

## ALLEGORIES OF THE INVISIBLE. OR, HOW TO ESTRANGE ECONOMY (THEOLOGICALLY)?

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**Abstract:** The paper tries to once again bring into play the classical ideas of the Marxian critique of political economy and to demonstrate how these ideas can be reactivated by an injection of theology. Special attention will be dedicated to the theologically intensified notion of *alienation*, treated not only as a subject but also as a method of criticism. The aim of such an estranging method is to make visible the “transcendental plane” of the capitalist historical a priori. This will be done through the production of *allegories*, that is figurations of the infinite movement of the capitalist totality. Starting with a critique of the disenchanted Euhemerism of Hardt and Negri, who want to demythologise political economy as nothing but relations between people, I attempt to show the limits of their approach, by exposing the constitution of capital as the creation of an inverted reality. In this process, hypostasis of human labour (i.e. capital) gets the upper hand over human beings, not only in imagination, but also in reality, making a clear-cut distinction between real and imagined entities questionable. Through the analysis of the focal points of this process, I will attempt to demonstrate a complex interplay of subsequent disenchantments and miraculations, which establish capital as something more than human, while simultaneously naturalising its phantasmic becoming as the very core of the reality principle. Alienation as method tries to break the simultaneity of miraculation/dischantment by dividing apparently unitary semblance – *fetish* – into distinct and potentially conflicted layers. Potential for this conflict is produced by two estrangement effects. Firstly, by juxtaposing a finite human subject with the infinite process of capital. Secondly, by thinking of conversion, which – becoming the highest point of alienation – could enable the human being to establish itself as an autonomous subject against the gods of this world and its own worldly self.

**Keywords:** political economy, theology, fetishism, enstrangement effects, allegory

## I EXPOSITION

### Political economy and the invisible

“We need to stop confusing politics with theology”, write Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, beginning the last part of their trilogy with “a repudiation of an apocalyptic tone adopted recently in philosophy” (Hardt and Negri 2009, 5). According to the authors of *Commonwealth*, many critiques of capitalism resemble “those medieval European renditions of hell: people burning in a river of fire, others being torn limb from limb, and in the centre a great devil engorging their bodies whole” (Hardt and Negri 2009, 3). But, Negri and Hardt argue, there is no great Satan. We are dealing with the powers of capital and law, both entirely of this world. What is needed is not political theology (or demonology), but rather something they call Euhemerism. Just like the ancient critic Euhemerus had explained that myths about gods are nothing but exaggerated narratives about divinised kings, a new political Euhemerism should demonstrate that what seems to be transcendent, otherworldly Power is in reality *nothing but* relations between people.

The present research shares Hardt and Negri’s conviction that in order to understand the powers that be of our time, we have to engage in a critical enquiry into the entanglement of socio-economic-political relations, which the Marxian tradition used to call political economy. The notion of critique here should be understood in its strict sense, i.e. as an exposition of the *a priori* conditions of experience and appearance. These *historical a priori* conditions (or rather incessant conditioning) constitute a transcendental plane, which “occupies a position not wholly in the immediate, immanent facts of experience but not wholly outside them either” (Hardt and Negri 2009, 6).

According to the Italian-American philosophical duo, the capitalist transcendental plane, which shapes the conditions of the possibility of social life, is established in and through our everyday practices. And these practices are mundane, micrological, capillary etc. However, Hardt and Negri add another adjective, which should make us think twice before we fully embrace their proposal to get rid of all theology in analysing capitalism. They say that the socio-economic powers conditioning our experience are *invisible*. On the one hand power structures are so deeply embedded in our everyday lives, in the movements of our bodies, in our consciousness and unconsciousness, in our subjective and infra-subjective behaviour – every time we go to work, every time we go shopping – that they have become unperceivable. On the other hand, the movement of an abstract self-valorising value incessantly circulating at enormous speed in the heavens of financialised speculative capitalism seems to be

ungraspable by a finite human mind. As if capital was at the same time too small and too big to be perceived.

## Alienation as method

What is needed here is a conceptual and figurative device which could make the transcendental plane of capital – in the immediacy and abstractness of which we are all immersed – visible. In order to construct such a device I would like to turn to the somehow dusty and outmoded notion of *alienation*. It will not only be the object of our study but also its method. Alienation as method is aimed at producing *estrangement effects*, suddenly exposing the normal world, where everything is as it is, as something much more enchanted than we tend to think. That is why theology – that is a science which deals with the invisible – might be of some use for the analysis of capital.

Estrangement effects created by a juxtaposition of theological imagery with political economy could enable us to step out of an undifferentiated movement, to grasp an invisible monster, which has no measurements and escapes definitions – to finally grasp it as a historical *a priori* which is always almost present as the unrepresentable condition of all appearances. Or, to use the language of Paul of Tarsus: it could help to expose the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the invisible atmosphere, the very air we are breathing as an alien power which stands against us (see: Ephesians 2:2, Colossians 2:14).

What is the position of a human subject (say, a reader or the author of this text) in this process of estrangement? What is his position towards the protagonists of our moral play: capital, the capitalist and the worker?

For what else is he if not the brother of the characters, caught in the spontaneous myths of ideology, in its illusions and privileged forms, as much as they are? If he is kept at a distance from the play itself, it is not to spare him or set him apart as a Judge – on the contrary, it is to take him and enlist him in this apparent distance, in this “estrangement” – to make him into this distance itself, the distance which is simply an active and living critique (Althusser, 1962).

Critique brings the process to a stand-still. When the infinite movement suddenly stops, exposed as something alien, a certain distance is produced. Powers – confronting me from the outside as the alienated fruit of my own work, and from the inside as “another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner” (Romans

7:23)<sup>1</sup> – these powers could be therefore grasped as something non-identical with me. Even though they do co-constitute the very fabric of myself and the actual conditions of the process of subjectification, I can alienate myself from them. The human subject abstracts itself from the totalising *socius* and from its own self in the gesture of self-alienation, coming to a Paulinian conclusion that: “if I do not will, this I do, it is no longer I that work it out, but sin that dwells in me” (Romans 7: 17). Alienation as a method could make us step out from the Heraclitean river of capital’s becoming, and achieve at least partial, conceptual mastery over its totality.

### Blockage of figuration

Putting an infinite process into definitions, especially if chaos and fragmentation seem to be its very principles, seems ridiculous. The finite human subject and its subjective opinion appears to be comically incommensurable with capital’s measureless becoming. Much of contemporary thought relies on this incommensurability, ridiculing any attempt to master this *chaosmos*. Dominant *doxa* claims that the will to construct a mental totalisation must lead to totalitarian theory and, ultimately, to totalitarian practice. Or at best it has to remain nothing more than pathetic *hubris*: the pride of limited human reason confronted with powers infinitely exceeding it.

Let there be no misunderstanding. Those who advocate the superiority of these processes are definitely right; nonnegotiable facts stand behind them. Nevertheless, we will risk the stupidity of reasoning, which tries to grasp the air surrounding us and is always left empty-handed.

Here we are confronted with the problem of invisibility once again. It can be traced back to the text which shaped popular beliefs on classical economy: Adam Smith’s famous fragment on “the invisible hand” (Smith 1976, 456). While analysing this expression it is important to give equal value to both elements of this figurative concept. That is, to take into consideration both the idea of the rational providence evoked by the action of the “hand” – and its “invisibility”. The order, the rational pattern is there, however it remains ungraspable by the human eye and incomprehensible for the human reason of an actor embedded in economic reality; be it a worker, a merchant or a political sovereign. As Michel Foucault (Foucault 2008, 278–286) rightly noted in his reading of this text, non-transparency, or the objective blindness of agents engaged in economic action is constitutive for the rationality of the process. Human subjects act rationally if they are trying to predict ultimately

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1 All quotations from the Bible are taken from the New International Version.

unpredictable movements of the mighty hand. In contrast, any attempts to contradict the unfathomable verdicts of the economic reason, any attempts to intervene in the operations of the market, disturb the rational course of events – must lead to catastrophe. The human subject, be it individual or social, cannot posit itself on the level of the sovereign who sees the process and thus is able to shape its *a priori* conditions. Or at least that is what the economic *Biblia pauperum* teaches us.

However, it would be overhasty to state, as Foucault does, that imposition of the economic reason makes the very idea of totality impossible, establishing economy as a fully immanent, atheistic domain, where there is no place for invisible Providence<sup>2</sup>. Totality is there, constituting the interrelation of independent agents, and guaranteeing harmonious coincidence. Thanks to this strange coincidence the pursuit of the maximisation of an individual profit is claimed to lead necessarily to general benefit and a just, rational allocation of resources (see Foucault 2005; Marx 1990, 280; Vogl 2015). The totality exists precisely as invisible. It remains at the threshold of the subject's consciousness. As when we wake up every morning disquieted, trying to remind ourselves in vain of what it was that we did not do yesterday.

### Allegories of totality

We have said that the concept-image of the invisible hand keeps the totality an almost-present, tacit precondition and the unsurpassable horizon of reasoning. It cannot step-over the point of figuration and conceptualisation, after which it could become an object of critique. A strange mixture of visible and invisible, sensuous and super-sensuous confronts us not only on the macro-level of totality, but also on the micro-level where we meet the cellular form of capitalist society – commodity. Commodity appears as something unitary: an unbreakable atom of socio-economic physics. Capitalist fetishism creates something that Marx calls “an indissoluble fusion” (Marx 1990, 983) of the sensuous and the super-sensuous. And this fusion proves to be strangely resistant to analysis.

The social whole does not give itself to our cognition in any transparent symbol. There is no object of experience which could work as its *pars totalis*, a monad, in which totality is simply present. A statement that tries to pin down totality cannot be anything more than an example: a shadow, which precedes the body, a figure, which comes before the real

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2 To make Foucault's strong claim more questionable one could recall the strange similarity of the supposedly atheist Smithian invisible hand described in Foucault's *Birth of Biopolitics* to the beatific vision of the divine, cosmic necessity to which the Stoic sage has to adjust himself, which we encounter in his *Hermeneutics of the Subject* (Foucault 2008, 283–285). This of course tells us something not only about Adam Smith or Seneca, but also about Foucault's own position, after the fall of the revolutionary wave of the sixties.

thing (Hebrews 1:10, see also de Lubac 1988). As Marx warns us, whoever simply identifies capital with a material, visible thing, falls into fetishism. Fetish is no-thing (1 Corinthians 10:19–20), even if it uses a material body as its bearer. That is why, instead of seeing totality in any particular, concrete symbol we need to satisfy ourselves with what Paul of Tarsus baptised as *allegories* (Galatians 4:24–26). Allegories, in contrast to symbols, are necessarily partial and incomplete (Benjamin 2003, Jameson 2008). The allegorical gaze always requires an interpretative or political act: a decision on the part of the subject, be it individual or collective. The subject has to recognise a figure in a cloud, to draw the lines between dispersed dots in order to see the movement of totality in a concrete moment for the first time.

### The object of analysis: the production process

This might all sound too poetic. However, as Bertolt Brecht teaches us, in certain circumstances an intensified poetical estrangement effect can work as an instrument of scientific cognisance. What I want to prove in my paper is that this figurative operation we call estrangement can be treated as an actual method of Marxian *analysis*, in its literal sense. Analysis dissects and discerns. What is, what gets dissected in *Capital*? I would like to argue that it is firstly and most importantly *fetish*, that is, as we have said, a very peculiar indissoluble amalgamate of the sensuous and the super-sensuous.

