Frankfurt School – is Marx's insight into the increasing superimposition of production and reproduction. Little by little, reproductive processes are included in productive ones. Against classical economics, for which reproduction is a consequence and effect of production, and essentially of consumption, Marxian ontology opens onto the inclusion of reproduction into production – as well as the repetition of the antagonism between the two. It is from this point of view that we can discern the biopolitical point of view within Marxian ontology.

The third element that needs to be taken into account, in the continuity of Marxian thought, in its ontology, is the constructive and constituent anthropological dimension that invests the capital relation and is specified in the question of technics. This problem has never been as central to any Marxian reading as it is today, when it evokes the political theme of subversion in the age of the *General Intellect*. It is not enough to underscore that in Marx this theme is clearly foregrounded in the *Grundrisse*, it must be recovered as a revolutionary theme in a society where intelligence at work constitutes the centre of the productive process. Here the theme of the liberation of humans from labour, on the basis of the transformation of labour, emerges with tremendous force. The theme 'appropriation of fixed capital' by 'living labour' enjoys a central place in Marxian ontology, along with the productivity of antagonism and the overturning of the alienated condition into a productive 'second nature'. The appropriation of fixed capital by living labour – this theme is not a metaphor, it is alive in the pages of *Capital*. Marx in fact begins by showing how the mere placement of the worker before the (command over) the means of production modifies not just his productive capacity, but his figure, his nature, his ontology. From this point of view the Marxian narrative of the passage from 'manufacture' to 'large-scale' industry is a *locus classicus*. In manufacture, the

division of labour is still governed by a 'subjective' principle – meaning that the worker has appropriated the productive process after the productive process was adapted to the worker; while instead in large-scale industry the division of labour is 'objective', since the subjective/craft use of the machine is eliminated and machinery constitutes itself against man; the machine comes forward as the worker's competitor and antagonist, even reducing him to the status of working animal. And yet in Marx there is also a different insight. He recognises that the worker and the instrument of labour are also configured as a hybrid construction and that the conditions of the productive process largely constitute the worker's conditions of life, his 'form of life'. The concept of productivity of labour implies a very close and dynamic connection between variable and fixed capital, while theoretical discoveries, as Marx suggests, are incorporated into the productive process through the experience of the worker.

In a moment, we will conclude our argument by touching on how Marx himself intuits, in *Capital*, the appropriation of fixed capital by the producer. But now let us highlight how Marx's analysis in *Capital* remains subtended by the arguments of the *Grundrisse*, namely by the theorisation of the *General Intellect* as the matter and subject of the productive process. That discovery led him to show the extent to which cognitive matter was central to production and how the very concept of fixed capital was transformed by it. When Marx proclaims that fixed capital, which in *Capital* is usually understood as a complex of machines, has become 'man himself', he foreshadows the development of capital in our time. Though fixed capital is the product of labour and nothing but labour appropriated by capital; though the accumulation of scientific activity and the productivity of what Marx calls the 'social intellect' are incorporated into machines under the control of capital; and though, lastly, capital freely appropriates all of this – at a certain point of capitalist development living labour begins to exercise the power of inverting this relation. Living labour begins to show its primacy over capital and the capitalist management of social production, even when it cannot necessarily stand outside that process. In other words, when it becomes an ever-ampler social power, living labour operates as an increasingly independent activity, outside the disciplinary structures commanded by capital – not only as labour-power but also, in a more general way, as vital activity. On the one hand, past human activity and intelligence are accumulated, crystallised as fixed capital, but on the other, inverting the flow, living

human beings are capable of reabsorbing capital into themselves and their social life. Fixed capital is 'man himself' in both senses.

Here the appropriation of fixed capital is no longer a metaphor but becomes a *dispositif* that class struggle can take up and which makes itself felt as a political programme. Capital is no longer, in this case, a relation that objectively includes the producer, forcibly imposing its domination upon him; rather, the capitalist relation now includes a final contradiction – that of a producer, of a class of producers, which has, be it partially or totally, but in any instance effectively, dispossessed capital of the means of production, asserting itself as a hegemonic subject. The analogy with the emergence of the Third Estate within the structures of the *ancien régime* is carried out by Marx in the historicisation of the capital-relation, and it obviously presents itself in an explosive, revolutionary way.

To conclude, Marxian ontology displays at least two aspects. The first is represented by the development of labour-power in its radical productive capacity, in its full and bodily abstraction, which determines the evolution of capital and imposes upon it a progressive character; this is an ontology that takes the figure of a *deposit* of dead labour, a common that is fixed, stratified, organised as existing wealth and the command over it. But this ontology has a second face, the one represented by living labour, class struggle, a continuous drive to break capitalist development, which takes the guise of *virtuality* and the power of liberation from work. This relation implies two opposing teleologies – the one that corresponds to the ontology/deposit of dead labour and the one that corresponds to the ontology/power of class struggle. The common presents itself in two forms: as *deposit* and *telos*, as *deposit* of dead labour and as *telos* of living labour.

**Translated by Alberto Toscano**