The vast majority of commentators recalls the concept of fetish solely in the context of the opening chapters of *Das Kapital*, where Marx deals with so called “simple circulation”. Thus fetishism is usually analysed as a problem emerging in the sphere of exchange and eventually, consumption (with important consequences for the reconstruction of Marxian thought). In my reading I try to take into consideration fetishist “equivocation”, a phantasmic becoming, which takes place not only in exchange, but also at the heart of the *production* process.

Thanks to such an analysis, rather than being confronted with a unitary block of totality on the one hand and the unbreakable atom of commodity on the other, we could see them as incoherent and temporary production processes. What is more, under an estranging gaze the production process itself falls apart, exposing the coincidence of two very different realities: *the labour process* and *the valorisation process*. In the actual reality (or rather: in the reality as conditioned by capitalist *a priori* conditioning) these two processes merge, appearing as a unitary semblance: fetish. The analysis of fetishes tries to dissolve it, by breaking it into distinct and potentially – but only potentially – conflicted layers. The task of a critique of

fetishes is to alienate the poles, which constitute this semblance, to polarise them and to turn one against the other.

Inside the fetishist visual field social objects and subjects are presented as something *unitary*: as “commodity”, “labour” or “capital” pure and simple. Things and actions (the commodity on a supermarket shelf, the act of buying this commodity for money, the act of earning this money for producing other commodities) appear “at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing”. Only “analysis” exposes it as something “abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (Marx 1990, 163). The analysis of fetishes tries to arrest the indivisible movement of the capitalisation of labour, in order to dissect it and expose its strangely twofold character. To understand how this process works, it is necessary to make it stand still, as if by using a slow-motion camera, separating moments and movements, which in capitalist reality exist in the eternal present of *creatio continua* of incessant production-distribution-exchange-consumption-production. The method applied here tries to produce such a chemical solution which will make elements of fetishist “indissoluble amalgamation” precipitate.

## II ANALYSIS OF PRODUCTION

### Inversion, or why is disenchanting critique not enough?

These are, however, still promises without sufficient grounding. Let us come back to Hardt and Negri to see better – in contrast to their optimistic, secular, enlightened Euhemerism – how theological estrangement works. Hardt and Negri’s attack on political theology recalls the rhetorical pathos of young Marx’s critique of religion (stop looking for sovereignty in the heavens and recognise the structures of power on earth!). The aim of such a critique is to present things as they really are. Young Marx’s “irreligious criticism” is based on an assumption that “*Man makes religion, religion does not make man*” (Marx 1992, 244). Religious inversion, which pictures the producer (man) as conditioned by his product (god) is something in the imagination only, but in truth and reality nothing.

For young Marx and his mentor, Ludwig Feuerbach, the main subject of criticism, the arch-enemy, who managed to prolong the existence of religion by dressing it up as philosophy was, of course, G.W.F. Hegel. According to the young radicals, Hegel, a theologian undercover, a bookish idealist, an apologist of the Prussian authoritarian state, in an all too Christian manner replaced the concrete, sensual, living human subjectivity, a man of flesh and blood, a man with a body (and a stomach!) with a theoretical, abstract hypostasis called the Idea. In his critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* Marx condemns the Hegelian Idea

– the supposedly self-positioning Subject – as nothing but an inversion of real relations. He finds Hegel guilty of a “logical, pantheistic mysticism” (Marx 1992, 61), which conceives human beings to be mere moments of the process of the actualisation of the Idea. Describing how social positions really are distributed in the modern state and how the division of labour operates in modern society, young Marx writes:

The real relationship is “that the assignment of the material of the state to any given individual is mediated by circumstances, his caprice and his personal choice of his station in life”. This fact, this real relationship is described by speculative philosophy as appearance, as phenomenon. [...] The family and civil society are the preconditions of the state; they are the true agents; but in speculative philosophy it is the reverse. When the Idea is subjectivized the real subjects – civil society, the family, “circumstances, caprice etc.” – are all transformed into unreal, objective moments of the Idea [...] the condition is posited as the conditioned, the determinant as the determined, the producer as the product (Marx 1992, 60–63).

We find here a sharp contrast between “the real” and its inversion in speculation. Inside this critical framework capital cannot be conceptualised otherwise, than as a merely imaginative hypostasis of the actions of individuals and their families; as nothing but a semblance.

But, for some reason, workers find this illusion real enough to make them work. How does capital succeed in changing individuals into *nothing but* living elements of a collective machine producing profit? Is capital a real thing or a phantasmagoria? If we could really speak of a rupture between the rhetoric of the young and the mature Marx, it does not happen with the abandonment of the “religious myth” of alienation. “Rupture” (or rather the reconfiguration of the elements of thought, a regrouping forced by the blockage encountered) is produced by the attempt to conceptualise the strangely sensuous-super-sensuous, real-phantasmagorical character of capital. The problem of alienation was persistently and stubbornly present in the writings of Marx (see Marx 1990, 989–990, 1002–1003)<sup>3</sup>. As we will see, for the mature Marx alienation is above all a matter of the *results of production* under a specific social formation. Criticism of religion, defined as the fundament of all criticism in his early writings, remains. But in the *Grundrisse* and *Das Kapital* it does not operate in the mode of a Euhemerist denunciation of the misty creations of religion as merely inexistent hypostases. “Irreligion” returns as a practical critique of fetishes. Capital as fetish, far from being something in the imagination only, is immersed in material practices and produces real effects. It organises the division of the social field and the division of social labour:

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3 In these writings Marx explicitly discusses religious alienation in the context of the capitalist relations of production, using both the terms “alienation” (*Entfremdung*) and “fetish”.

Capital is the lifeblood that flows through/in the body politic of all those societies we call capitalists [...]. It is thanks to this flow that we, who live under capitalism, acquire our daily bread, as well as our houses, cars, cell phones, shirts, shoes and all the other goods we need to support our daily life. By way of these flows the wealth is created from which the many services that support, entertain, educate, resuscitate or cleanse us are provided. By taxing this flow states augment their power, their military might and their capacity to ensure an adequate standard of life for their citizens. Interrupt, slow down or, even worse, suspend the flow and we encounter a crisis of capitalism in which daily life can no longer go on in the style to which we have become accustomed (Harvey 2010, vi).

Participation in and dependence on capital flows can be more or less direct. Our income which gives us access to the means of subsistence and makes our existence possible does not have to be acquired in the form of the wage. It can be the gain of a speculator, the pension of a pensioner, the benefit of a benefiter or the share of income transferred from a wage-labourer to his wife for her reproductive labour. In any case, it seems that the means of subsistence *ultimately* comes from a single source – capital. It *appears* – and here I ask the reader to keep in mind the uncertainty of this word – that in this world capital is the breathable air, the invisible being in which human beings live and move and have their being.

What will the markets say about this? Are the markets happy with the new government? The hypostases of our own activity, the products of our own labour appear as a natural-divine precondition of labour, as a quasi-cause of the social process and as a self-begotten being. In the *Realprozess* of capital, like in the movement of the Hegelian Idea, capital posits and presents itself as a presupposition of labour, changing its precondition into something conditioned. Real, concrete, finite human beings are subsumed under capital to serve the infinite process of valorisation of abstract value, which has become the final goal of production. Human life is contingent, and becomes more and more precarious, whereas abstract markets attain ontological solidity. Capital posits the laws of its own reproduction as necessary, whereas the epiphenomenal existence of this or that particular human individual becomes perfectly unnecessary in the very moment that it ceases to play the role of a bearer of the valorisation process. The phantasy, which conceives the human subject to be “a moment of the inner imaginary activity” (Marx 1992, 62) of the Capital-Idea – this phantasy is made real in the actual production process whenever capital succeeds in turning living labour into a moment of its own becoming. The means of production, the products of labour, represented and personified by the capitalist, rule over living labour as an *alien power*. This produces an inverted world, which cannot be fathomed by flat, two-dimensional, disenchanted Euhemerist discourses.

## Sphere of tension: semblance/appearance

Before we can penetrate this strange world (where dancing tables animated by the movement of exchange go about their own business and dead labour spiritualised as capital employs and commands living labour), we have to devote some time to the exegesis of the opening sentence of *Capital*. Or, to be more precise, to the exegesis of a single notion used in this sentence. A notion, which plays a crucial role in understanding the Marxian idea of sensuous–super-sensuous social objectivity.

Marx begins his *opus magnum* with the following statement: “The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears [*erscheint*] as an »immense collection of commodities«; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form” (Marx 1990, 125). Marx picks his words very carefully here, and for good reason. He does not say that wealth simply *is* an immense collection of commodities. He says that under capitalism things *appear* as commodities. The meaning of the word *Erscheinung* used in this sentence is usually explained as “a necessary mode of expression” or “objective appearance”. It is often compared and contrasted with another closely connected, and at times overlapping term – *Schein*, which in this context is translated as “semblance” or “illusion” (see Bellofiore 2009). In the writings of the mature Marx there is an incessant ambivalence, a constant oscillation between *Schein* and *Erscheinung*, between *appearance* and *semblance*: between capital understood as an objective and necessary form of social mediation, and capital understood as something illusory, lacking any power, apart from the power extracted and expropriated from living labour. The same ambiguity lies at the heart of the Marxian idea of human subjectivity. The meaning of “the subject” in *Das Kapital* is notoriously undetermined and unstable. It is simultaneously a surface effect of the underlying forces of capital and a genuine power of the self-determination latently present in the “residual subjectivity” (Arthur 2004, 53) of workers resisting and fighting capital.

I will try to prove that this ambiguity is not a matter of Marx’s inability to distinguish clearly between the different meanings of words, but rather an expression of real ambivalences inherent to a specific social process. “Appearance” recurs in innumerable passages of *Capital* in the most decisive moments. It is used not only when Marx defines the “elementary form” of capitalist society (i.e. commodity) but also when he speaks of capitalist production, which transforms dead labour into capital. Under capitalism things appear as commodities, living labour predominantly acquires the form of wage-labour and the means of production present themselves as being capital by nature. Thus, a specific social relation appears as something intrinsic to the thing-hood [*dingliche Qualität*] of a thing,

Under certain circumstances a chair with four legs and a velvet covering may be used as a *throne*. But the same chair, a thing for sitting on, does not become a throne by virtue of its use-value. The most essential factor in the labour process is the worker himself, and in antiquity the worker was a slave. But this does not imply that the worker is a *slave* by nature [...] any more than spindles and cotton are *capital* by nature just because they are consumed nowadays by the wage-labourer in the labour process. The folly of identifying a specific *social relation of production* with the thing-like [*dingliche*] qualities of certain articles simply because it represents itself in terms of certain articles is what strikes us most forcibly when we open any textbook on economics and see on the first page how the elements of the process of production, reduced to their basic form, turn out to be land, *capital* and labour. One might just as well say that they were *landed property*, knives, scissors, spindles, cotton, grain, in short, the *materials* and *means of labour*, and *wage-labour* (Marx 1990, 998, original emphasis).

This “equivocation”, which produces an apparently indissoluble fusion of historically specific social forms and things (scissors-capital-spindles-wage-labour-grain-landed-property) is precisely what Marx calls fetishism. If it was only a matter of some logical error made by economists due to their lack of information or diligence it could easily be corrected simply by providing more information or by introducing a more adequate scientific paradigm. The problem is that “this illusion is one that springs out from the very nature of capitalist production itself” (Marx 1990, 998). If it is a folly, it is a generalised social folly. Fetishist appearance does not posit itself merely in the consciousness or imagination of actors on the market, but becomes the *medium of appearance* of all subjects and objects – constantly turning one into the other. It becomes a socially valid form of mediation: an objective thought form. This form of mediation is not established by a kind of social contract (as when all the participants consciously agree to treat a certain thing as a symbol of wealth). Rather it is posited through constant repetition. That is: in the actual acts of exchange and production. Value and capital are social practices. If capitalism is a religion it is above all else a cultic religion, a religion of everyday life, which makes the human subject kneel down, in following everybody around, while “faith” follows. And even if one does not believe fully in capitalist dogmas or is not fully conscious of them, one has to participate in the rituals of capitalist exchange and production in order to get access to goods and services. One has to take part, directly or indirectly, in the generation and realisation of value to get the means of subsistence.

This socially objective basis of fetishism is produced and reproduced not only in market exchange, when the abstract quality of exchangeability is attributed to materially different commodities, but also in the actual process of capitalist production. The capitalist buys commodities on the market, in order to employ them in production. He buys the means

of production, raw materials, machines and “labour”<sup>4</sup>. His money is now transformed into these commodities, they all belong to him and now they *represent (vorstell)* his capital. The means of production appears as capital, since it is in fact put to work producing profit for the capitalist. Abstract capital represents itself in concrete use-values. It incorporates living labour, acquiring a body that can work for it. For an appointed time this body belongs to the capitalist just as all the other elements, just as the process itself, and just as the results of this process.

As Marx tirelessly repeats: in capitalism *it is capital that employs and commands labour— not the other way around*. The capitalist and his supervisors subjects who are in charge of the production process have the ability to command labour, by the sole (social) virtue of owning and representing capital. “Even this relation in its simplicity is a personification of things and a reification of persons. [...] the objective conditions of labour, do not appear as subsumed under the worker; rather, he appears as subsumed under them” (Marx 1990, 1054). In capitalism it appears – with the whole power of socially objective appearance – that it is capital that *gives jobs to the worker*. It seems that objects (the means of production) by their very nature have the ability to employ and control living labour. Capital is effectively posited as a necessary form of the appearance of things, processes and human agents.

## Breaking the process 1: labour and valorisation

Fetishist equivocation identifies a specific social form (an arrangement constituted of the relation between wage-labour and capital) with its thinghood (the fact that it exists as a means of production, as stuff for making other stuff). Marx tries to separate this arrangement by distinguishing *the labour process* from *the valorisation process*. The labour process transforms its material into something socially useful: concrete labour produces concrete use-values which form social wealth. The valorisation process creates abstract value, expressed in money. People under different social regimes of production have always worked to produce products, which will be *socially*<sup>5</sup> useful for them, whereas in capitalism workers work under the control of the capitalist to produce commodities, in order to valorise value and to generate profit for the capitalist. The labour process is the trans-historical condition of the

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4 The unitary notion of “labour” is also a fetishist appearance. Yet an analysis of the crucial doubling inside this notion – a doubling that makes possible the movement of differentiation and identification, which constitutes surplus-value, and thus capital – is outside of the scope of this paper.

5 We should not forget that for Marx use-value is neither simply “natural”, nor does the labour process take place in the realm of pure nature, since its product is always pre-determined by human needs/desires, which are themselves historical creations/social products, see Marx 1990, 287.

metabolism of human beings and nature. The valorisation process is a social form, which has become dominant under capitalism.

The labour process as such is “independent of every form [...], or rather common to all forms of society in which human beings live” (Marx 1990, 290). The notion of the labour process is thus a trans-historical, theoretical *generalisation*<sup>6</sup>. It cannot appear directly in a pure state, because it is always already immersed in a definite set of the social relations of production, being only a moment of a historically specific whole. Thus it necessarily presents itself in specific, historically determined social forms of appearance, which are the modes of its existence. The capitalist valorisation (in production)<sup>7</sup> is also materialised in a particular labour process. Although for value it is a matter of indifference if the surplus is generated by the production of flowers or guns, the abstract value in the production process has to be valorised in and through *a* concrete form of labour – thorough dressmaking, computer programming, spinning etc.

Since labour creates value solely in a particular useful form, and since every specific useful kind of labour requires material and means of labour which possess a specific use value, [...] the labour can only be absorbed in so far as capital takes on the shape of the specific means of production required for particular labour processes, and only in this shape can capital absorb living labour. Here, therefore, one sees why the material elements of the labour process are seen as capital on account of their material characteristics by the capitalist, the worker and the political economist, the last-mentioned being capable of thinking of the labour process only as a labour process appropriated by capital. One also sees why the political economist is incapable of separating their material existence, as simply factors of the labour process, from the social quality attaching to them, which makes them into capital. He cannot do this because in reality the same identical labour process which the means of production serve through their material characteristics as mere means of subsistence of labour, *converts* those means of production into mere means for the absorption of labour. The worker makes use of the means of production in the labour process, considered in *isolation*. But in the labour process which is at the same time a capitalist production process the means of production make use of the worker, with the result that labour appears only as a means whereby a certain amount of value, hence a certain amount of objectified labour, absorbs living labour in order to preserve and

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6 Such a general notion is of course related to but not identical with *real abstraction*, which has become effective under specific historical conditions. Real abstraction of “abstract labour” is not simply a trans-historical generalisation, but a real (cognitive and material) process of abstracting from the concrete, useful character of particular type of labour in capitalist exchange and production.

7 We have to restrain ourselves from analysing processes in which abstract capital appears as not mediated by any direct relation to material objects. Analysis of the “autoerotic” relation of Money to More Money (M–M') in finance and the way in which finance falls back upon production is a matter of the highest importance, requiring further investigation.

increase itself. Thus the labour process appears as a process of the self-valorisation of objectified labour by means of living labour (Marx 2015)<sup>8</sup>.

Marx, takes pains to analytically distinguish (“isolate”) the labour process from the valorisation process, by showing that the valorising process is a historical and thus not absolutely necessary form acquired by the labour process. In production, the valorisation process has to be embodied by a concrete labour process. But the reverse does not hold.

For the spinning process as such, for example, it is a matter of indifference that the cotton and the spindles represent the money of the capitalist, hence – capital, that the money expended is determined as capital. Cotton and spindles become the material and means of labour in the hands of the working spinner alone, and they become these things because he spins, not because he turns cotton belonging to another person into yarn for the same person by spinning with a spindle belonging to the same person (Marx 2015).

The labour process does not have to acquire the capitalist form in order to produce use-values: it is possible to recall or imagine that labour is done under other social regimes than capitalist valorisation. The capitalist form is neither eternal nor absolute. This enables us to abstract the trans-historical *fundamentum* of the labour process from capitalist reality.

What is more, the distinction between the labour process and the valorisation process exposes the inversion that I have tried to describe in previous sections. We can think of historical examples of societies in which social reproduction was *not* subordinated to the infinite production of abstract value. We can even recall such societies in which the imperative of the ever-increasing production of material wealth was not self-evident. In such societies “[...] the typical reaction to economic good times, even among urban craftspeople and most of the protobourgeoisie, was to take more days off” (Graeber 2012, 302). Many workers, having the opportunity to work more, preferred instead to celebrate what they called Saint Monday (see also Thompson 1993). By comparing our society to the communities in which it was by no means obvious to choose more money over more free time we could produce an estranging distance towards our presence.

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8 Here I use Ben Fowkes’ translation of Marx’s *Results of the Direct Production Process* available here: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1864/economic/>, since it is more precise than the one that can be found in Marx 1990, p 1054.

## Fetishist production

In the actual process of capitalist production, however, the incessant “conversion” of the means of production utilised and controlled by living labour into means for controlling and exploiting living labour, make the two processes merge, creating an indissoluble amalgamate. Concrete labour (here: spinning) uses specific raw materials (cotton) and means of production (spindles) to produce concrete products (yarn); a use-value which contributes to social wealth. If we take the standpoint of the *pure* labour process – abstracted from capitalist actuality – it might seem that it is the worker who is in charge, making use of the instruments of labour in order to transform raw materials into a desired product. Nevertheless, both the cotton and the machines exist as commodities owned by capitalists. The potential labour of the cotton spinner was also available on the market as a commodity bought by the capitalist, in order to valorise value. Finally, the spinner herself was actually put to work to produce surplus. The labour was *not* done twice: once to produce concrete use-value and later to generate abstract value. Inside the capitalist framework, the same movement of the body and mind produces products and valorises value. In the movement of labour there is yet another overlapping movement, which creates capital. The labour process and the valorisation process are phenomenologically coextensive. They are made identical, since the worker is made to work for the capitalist.

Identification of the means of production with capital produces two apparently opposed effects. On the one hand, the ability of capital to yield profit is attributed to the technical function of capital as means of production. It seems that profit is only a revenue for the technical function of the means of production in the labour process itself. Social phenomena (the generation of profit constituting capital) seem to derive directly and necessarily from technical phenomena. The capitalist can be thus presented as somebody who simply gets a fair share for his effort of managing creatively these means of production, rather than as a shareholder, who gets his due even if he has no idea what it is that is being produced in a factory a thousand miles away<sup>9</sup>. On the other hand, fetishism produces the reversed but symmetrical effect of deriving technical phenomena directly from their social form. For instance, the power to increase the productivity of labour (to produce more “wealth”) is attributed to capital, as in the theory of the productivity of capital (see Rubin 1972). Therefore, the development of the means of production appears “as a direct act and achievement of the capitalist who functions here as the personification of the social character

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9 What is more, with the growing importance of the financial sector, even this detachment from concrete production, the sublime indifference towards concrete labour and supposedly absolute, abstract fluidity is presented as another skill of the capitalist who, as a pure intelligence, hovers over the formless surface of the production process, decides to invest here and then suddenly takes his money to another continent. We will return to this question while analysing the problem of fluidity and abstract labour.

of labour, of the workshop as a whole” (Marx 1990 1053). That is why, e.g. technological innovations are attributed to the figures of genius individuals, who – like Steve Jobs or Bill Gates – represent and appropriate individually the work and creativity of various collectives, which have made these breakthroughs possible (for a detailed case-study of this process see Mazzucato 2013). Dominant ideology effaces the traces of the social character of the innovation processes (including the crucial role of public funding and the cooperation of diverse research teams). These ideological effects, however, are made possible thanks to a specific social relation, rooted in the actual historical process of technological progress. Capitalist alienation and the rapid development of the social means of production were and are simultaneous and coextensive. As Marx says: “the productive forces of social labour, came into being historically only with the advent of the specifically capitalist mode of production. That is to say, they appeared as something intrinsic to the relations of capitalism and inseparable of them” (Marx 1990, 1052). As we can see, Marx conceptualises alienation under capitalism not as the estrangement of a somehow fully developed, pre-existent substance, but as a historical process in which the social forces of production are developed precisely as alienated, expanding in an alienated form.

The products of labour (machines) owned by capitalists appear and act in the labour process as integral elements of capital. When an individual worker enters the workshop the technical and organisational framework, the cooperation in the workplace, the very sociality of labour itself act as something alien or even hostile to him – as means for disciplining and mobilising him to work. Science, organisation and the tempo dictated by machinery are actually means for extracting surplus-labour from the worker. On the level of socially objective appearance, the labour process in the capitalist company *works as* the valorisation process.

## Subsumption of worker under capital<sup>10</sup>

We have said that under capitalism the production process appears as an indivisible fusion of the labour process and the valorisation process. This unity is, however, an unequal one. The bearer of the valorisation process is *subsumed* under it<sup>11</sup>. Here is where the inversion takes place. In the labour process the worker uses the means of production to produce a product. She treats the materials and instruments of labour as means to her ends. When the labour process is subsumed under the valorisation process, it is no longer the worker who uses the means of production, but an animated means of production that employs and uses the worker to valorise value. The production of goods and services, together with circulation and consumption, is only a moment in the total process of the production of surplus-value. It is an illusion that capital produces things to satisfy human needs. It produces things in order to produce more capital. Things are produced as commodities in order to be sold with profit. Capitalist production is – first and foremost – the production of augmented value. The production of “stuff”, of material and immaterial social use-values, is only a means to the ultimate end, which is the infinite process of the valorisation of capital. To prove this, suffice it to think of the mass needs that are *not* satisfied, as in the case of the masses of workers and in the case of the people excluded even from the relation of wage-labour, whose demands are not capitalised due to the lack of an *effective* demand on their side. In other words: their needs and desires – even such as basic as food or healthcare – are irrelevant since they do not dispose of enough exchange value (money) to realise them.

The labour process serves only as a bearer, in the same manner as use-value serves as a “material substratum” (Marx 1990, 293) of exchange-value. The worker, in turn, serves as a carrier of the movement of the production of capital, which aims at unachievable abstract absolute wealth. The labour process is thus only a material presupposition of the valorisation

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10 I ask my reader to note that we are not dealing here with the idea of „real subsumption of life under capital”, but much more modestly, with subsumption of the wage-labourer under capital in the production process. The idea of real subsumption of life under capital, made popular by Antonio Negri and his followers, assumes that after achieving the stage of real subsumption, life as such – including language and affects – simply became totally identical with labour. This implies a very stadial and Eurocentric concept of history (let us just think of the places where the language of the workers is explicitly excluded from the direct production process: as happens in Chinese factories or in warehouses of Sports Direct in Nottingham, where workers are fined and can even be fired for talking to each other at work; see Annanikova 2014). What is more, the Negrian idea of subsumption of life under capital implies that the notion of alienation of the subject from its labour can no longer be operative: if one’s life is simply, totally identical with one’s work there is nothing to be alienated from. In the section dedicated to the question of „human capital” I will try to prove that this approach – although it brings some important insights – is simplified and over-general.

11 Chris Arthur assumes that the category of subsumption was taken by Marx from Schelling’s theosophy “where it signifies the absorption of the finite by the infinite” (Arthur 2009, 156).

process, just as the body of a product serves only as a presupposition of the value of a commodity.

## Breaking the process 2: source and presupposition

At this point an important distinction has to be introduced. As we have seen, Marx distinguishes use-value from value, the labour process from the valorisation process and the means of production from capital. Although productive forces *appear* in a specific socio-economical form, they *cannot be* simply *identified* with it. Economical categories (such as value or capital) cannot be derived directly from the natural properties of products or from the means of production. The means of production are not capital by nature and labour does not intrinsically and necessarily have to take the form of capitalist wage-labour. Marx exposes this lack of continuity (“not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of value”). Value cannot be derived directly from use-value, money from the technical properties of gold, and capital from the technical productivity of the means of production. As Isaac Illich Rubin<sup>12</sup> has written in his groundbreaking *Essay on Marx’s theory of value*, use-value is the *presupposition* but not the *source* of value. This distinction, although it might sound technical, is actually crucial for understanding the Marxian method. Marxism is often pictured (also by many Marxist, and at times by Marx himself) as based on a fundamental reduction. The “social” superstructure is reduced to its “material” basis. Here we can see a different Marxism. Its difference, in comparison to classical economy, lies precisely in the constant exposition of the non-reducibility of social relations to things and *vice versa*:

In order to discover the content of these social forms, the Classical Economists reduced complex forms to simple (abstract) forms in their analyses, and in this way they finally arrived at the material-technical bases of the process of production. By means of such analysis they discovered labor in value, means of production in capital, means of workers' subsistence in wages, surplus products [...] in profit. [...] Afterwards, when the given social-economic forms are finally reduced to their material-technical content, the Classical Economists consider their task complete. But precisely where they stop their analysis is where Marx continues. Since he was not restricted by the horizon of the capitalist economy, and since he saw it as only one of past and possible social forms of economy, Marx asked: why does the material-technical content of the labor process at a given level

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12 Rubin was an activist of the Bund and Menshevik Parties and a scholar in David Riazanov’s Marx-Engels Institute. He was persecuted and finally executed during the Great Purge. As Stalinist philosopher, Rosenthal wrote, “The followers of Rubin and the Menshevizing Idealists treated Marx’s revolutionary method in the spirit of Hegelianism. The Communist Party has smashed these trends alien to Marxism” (Rubin 1979, 1).

of development of productive forces assume a particular, given social form? Marx's methodological formulation of the problem runs approximately as follows: why does labor assume the form of value, means of production the form of capital, means of workers' subsistence the form of wages, increased productivity of labor the form of increased surplus value? [...] Starting with the social forms as given, the Classical Economists tried to reduce complex forms to simpler forms by means of analysis in order finally to discover their *material-technical* basis or *content*. However, Marx, starting from a given condition of the material process of production, from a given level of productive forces, tried to explain the origin and character of social *forms* which are assumed by the material process of production (Rubin 1972).

Thus, Marxian thought can be defined literally as a theory of *social formations*. While the fetishism of economists identifies things with their social form and takes them at face value as unproblematic, impenetrable, non-intelligible ultimate conditions<sup>13</sup>, Marx tries to problematise precisely the process of the formation of social forms. Classical economists were able to describe how subjects conform to apparently pre-given *a priori* conditions (how these conditions inform the motivations of the universal *homo oeconomicus*, how s/he adjusts to competition, how s/he innovates inside this framework etc.). Marx wants to show that these material conditions are *social relations materialised*: social relations, which manifest themselves in things and through things. He wants to grasp both the formation of individuals by the social forms they possess (possessing capital makes one a capitalist) and the emergence of social forms from the relations between people (the relation between labourers deprived of the means of production and the capitalist who possess this means is materialised in the means of production functioning *as* capital).

Inside the visual field of bourgeois economy capitalist production “in which the process of production has a mastery over man, instead of the opposite” appears “to be as much self-evident and nature-imposed necessity as productive labour itself” (Marx 1990, 175). The two-fold character of the production process is therefore invisible. Capital is reduced to its physical “material substratum” to “means of production (raw materials, auxiliary materials, means of labour, tools, buildings, machines)” (Marx 1990, 981), it is treated as a thing “among other things” (Marx 1990, 998). These things, however, miraculously seem to possess the right and the power to hire and control labour. The fetishism of political economists reduces the process of valorisation to the process of labour, concealing the opposite movement of practical reduction, in which labour matters and *counts* – in literal, economic sense – only when it participates in the valorisation process generating surplus-value.

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13 “We cannot pursue the question of what the particular elements of our system ‘are’ and why they are as they are, right up to their ‘ultimate grounds’. We take them as given” (Schumpeter, cited in: Backhaus 1992, 61).

## Capital beyond true and false

According to Feuerbach, the proponent of the critique of religion who we met in the previous chapter, religious imaginative inversion “stands in most glaring contradiction to our fire- and life-insurance companies, our railroads and steam engines, our picture galleries, our military and industrial schools, our theatres and scientific museums” (Feuerbach 1957, XIX). In the writings of the mature Marx this apparently sober world of modern society, technology and economy is exposed to be far more enchanted. What is enchanting us is not, however, some pre-modern dark remnants of pre-capitalist social systems, which have not yet been fully modernised. Enchantment, or myth, lies at the very heart of capitalist reality. The strange inversion which subsumes living human beings under the movement of valorisation is naturalised and secularised. It is treated as something absolutely normal, as the very core of a sober, disenchanting reality in principle.

“The market” presents itself as the best source of information, as the principle of selection and generation of the most rational/economic actions and decisions. Capital aims at defining the very standards of what is real or realistic, by placing itself as the ultimate rationale of social production and as the model of rationality, to which human subjects must adjust their behaviour.

If one does not succeed, it only proves that s/he was unable to internalise these contingent but always necessary (and thus: rational) judgements. If I am unemployed, it only proves that I was unable to predict what skills the market will demand in the future. And I am the only one to blame. Revelation of the unknown law is identical with its trespassing and with punishment. Each result of the interplay of market forces – however irrational and unpredictable it might have been – is retrospectively rationalised as the expression of the power of economic reason. Capital’s theodicy justifies itself, positing itself as “neither true or false but simply real” (Jameson 2014, 26) in the sphere of the indiscernible, where the reality principle and capital’s phantasmic becoming – merge. *It is as it is*: an ultimate rationale resonating with the tautological power of incantation.

For the dominant *doxa* it is perfectly natural that capital employs and commands labour. It finds nothing extraordinary in the fact that millions of people, in order to get their means of subsistence, wake up every day to go to work for other people, who happen to own/represent the means of production. This is repeated every day, so we have time to get used to it, since we practically take part in it (as producers) every day we work, and (as consumers) every day we go shopping. It is almost impossible to see anything strange in the fact that the worker does not work for himself, but for capital represented by the capitalist,

and thus *miraculation*, in which human beings are turned into mere moments of the becoming of abstract capital's becoming, goes unnoticed. The “mystical result” of the process is *disenchanted*.

Miraculation and disenchantment form the structure of fetishism: both elements simultaneously constitute each other and can be distinguished only analytically. Disenchantment (which conceals, effaces and justifies the quasi-theological status of capital) reduces it to pure use-value. The miraculous power of things employing living labourers, presents itself as *nothing more* than an attribute of things *qua* things, as brute fact. Let us now see how the conditions for this are made.

### The making of the real existing capitalism

The conditions are already set from the beginning, and *the worker is always late*. Capital reproduces itself by reproducing the very social relation, the conditions which make it possible. This implies reproducing wage-labour on the one hand, and capital on the other. It also implies making the encounter between these two as unavoidable as possible. As Fredric Jameson rightly notes on *ex re* “primitive” accumulation,

This type of social evolution takes place [...] not by virtue of some disembodied Hegelian essence called capitalism or the market, nor either by some psychological drive rooted in human nature, but rather by a systematic negation of everything which might have permitted an alternative to them” (Jameson 2014, 86).

This happens with so called “continuous primitive accumulation” (De Angelis 1999). Attempts to make a living, conducted e.g. in 16th century England or 21st century Ghana, by the members of rural communities are systematically blocked by capitalists and state officials, who privatise and appropriate natural resources, which were previously held in common. This produces not only conditions for the capitalist accumulation of resources, but also a surplus-population – and thus a potential workforce. Access to land and resources makes possible the very existence of these populaces. When it is limited, members of these groups are forced to enter into a productive relation to capital on unfavourable terms in order to survive, accepting low-wages and hard working conditions.

These examples, which could be multiplied by recalling the process of dismantling the welfare model and building the “workfare” model in its place in First and Second World

countries<sup>14</sup>, show that “the actually existing capitalism” (Wacquant 2012) is something very different from “the free-market economy”, as pictured by the free-trader *vulgaris*. Rather than being based on the principle of non-intervention, it operates by means of continual political intervention on behalf of capital.

The worker is made to work for a capitalist, since access to goods and services is necessarily mediated by capital as capitalists already own the means of production. And since the materials, instruments and the productive time of the worker herself belong to the capitalist, thus when the worker objectifies her labour, she objectifies it as something belonging to someone else. Capital is established as the precondition of wage-labour deprived of the means of production (I have no capital that is why I have to sell my labour-power to a capitalist to keep on living). At the same time capital is the result of each act of labour (my product, when objectified, constitutes capital confronting me). This is how it tries to establish itself as *historical necessity*. That is a contingent event, an encounter, which reproduces itself by conditioning the conditions of possibility and impossibility of the social process. Or to use the Paulinian idiom: as *eon-archon*, the basic principle of this world under which we are sold (Galatians 4:3, Romans 7:14).

## A man-made god

Our daily gestures could thus be exposed as something utterly strange: ritual acts building a monstrous “god” above us. It is a god who, in being created, is established as the quasi-cause of the social – a god who, being produced is grafted onto production as its organising principle – a god who realises and actualises himself in the human acts of production, circulation and consumption – a Hildegardian god who has no other hands or heads than ours. Being an inhuman Entity, not “trans-historical and knowing” but “historically determined and blind” (Postone 1996, 76–77), it cannot act and think otherwise than through the acts and thoughts of its human bearers. It is a structure established in human practices, which structures human consciousness and unconsciousness, but itself has no self-consciousness and no ego.

Its theological character is therefore purely social, not metaphysical. It could be described as “meta-physical” or “super-natural”, but only in a very specific, literal sense of these words. That is: as something that edifies itself over-nature, over the bodies of things

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14 Legislation implemented in Hungary gives an instructive example of this tendency in almost all the European countries. See Agence France-Presse 2014, *Orban trumpets harsh Hungarian 'workfare' scheme* <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/afp/140309/orban-trumpets-harsh-hungarian-workfare-scheme>. For a theoretical account of this problem see Lazzarato 2012.

and people, which serve as its presuppositions. Finite human beings and finite things, from which capital abstracts itself, are its *conditio sine qua non*. The actual becomes phenomenon, but the Idea has no other content than this phenomenon, as young Marx notes *ex re* Hegelian post-metaphysical notion of the Spirit (see Marx 1992, 62). There is nothing but an interrelation of man to man, nothing but human inter-subjectivity that is the sole god – as Feuerbach says.

The result of such a disenchantment, however, remains strange and does not resemble the dreams of harmony, love and equality derived from the equation *god = man + man* by Feuerbach and other “gentlemen humanists, atheists, socialists and democrats” (Gombrowicz 1989, 69). In the relation of man to man, “in this other church made of people” certain surplus meaning and power is exuded: “a by-product of thousands of impulses [...] a play of creative forces [...] a deity, [...] born of people, ‘superior’ to me but only by an inch” (Gombrowicz 1989, 73–74), an incessant interplay of seduction and domination. In Gombrowicz’s description this surplus was transferred onto a divinised tyrant (“Hitler” who became a monstrous collective body that overwhelmed the flesh and blood Adolf Hitler himself). In capitalist production “the constant transposition” (Marx 1990, 1057) of energy, power and meaning is more omnipresent and less visible, since the totality of *socius* – which appears to be identical with the incessant production of production-distribution-consumption – cannot be identified with anybody. Be it the corpus of a king, a concrete capitalist, a corporation or even the total stock of material wealth.

### Irony of the spirit<sup>15</sup>

Whoever finds this evaluation of the power of capital exaggerated should perform a simple thought experiment, which Adorno recommended to absolute skeptics. All those who believe that now god is dead, that in postmodernism everything is permitted, that everything that is solid, melts into air should try to stop going to work for some time and see what happens. At the end of the day, the bottom line is the bottom line.

It would be wrong, however, to neglect the power of the irony of the relativist. Something real and objective speaks through it. Yet what speaks is not so much the human ironic subject, but the process of capital’s self-valorisation of itself. It is not this or that individual, nor is it his or her individual thinking process that has the power to relativise everything except itself. In this case, the irony of the human subject reflects the irony of

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15 In the matter of interrelations of irony and system, see a remarkable analysis in Olesik 2014, to which the present study owes a debt.

infinite movement. Self-irony works here as violence of the individual against her/himself exercised in the name of the objective, collective process. Like a class clown derives some pleasure from participating in collective fun – even if he violently ridicules himself – the ironist derives some satisfaction from participating in the objective irony of the spirit of capital. I mock myself in order to anticipate mockery. Not only the mockery of the group but also the objective ridiculousness of my individual existence in confrontation with the total process. The internalisation of the relativising movement of capital (which makes the distinctions between the “spirit of lightness” and the “spirit of heaviness” or between “open” and “closed” systems irrelevant) takes place not only in thoughts. One tries to imitate and integrate the incessant movement of valorisation in the movement of one’s body (Quantified Self movement, aimed at measuring one’s performance by means of trackers and other electronic devices and the comparison of one’s result and status via social media, being a radical but telling example). The human subject tries to get moving, to “join the movement”,<sup>16</sup> to go with the flow of capital before the wave sweeps him or her away.

### Fetish of human capital

The line of 1) abstract labour (indifferent to the particular, concrete shape of this and that job), and the line of 2) concrete labour (with which the worker identifies him/herself as for example “tele-marketer” or “junior brand manager”) are forced to coincide. Ironic non-identification with one’s social position is proclaimed a virtue of flexibility, coinciding with the compulsion to identify with each and every menial and temporal position. Mobilisation has to be spelled out in every motivational letter and acted out during consequent job interviews<sup>17</sup>. The estrangement effect works as shock therapy, which forces the subject to adjust itself to a changing market. Fusion of abstract and concrete neutralises the potential

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16 See e.g. an add by vivosmart: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CRymY6Qz-os>

17 Since one coincides with one’s human-capital, one is simply “selling oneself”, to use an expression proclaimed by the dominant powers with shameless innocence, proving how explicitly commodity has become its own ideology. For a good example of a show which condenses, exposes and sells the compulsion of competition and necessity of selling one’s labour-power, see Dragon’s Den. Edycja polska (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZvwyXA0iCig>) especially from 7:43 to 8:00 (knowing Polish is not necessary, it is enough to focus on expressions of domination and self-domination inscribed on bodies and faces). It is important to note that in certain branches, where the alienating pressure exceeds the possibility of being tamed by pharmaceutical means, alienation itself is openly proclaimed as the solution. A worker for a head-hunting agency, interviewed by me, reported that the management asks the employees not to identify themselves with their occupation („use only your operational self when you’re at work”, as my friend has heard her boss say). This perhaps gives a useful methodological hint, which should make us wonder whether companies always try to achieve higher productivity by promoting conscious emotional identification with the job.

alienation effects by introducing the figure of *human capital*, in which human subject and capital merge. The position of the *entrepreneur of self* is produced by identification of one's labour-power (capacities of one's own body and mind which one is selling on the market for a wage) with one's own human capital (treated as a personal source of income), creating an indissoluble fusion of human-capital, a phantasy on "capitalism without alienation" (Foucault 2008). The basic distinction of Marxian political economy – the class distinction between capital and labour, elaborated through the analysis of fetishist unitary appearance – disappears since the worker's workforce is proclaimed to be identical with *his/her* capital.

It is claimed that alienation is suspended but an inner doubling remains. One is accountable before "one's own" capital. The human subject is trained to justify his or her behaviour before this inner tribunal, proving to others and to the self that the behaviour was *productive enough*. And this can never happen, since capital aims at immeasurable absolute wealth; hence there is no natural upper limit of exploitation (see Marx 1990, 252–253). The finite subject has been infused with the infinity of the movement of capital, and now can never be sure if s/he has made absolutely effective use of the time given. No work can fulfil the infinite law of capital's accumulation.

One has to "invest in oneself" in order to achieve profits. Lack of success in such an investment only proves that one was unable to internalise the contingent but always necessary and thus rational judgements of the market. "There is nothing permanent except change" – as an expert from ManPower temporary work recruitment agency once said to the author of this text, with a matter-of-factness characteristic of this hylemorphic religion. Capital's power comes not only from the fact that subjects are unaware of capital's domination over their lives. Rather the sheer exposition of this domination, the pure power of facticity, which needs no other justification than its own power – works as a justification. It is as it is.

## Working by breaking

Thus, certain doubts can be raised concerning the narrative strategy of intensified estrangement employed here. The analytical method of our research was aimed at abstracting the labour process from the valorisation process. The labourer was thus confronted with the infinite movement of capital and presented as subsumed under it. The effect of sublimity emerges from the incommensurability of the human subject and the alienated mass of social forces, which infinitely overwhelm any finite body. This juxtaposition was supposed to de-naturalise and de-rationalise the "reality" to which we are all too well-accustomed.

But the possible result of such a shock can simply be paralysis. The subject confronted with "the total system" might end up frozen and mesmerised, contemplating

passively the processes of his/her own disappearance or even deriving certain pleasure from his/her own subjective disintegration (Jameson 2008). The concept of the death of the subject finds here its socio-economic basis and is not without practical, daily life correlations. As when overwhelmed by pressure to concentrate yourself on multi-tasking projects at work, you come back home, too tired to think and you start to scroll Facebook walls or surf TV channels in order to distract yourself to the ultimate limit where you are finally tired enough to unplug and fall asleep. So doing you enter the spheres where the intensities of labour and subjective fragmentation exist in continuum, not in contradiction<sup>18</sup>, entering

Those quicksands where a tree changes into nothing  
Into an anti-tree, where no borderline  
Separates a shape from a shape [...]  
King of centuries, ungraspable Movement  
Now we have become equal to the gods  
Knowing in you, that we do not exist.  
(Miłosz 2001, 132–133).

### A mediocre archon

Neither the demonological figuration, however, nor the recalling of the heroic persona of great tyrants should make this description too sublime. The image of sublime evil can be misleading, since it still contains too many remnants of romantic grandeur (like in the case of Thomas Mann's demonisation of Nazism in *Doctor Faustus*, which might be read as a therapeutic narrative helping Germans to experience their history as something of at least negative greatness). One could say that the devil of our time is much more trivial, resembling less a fallen angel than a reasonable, mediocre, middle-age gentleman, who once paid a visit to Ivan Karamazov, declaring to be a non-entirely-non-existent "sort of phantom in life who has lost all beginning and end, and who has even forgotten his own name" (Dostoyevsky

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18 Here we find one of the most significant shortcomings of the theory of a hidden but important protagonist of this research, Polish Kantian/Marxian/Nietzschean/Catholic philosopher, Stanisław Brzozowski who believed that "Only that which exists for the sake of labour really does exist. Everything else might just be a dreamlike semblance" (Brzozowski 1990, 173 [my translation – MP]). The blind spot of Brzozowski's thought was the hallucinatory and narcotic nature of intensified labour itself. However, the suppressed affinity of dream and frenetic labour was from time to time brought to the surface of his texts by the dynamic of his modernist hypertrophic figurations.

2015, 1350)<sup>19</sup>. The dreariness and obtuseness of our everyday “Antichrist diluted” (to use the acute term created to express the nature of inertial power in the progressively non-ideological and technocratic times of the convergence between Eastern and Western Blocs, see Konwicky 1999, 158), the “unfinishness” of his bad infinity – an infinite cue to a doctor or a supermarket until, an infinitely postponed deadline – only makes its suffocating weight heavier.

### III INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION, OR SOME PRELIMINARY NOTES TOWARDS A WORKING ETHICS OF GRACE

We have encountered some limits of our figurative strategy. Let me allow myself now to invite my reader to share some of my doubts and partake in some indecisive investigations. It seems that neither a sheer presentation of the demonised, totalising movement of capital, nor the effects of alienation produced by the juxtaposition of the infinite and finite, is sufficient. What is more, this kind of presentation does not give the real picture, since “the system” is far from being totally functional. It works by breaking the human subject, and itself it works as broken. However it would be one-sided to comfortably assume that the task of critique is simply to bring chaos into order, since, as old Deleuze quite rightly notes, social arrangements under capitalism “continuously generate attrition and loss, exclusion and dysfunction; [...] always contain potholes, tracts of wasteland, stagnant ponds of unproductiveness” (Deleuze 1996, 235, cited in Vogl 2015, 103). It is perhaps true that the Whole contains holes, but to say that is not to say much. Breakdowns do not have to lead automatically to an overcoming of “the system”. They may perfectly well end up simply exhausting the subject, as when the self-disciplining pressure to be productive and successful reaches its limit, or cannot even achieve the point of mobilization, which makes the subject get out of bed. Thus the pressure implodes into a reactive de-pression, which takes the burden of responsibility and self-mastery off the subject’s shoulders, opening the vast field of the boredom of unproductiveness and of the miseries of non-work.

Yet it seems that it would be equally wrong to assume that all the moments of dysfunctionality are nothing but functional elements of “the system” itself. Rather than overestimating the cleverness of capitalist unreason, it might be more fruitful to think of its ambivalences and blockages as things that have to be actively brought to the point of

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19 A much more subtle and in-depth reading of this fragment in the post-Hegelian context, can be found in Aleksander Temkin’s unpublished book on Dostoyevsky, excerpts of which have been published in *Kronos*, see Temkin 2014.

consistency, where the figuration of estranged dead works could reach the stage of actual *conversion*, turning towards liberation.

What does this mean when applied to our field of interest? And does it imply abandoning the analytical method which abstracts the labour process and the valorisation process? If we want to get nearer to the answer, we have to go back to our basic question: what is the relation of the “matter” of the labour process to the capitalist “form” of valorisation? Is the capitalist “formation” merely an *exterior* obstacle for the creative labour of the multitude, something that is only an artificial shackle, which is not embedded in labour itself, and thus can easily be shaken off?

I am writing this text inside a certain “framework”. If I will not publish texts in reviewed scientific magazines I will not get parametrised points, which measure my productivity. And if I fail to gain them, I will probably not get a studentship or a grant. Thus my attempts to make a living by being a researcher in the social sciences will be seriously threatened. It would be naïve to think that all this has no impact on my work. This “framework” or rather the fundamental *Stimmung* of capitalist social ontology, the generalised mood, the atmosphere of precarity and competition, definitely have some influence not only on the final product of my work, but also on the way I work. While writing this text, I had all of the above mentioned factors (deadlines, points, competition, the entire “publish-or-perish” thing) in mind.

Is it then right to say that all this ultimately makes capital the *source* of the text you are reading? Do people write texts of this kind solely to get points? And will the production of knowledge stop or diminish if lean production Toyotism will not be implemented in academia? Does the labour process have to be subordinated to the imperative of the valorisation of value? And if not, how can the distinction between the two be made *in practice*?

## The queen of sausages and concrete labour

In *The measure of a man*, (*La Loi du marché*, Brizé 2015), a story of an everyman trying to make a living, we are situated in the familiar landscape of our everyday, mediocre archons. We meet a middle age ex-industrial worker, who gets a job in a supermarket. If we were to be lost among supermarket shelves in another film on the impotence of a “Kafkian” character destroyed by the omnipresent but impenetrable laws of the market, there would not be much sense in talking about it here. What makes the film highly original, in comparison to many anti-productivist social dramas, is the scene of a farewell party organised for Gisele, who is retiring after thirty or so years of work in the supermarket. Her fellow workers and members of management sing for her a rather clumsy nursery-rhymes farewell song. We can easily

imagine how this celebration could be portrayed as another humiliating, obligatory team-building exercise. However, in *The measure of man* there is a glimpse of something altogether different. Both Gisele and the main character really are moved by the celebration. And when Gisele's supervisor says that, although he is her boss, he could actually learn a lot from her about how the shop works it is something more than mere corporate bubble-talk. Of course, the brutal pressure to achieve profit is still there. Later we witness how the supervisor, who is probably personally a really nice guy, tries to "lean production", firing another worker, who was caught stealing from the store, which ultimately leads to her suicide. But the fact that the film allowed this moment of the celebration of the dignity of labour – which is neither a "creative" profession like, say, that of an artist or a hacker, nor is it like the occupation of a miner, which still has some kind of gravity of the working-class ethos, but the least socially prestigious and most alienating supermarket job – the fact that this scene was allowed to enter into the picture is an act of revolutionary courage. It would not be very hard to ridicule the emotions of Gisele and of the main protagonist as naïveté which does not see the actual state of affairs, but forgets for a moment about the fact of alienation and acts as if there was no exploitation. However, this act of conscious forgetting might take us further than we expect. Let us come back to Marx. He writes that when we

[...] proceed directly to the *immediate process of production*, we find that it is primarily a *labour process*. In the labour process the worker enters as worker into a normal active relationship with the means of production determined by the nature and the purpose of production itself. He takes possession of means of production, the way they hold fast of their independence and display the mind of their own, their separation from labour – all this is now *abolished* [*aufgehoben*] in practice (Marx 1990, 1007).

This moment when the worker gives himself fully to his activity, *in practice* forgetting about the capitalist, is possible only "if we consider the production process just as a labour process" (Marx 1990, 107). The act of abstraction, which does not see that the worker in practice must work for a capitalist, is definitely an element of the "mystification of capital" (Marx 1990, 1052). This mystification, in the times of human capital, is aimed at making self-exploitation operative. That is, activating "the boss option" inside the worker himself. The worker is convinced by HR pundits, the managerial board and the authors of self-help manuals that he does work for himself, in order to realise himself. At the same time he is incessantly reminded (by the very course and tempo of the process and by the excessive pleasure derived by his bosses from the sheer manifestations of power, however petty they might be) that, yes, there is a boss over him, and that the mystification of capital is only a semblance.

Sometimes, however, the workers take this "essential formality" of capital (Marx 1990, 1064) more seriously than capital takes it, itself. They start to act as if they really did not

need a capitalist to work<sup>20</sup>. Thus they try to decapitate “the alien head”, the *caput* of capital. Companionship, identification with one’s workplace and the will to fight for it were already there, when they were working, before the conflict with the capitalist burst. All of this was there as the basis of potential autonomy, as the author of this text noticed in participating in the organisation of the protests of school kitchen workers in Warsaw in 2012. The workers gave value to their jobs and used this self-valorisation as an argument for the media, parents and local authorities, stressing that at work they feed and take care of children, not being motivated in the first instance by profit; in contrast to private catering companies, which were about to replace the local government as their new employers. Thus, identification with one’s occupation and one’s position as members of “the caring classes” – taking the promise of a meaningful job more seriously than capital takes it – was an extremely important factor in the workers’ mobilisation<sup>21</sup>.

The dignity of labour is worth considering not only as a potential point of confrontation with the capitalists and its delegates, but also in itself – as something which on a daily basis binds people at work together and produces the interwoven worlds in which we all live. Perhaps we can push this thought even further. I am tempted to say (however non-revolutionary and un-Marxian it might sound), that perhaps the value of these living-worlds lies not only in their potential autonomy in confrontation with capital, but precisely in the fact, that fortunately they cannot just be reduced to the point of resistance, nor to their creative, productive potential. That in the end, it is not all about capital and class struggles.

## Gena the Crocodile and abstract labour of the precariat

Now let us see how the operation of taking capital more seriously than it takes itself could work with abstract labour. In order to do so, I would like to turn to a much greater artwork: a classic Soviet cartoon *Gena the Crocodile* (Kachanov, Uspensky 1971)<sup>22</sup>. The fact that it takes place in the country of Stakhanov speedup and labour competition, which is reflected in the overwhelming melancholy of the cartoon, should make us suspicious towards all the idyllic

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20 The focus on the necessity of building the workers movement as a movement of people who are able to work freely, without compulsion (that is: able not work *compulsively*) remains a true achievement of the late Stanisław Brzozowski, leading him beyond the limits of his productivism. See especially his essay on Charles Lamb (Brzozowski 2007).

21 One could even say that the workers were using the traditional, patriarchal archetype of “The Polish Mother”, which in the context of their actions produced very different effects. For an analysis of the use of gendered roles in women workers’ struggles in communist Poland see Kenney 1997.

22 I would like to thank Aleksander Szostakowski for this idea.

images of labour. However, we find here an idea worth considering if we are to construct a distance with our work, which will be something more than mere self-irony.

The film begins when a salesman (although this is not a very accurate description, since nobody in the cartoon uses money) finds a little creature, Cheburashka in a box of oranges. Not knowing what to do with her, he takes her to the Zoo. He brings her to a security guard, who leads Cheburashka inside to see if they will be able to find a home for her there. The guard enters the zoo, and the former “salesman” takes his gun, happy to replace him on guard, until he is back with Cheburashka. This scene can be read not only as a metaphor of the absolute indifference towards the individual in an ideal totalitarian state, but also as the exposition of an important feature of the market economy: *flexibility*. Labour in capitalism becomes more *abstract*, that is: it abstracts from this or that concrete feature of labour, from the particular character of a concrete occupation (Marx 1990, 1013). Capital treats labour only as its presupposition and it is not bound to its concrete shape, thus it can be invested otherwise. The only condition is bringing profit. We all witness this with the brutal imposition of labour flexibility, which forces workers to adjust themselves to the fluctuations of the labour market.

This feature, however, – if estranged to a certain limit – can also work otherwise. The idea of being able to freely change one’s occupation alludes ultimately to the idea of the abolition of the strict division of labour. What is more, flexibility can be contradicted with the obstacles to flexibility produced by capitalism itself. Although flexibility is proclaimed a virtue, the highly competitive labour market with its big reserve army of the unemployed, makes people in many sectors cling to their occupation; however unsatisfactory it might be. Workers become less willing to change jobs and start something afresh (as a popular saying among workers in a middle-size Polish city goes, “Stick to your job, because if you lose a job in Lublin you will never get it back”). It might therefore be useful to show that flexibility itself is a term, which can be *polarised* and divided along class lines. Flexibility for the capitalists means iron laws for the workers. Flexibility for the workers (that is a real, legally enshrined and politically guarded possibility to take more days off or to go on maternity leave without increasing your colleagues’ workloads) relies on building stable jobs, shortening the working week and reinforcing safety nets provided by the state. Showing that the imposition of the capitalist interpretation of flexibility fails to provide its proclaimed results, leading to an actual *decrease* in productivity (which has been noted even by mainstream/popular organisational science magazines, see Santorski 2015) can be a step towards this<sup>23</sup>.

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23 A *possible* contradiction between the capitalist imperative of ever-increasing productivity and the conditions posited by capital itself, is ever more evident in the sphere of knowledge production. As Aronowitz and Difazio already noted more than twenty years ago, there is a tension between capitalist growth based on

The workers could therefore demand to be flexible on their own terms, but this means contradicting capitalist flexibility. This seems to be necessary if we are to have at least as much autonomy in our job as Cheburashka's friend, Gena, who, in spite of simply being a crocodile is not identical with his position, all the while working at the zoo *as a* crocodile [*работает в зоопарке - крокодиллом*], leaving his cage early every afternoon, dropping the key at the reception and simply going home.

Moreover, it is precisely flexibility, produced by the abstract character of labour, which grounds the condition of the possibility of solidarity among workers beyond the narrow limits and boundaries of particular branches and trades. The abstractness of flexibility returns now with great power in the concept of *the precariat*. It is however necessary to face the truth that it remains a *negative* notion. A possible alliance between this abstract, negative universality and the embedded concreteness of identification with one's job, remains a matter of political construction<sup>24</sup>.

Perhaps the same could be done with other concepts, which we treat as unredeemable, such as creativity or even entrepreneurship. Of course those who say that we should not repeat them light-heartedly are definitely right. These kinds of words are by no

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scientific innovations and the rules of the game imposed on academia by capital itself. When the US government withdrew its direct participation in research, claiming that it will be replaced by knowledge-hungry bio-tech companies, funding for basic research in this field was reduced by almost two thirds (Aronowitz and Difazio 2012, 390). But the problem lies not only in the fact that private enterprises are mainly interested in short-term gains, which preclude far-reaching (and thus not immediately profitable) research. "For the plain truth is that overfunding and *useless* knowledge is the key to discovery" (Aronowitz and Difazio 2012, 267). Science, as Marx foresaw in his *Grundrisse*, becomes a direct productive force but "the subordination of knowledge to the imperative of technical innovation undermines one of the central presuppositions of innovation: *unfettered* free time for knowledge producers. In recent years this contradiction has been at play at universities, even the first-tier institutions, which place increasing administrative burdens on faculty; the second tier impose, in addition, heavier teaching loads. Under impact of economic constraints we have entered a new era of academic cost cutting and of surveillance whose intended as well as unintended effects are to discourage independent intellectual work" (Aronowitz and Difazio 2012, 369). This kind of situation can be a point of departure for an organised action, which could turn mere dysfunctionality into a proper (=politicised) contradiction.

24 This would mean above all else building an alliance between the organised workers, still having relatively stable job contracts and the precariat working on the basis of temporary contracts. However, the generalised fear of precarity does not have to lead automatically to this kind of coalition. The angst and resentment of increasingly precarious labourers can be simply turned against the unionised workers still having such "privileges" as regulated working hours or minimal wage (for an example of such "race to the bottom logic" in the context of the recent miners' strike in Poland see Pitla 2015). Thus the construction of such a coalition would require 1) picturing stable occupations not only as anchors stabilising the labour market or bastions of the good old days, but also as the bridgeheads of quality jobs: quality which should be further generalised to other sectors 2) creating links between public sector workers and the recipients of public services. In the case of teachers or health-workers, the success of such an alliance relies on showing how intensified workloads lead to the worsening of services (e.g. leaner schools = more kids in each class-room = worse learning conditions for students). This could lead to the mobilisation of parents and patients around the postulates of "the caring classes" reformulated in such a communal context. For an instructive example of bringing together workers and their community see Ontario Health Coalition <http://www.ontariohealthcoalition.ca>

means innocent or neutral. Being deeply immersed in capitalist newspeak, they refer to the whole set of implicitly invoked premises and presuppositions, which should not be unconsciously reproduced<sup>25</sup>. But maybe the awful lot of work, expended everyday by workers, is too easily wasted when critics see in the expenditure of workers' energy nothing but participation in a fallen "system"? Perhaps we could try a different experiment. An experiment which would make an attempt to see in the energy of the workers, and even in the energy of their supervisors and bosses, a kind of pure entrepreneurship. Perhaps, a *purified* entrepreneurship which could be abstracted from actual capitalist production, by an estranging gaze is something worthy of being saved?

### Discerning spirits

We have just encountered the old opposition between exchange value (mutated into the interchangeability of abstract labours) and use-value (disguised as concrete labour). And now we are forced to test it - one last time, in this text. Use-value is a strange concept indeed, resonating with utopian and erotic overtones, promising sensual satisfaction through contact with things in the act of consumption or in the act of labour. It is always at risk of sliding back into certain Edenic naturalism; it is easy to picture it as an urge to return to a beatific epoch, when unmediated objects were supposedly fully present and directly achievable. As such, it is probably one of the most vulnerable points under the conceptual armour of both Marx and some of his romantic followers (especially the young Lukacs). This vulnerable - i.e. both weak and intimate - point has become the object of many critiques. And one of the most influential critiques of "use-value" in recent years is obviously that of Jacques Derrida.

Marxian conceptual machinery was programmed to safeguard itself against possible critiques of this kind. The author of *Das Kapital* did not forget to emphasise that neither is use-value simply "natural" nor does the labour process take place in the realm of pure nature, since its product is always pre-determined by human needs/desires, which are themselves historical creations/social products. He also acknowledged that modes of usage cannot be fixed, and that its historical modulations transform the very inner "objective nature" of both the object of use and of its user<sup>26</sup>.

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25 Let us just think of Antonio Negri's uncritical use of the idea of "the productive nature of the multitude", which re-establishes the good old Stalinist and capitalist imperative of being always active and productive.

26 "Firstly, the object is not an object in general, but a specific object which must be consumed in a specific manner, to be mediated in its turn by production itself. Hunger is hunger, but the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is a different hunger from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail and tooth. Production thus produces not only the object but also the manner of

But since the objective of this work should not be to “defend Marx” against his “critics”, we have to ask: is his counterargument sufficient? The answer is crucial because what is being questioned here is the legitimacy of Marx’s supposed ideal: the ideal of a fully enlightened society, a society without fetishes. Or, if we agree on the terms towards which Derrida pushes the question, the legitimacy of the ideal of society without the spirits (of the past and future), a fully contemporary society, a society entirely of this time and of this world. It is precisely what is at stake in our enquiry all the way long: the possibility of the existence of secular thought and the status of the “spectral” and of the “spiritual” in the critical theology we are trying to sketch out here.

To avoid repeating unsatisfactory indefinite accusations and equally indefinite justifications let us first state that the question is not: whether Marx wished to come back to a simpler past, and if he believed that in the societies long gone use-value was fully accessible, self-transparent, and denuded of any ideology. (He certainly did not believe in the possibility of such a return to the past and it is dubious if he believed that such a society ever existed in the first place. He certainly did conceive of the former social formations, in which exploitation was not bound to the dominance of capitalist value-form as mystified and repressive.) But that is not the right question. Just as the answer is not that the true use-value simply lies somewhere in the future of socialist society. To say so, as Fredric does in his commentary on *Spectres of Marx* (Derrida et al. 2008, 54–55), is simply to defer the pressing problem ad infinitum.

The questions of past social formations and their relations to capitalism and the question of the possible events coming from the future will necessarily arise. But the conditions of asking them will be reformulated. By modulating their presuppositions I will try to repeat Derrida’s questions without repeating his answers, which I find unsatisfactory. The main reason for this dissatisfaction lies in his lack of discernment: in Derrida’s eyes all the spirits seem to, ultimately, melt together. What I propose here is training in a certain discipline of discernment. As it is said: “do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits” (1 John 4:1).

We will start by introducing possible distinctions in the genealogy of the present age, while trying to avoid the identification of the spirit of capitalism with the spirit (culture, value etc.) *tout court*, and to avoid identification of all actual and possible past social formations as nothing but steps leading necessarily to capitalism. Then, we will proceed towards specifying the terms, which could help us question the future, without simply satisfying oneself with putting our trust indifferently in the abstract mysticism of “openness”.

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consumption, not only objectively but also subjectively. Production thus creates the consumer.” (Marx 1973, 92)

When thinking about the past (that is, about the genealogy of present-day capitalism) Derrida – as many others – seems to take on board too much teleology by identifying all of the past spirits as the wannabe spirits of capital. When he says, “The ‘mystical character’ of the commodity is inscribed before being inscribed” (Derrida 2006, 202) he is certainly right, up to a determinant point. He is right in describing the fact that, in a *pure* market society every use-value is already being determined by the context of the dominance of capitalist value. Or, to express the same in temporal terms, Derrida describes the fact, or facticity of being “thrown” into the market. The fact that, as we tried to show in this text, “there is no original labour-week”, there is no first day of labour and one is always late when measured against capital which is always-already there. That is an *effect* (but only an effect), an incessantly produced effect, of the “absolute contemporaneity” of capitalist society, an effect of incessant eternalisation (*Verewigung*, see: Balibar, 272) of the conditions of its social reproduction. However - and here is where teleology, too much teleology – enters Derrida adds that not only capitalism eternalises itself but it actually is eternal, it truly was there *all the time*, as a necessary possibility, actualising itself in the course of history :

Just as there is no pure use, there is no use-value which the possibility of exchange and commerce (by whatever name one calls it, meaning itself, value, culture, spirit [!], signification, the world, the relation to the other, and first of all the simple form and trace of the other) has not in advance inscribed in an out-of-use excessive signification that cannot be reduced to the useless. A culture began before culture and humanity. Capitalization also. [my emphasis – MP] (p. 200–201)

Here Derrida not only identifies spirit with exchange-commerce-valorisation (which might be right, following Levinas’ dictum that: “Economic life is the ontological space wherein creature is transformed into spirit...”<sup>27</sup>) but also pictures all the possible economical exchanges, all the excesses of valorisation, which go beyond simple use as - *in potentia* and necessarily - capitalistic. The global market is there *in nuce*, already in the barter-exchange of shells between primitive fishermen. The teleology implied here is the following: there was exchange in every historical, human society - thus every society is potentially-necessarily capitalistic.

To make things clear: I am not accusing such a subtle thinker as Derrida of being simply wrong at this point. The position he stands for is defensible as long as it says that -

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<sup>27</sup> “...or, if we may use a terminology that has become suggestive, it is the space wherein flesh is opened up to the Word. (...) every relation is a transaction, that the relation with the Other can be brought about only to the extent that it engages us materially in some way or other, and that consequently everything must be done with justice. [...]” (Levinas 1997, 126).

retroactively speaking, when we look back at history from the present point of view, and we see this point as the peak of history - all past societies present themselves as always having been haunted by the possibility of becoming capitalistic. It is undeniable that capital does truly incessantly work in order to establish itself as the final aim of the past. That is why all past societies now seem to have been weighing secretly towards capitalism. The problem lies in the specification of this possibility, which in the hands of Derrida (despite his efforts to delimit his position from the vulgar ontology of success exemplified by Fukuyama) becomes necessity. When this is done, the story of the genealogy of capitalism, untold in the *Spectres of Marx*, but present there as an unarticulated presupposition, inevitably goes as follows. All past cultures - by mere fact of having been culture at all, by virtue of valorising things beyond utility - were always inhabited by the virus, and that virus was capital. When the immunological system of these societies, aimed at expelling usury as sin, that is at exorcising the possibility of making money for the sake of making money (which, in this narrative, is immediately identified with the faculty of valorising values, with every possible kind of autotelic, non-directly-useful or non-directly-consumable action), when this immunology has been weakened the ever-present virus attacked and prevailed. When blockages and obstacles were taken down, exchange immediately matured into capitalist exchange (which, in truth, it has always been), realising its ever present potential. The only condition for the emergence of capitalism was “negative”; once the obstacles had been removed, the natural (or cultural or eternal or spiritual) tendency to give value to the abstract, to exchange, was liberated.

The problem here (let us repeat) is not that such a description is simply wrong. Since capitalism succeeds in reproducing itself, it really does succeed in establishing itself - not only in portraying itself, but also in establishing itself - as the final destination of all past history. Just as it often succeeds in establishing the valorisation of capitalistically understood value as the invisible centre towards which every action, now conceived as investment in oneself, should gravitate. The problem lies not in stating that capital has indeed succeeded and still succeeds in establishing itself as necessity (to negate that would be equal to negating the real load weighing on us), but in forgetting that it is a merely *historical* necessity. Historical means here: a very peculiar, complicated and “positively” constructed way of managing this “out-of-use excess”, which human beings carry inside themselves.<sup>28</sup>

Whatever way of dealing with this excess (or lack thereof) that we choose, it seems much more fruitful to analyse capitalism not as an ever-present eternal-natural-cultural

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28 An excess which we tacitly accept when we epitomise it as the “metaphysical” possibility of a worker to produce more than is necessary for his reproduction (as in Henry 1983), or as the power of ascesis, which enables human beings to engage in an activity without an external purpose (as in Stimilli 2011), or finally – if we are more skeptical towards natural theology or agnostic asceticism than the two authors mentioned above – as the original surplus/debt producing and produced by the law of death.

potential, which was simply liberated from its feudal shackles with the advent of modernity when the negative barriers disappeared, but rather as a very specific *positivity*. A positivity which had to be laboriously and often violently constructed - both consciously, “unconsciously”, purposefully and accidentally. Basing on historical work on the origins of capitalism of such authors as Ellen Meiksins Wood (Wood 2002, 11-50) and the philosophical insights of Foucault (Foucault 1990) as well as of the late Althusser (Althusser 2014), this approach could show that there was nothing natural in the weird set of events, which in a specific historical conjuncture produced the set of political struggles, decisions, processes etc., that created the conditions for a very specific type of social organisation we call capitalism. But why did e.g. well-developed technology and commerce in 15th century China not bring about capitalism, or why did the presence of densely populated cities, an appropriate legal framework and even some free-labourers not produce capitalism in the Greco-Roman world? These seemingly obvious questions will be countered by another question, namely: why, and by set of what aleatory “causes” did such a strange thing as capitalism emerge? It will be then much less self-evident to speak of homogeneous pre-*capitalist* societies (as if they were all the time necessarily heading towards capitalism) or about “*failed* transitions to capitalism”. To say so, is *not* to say that the mentioned social formations were necessarily “better” than capitalist societies<sup>29</sup>. To put it shortly and dogmatically, the indeterminacy and openness of history exists. But this openness does not give any place for hope by the mere fact of being open. There were many social formations and there are many social formations possible. Capitalism itself as a social formation can mutate in different directions. For example, it can mutate towards the greater importance of unfree or serf-labour, which - as its suppressed history shows - is by no means incompatible with the supposed “essence” of capitalism.

This is how we have arrived at the promised question of the historical “openness” of the future. Much caution is needed if we are not to fall prey to the “need for hope”. This urge, which was expressed by Derrida, was shared even by his most critical polemicists. Want of hope is psychologically understandable, especially if we remind ourselves of the historical time when *Spectres...* were written. This was a time when triumphant neoliberalism seemed to be unconquerable, and when counting on the fickle future seemed like the only chance to save the light of messianic promise from going out. This is all understandable, but the

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29 It is then *not* to say that e.g. the extraction of surplus from the peasantry in absolutist France by state officials was by nature better than the exploitation of workers by the English agrarian capitalists of the same period. Not to mention that to make such over-all comparisons between totalised “social systems” possible, we will have to first spend a good deal of time not only on analysing, say, the “standards of living” and the degree of political freedoms (for an interesting example of such a comparison concerning English popular classes before and after the Industrial Revolution see: Thompson 1988, 347-385), but also on elaborating at least a preliminary transhistorical set of “common measures” against which the “the progress of morals” could be measured in the first instance.

question remains: does this kind of trust, put in the indefinite future, not reproduce a reified opposition between the stable bourgeois cosmos and creative destruction, destabilisation or desynchronisation seen as necessarily *good*? This hope in “an unnamable and neutral power” (Derrida 2006, 211) of the abstract future, this faith put in “the messianic”, which “denudes itself in view of responding to that which must be absolute hospitality, the ‘yes’ to the arrivant(e), the ‘come’ to the future that cannot be anticipated, which must not be the ‘anything whatsoever’ (Derrida 2006, 217), does not this kind of indefinite hope fuel the hope that the Left puts in the *crisis* of capitalism? As if the very fact of destabilisation had to automatically bring change for good and not just more of the same, as we are witnessing now. Has not Derrida (and most of his opponents) underestimated the degree to which destabilisation can become a tool of *crisis management* of the economical system working as broken?

So, what can we do if we want something less indeterminate, something more determinant than the Derridian “messianic”? We could counterpose it with a more concretely, *materially* determined tradition – a tradition necessarily incarnated in institutional bodies: churches, parties and trade unions, in the bodies of dogmas and programs - as e.g. Terry Eagleton, a good Catholic-Marxist proposes in his polemic with Derrida’s anti-institutional mysticism (Derrida et al. 2008, 85-88). That is not a bad idea in itself. But, what I will try to briefly sketch here is not only a different content of tradition but a different formal conceptual matrix - a matrix that perhaps can also be used by the people outside this tradition - for thinking politics. This proposition will try to distance itself from Derrida’s, but only for an inch. Firstly, it takes on board Derrida’s conviction, expressed also by Étienne Balibar, in the matter of distinguishing ideological spectres from “real” reality:

[...] active 'appearing' (both *Schein* and *Erscheinung*, i.e. both illusion and phenomenon) constitutes a mediation or necessary function without which, in given historical conditions the life of society would be quite simply impossible. To suppress the appearance would be to abolish social relations. (Balibar 2007, 61)

To affirm this is to say, yes, it is impossible to delimit *Schein* from *Erscheinung*, to delimit ideology from truth, to discern spirits as long as we remain inside the social. “Social *sive* supra-sensible”, “social *sive* ideological”, social appearance-semblance as a necessary condition of visibility of the invisible and invisibility of many things visible as we know it. But only “as *we* know it”. Here is the point where we have to rely ultimately on *the extra-social*. Is this extra-social element truly as indeterminate and ungraspable, as Derrida seems to suggest in his almost entirely apophatic theology, which so recklessly gives us into the hands of indiscernible spirits? Out of the lack of space and time, and out of my own lack of understanding I can only point in the direction of something/someone more determined.

A Spirit made Flesh, but a Spirit which is not a pure invisible remainder, or an ever present (im)potential, safe-guarding itself by escaping at the right moment from its historical incarnation, but a Spirit made into concrete Flesh singularly and irrevocably, up to the very last limit and beyond. Speaking once again in the Marxian terms of our discussion, this would really be a Value-Flesh beyond use and exchange: a body that is used and consumed every day, transforming its consumers, but situating itself beyond both usefulness and exchangeability. Here is where Derrida seems to be on the right track<sup>30</sup>, but ultimately fails to think about Grace incarnated, killed and resurrected first in the concrete body of Jesus of Nazareth and then “repeated” every day in the piece of bread broken during Holy Communion - a very different short circuit between the historical and extra-historical of divine history. Test the spirits. “Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come *in the flesh* is from God” (1 John 4:2).

### Allegories of freedom

Let us sum up. We have seen how capital operates as a self-positioning semblance [*Schein*]. That is as a phantasm which makes itself real; a spirit which takes holds of heterogeneous elements and changes it into its organs, making a body for itself. This phantasmic becoming happens not only on the level of ideology, when all previous history is pictured as capital’s prehistory. More importantly it happens in the production process itself, when that, which preceded capital as its precondition – i.e. nature and labour – is turned into something derivative, something which appears to be a product of capital itself.

Yet capital’s opposite, freedom which fights against it, also operates in a strikingly similar manner. That is: by intervening at the level of historical *a priori* and positioning conditions for itself. It tries to condition the conditions of its social being, reclaiming for the human individual and human communities the dignity of a true cause, in a world of supposedly extra-human and supposedly necessary results. This happens not only when a political demos (like the Greek people in the latest referendum, which was so easily and ironically overturned) aims at making a decision in the matters of political economy<sup>31</sup>. It can

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30 “One could say as much, moreover, if we were venturing into another context, for exchange-value: it is likewise inscribed and exceeded by a promise of gift beyond exchange. In a certain way, market equivalence arrests or mechanizes the dance that it seemed to initiate. Only beyond value itself, use-value and exchange-value, the value of technics and of the market, is grace [so far, so good, but test the end of the sentence... – M.P] promised, if not given, but never rendered or given back to the dance.”

31 Nothing is more alien and abhorrent to the dominant *doxa* than the idea of such democratic sovereignty: “there can be no democratic choice against the European treaties”, “the major threat to the stability of the Eurozone is the existence of the democratic system in the member states” – as bankers and eurocrats have univocally stated, commenting on *the* negotiations between the representatives of the Greek

also take place on the mundane subjective level, when we manage to stand above the entanglements of our everyday compulsive cults, which keep us in bondage.

This happens by means of alienation, which “penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; judging thoughts” (Hebrews 4:12), leading to conversion. Conversion starts when we discover “another law at work in our bodies”, an alien power indwelling us. We can now tear ourselves apart, establish a distance and actually see our sins for the first time; and see that we are not identical with them. We are not tethered to our sins, and we do not have to drown with them. Now it becomes possible to turn away from them and to turn towards a point of alienation of myself from my self and from this world.

The point of all this is to make a different kind of freedom possible. A kind of freedom, which has to be snatched from both the social (W)hole and the individuality, made in its image and likeness. Since we cannot be certain of our autonomy, and since the very idea of individuality might be a surface effect, a by-product of the workings of the rulers of this world, it is not enough to simply state “I think therefore I am!”. That would only reaffirm the malicious substance-becoming-Subject. Therefore in order to go beyond the gesture of simple self-assertion – in which the struggle for individual autonomy coincides with the drive of the capitalist *socius* – it might be better to treat our autonomy precisely as an allegory.

Although the method of the operation of freedom seems to resemble that of capital, it is ultimately contradictory and incomparable. To tell this story in the Paulinian allegorical images of Jacob and Esau, Isaac and Ismael: the son of slavery and the son of freedom are brothers, but the covenant of slavery oppresses and fights against the covenant of freedom – and it is impossible for them to inherit together (Galatians 4: 21-31, Romans 9:10). The new law of freedom is based on promise, which breaks the lineages of inheritance, breaking with the laws of this world.

The law of capitalist accumulation, as we have seen, works as broken. Not only because it produces dysfunction and loss, but, more importantly, because it cannot be fulfilled. No finite, human work can do justice to its infinite obligation. The finite subject can never be sure if s/he used the time given to him/her *productively enough*. The desire to justify oneself through work puts the subject to work, which cannot come to an end. The worker wants to reduce the productive tension created by precarity, to let steam off by working – and this is precisely the engine of accumulation. The impossibility of fulfilling this infinite demand by the finite deed of a finite subject is both its motor and its limit. No one can be saved by one’s work.

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*demos* and representatives of the apparent “objective necessities”. See Juncker 2015, and a comment on mBank’s twitter: [https://twitter.com/mbank\\_research/status/559430820952563712](https://twitter.com/mbank_research/status/559430820952563712).

The covenant of freedom overturns this order, positing itself as the new principle of free praxis. It does not put the subject to infinite labour because it knows that this will end up increasing guilt, indebtedness and precarity. Under the new law of freedom, therefore, the divine justification which abolishes all debts –grace, that is – precedes action as its infinite source. First we believe, taking hold of this far-reached position, which exceeds our own capabilities, and then we mature towards it. Work becomes an expression and effect of grace. An explication of the work of grace exceeds the limits of this text. Let us then make a provisional ending, by stating that the new law establishes each act of freedom as an allegory of things not yet visible.

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**CITATION:** Piotrowski, Mateusz. 2015. Allegories of the Invisible: Or, how to Estrange Economy (Theologically)? *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 3(17): 157–202

**DOI:** 10.14746/prt.2015.3.9

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**TYTUŁ:** Alegorie niewidzialnego. Albo, jak (teologicznie) wyalienować ekonomię?

**ABSTRAKT:** Tekst usiłuje raz jeszcze wprowadzić w życie klasyczne idee Marksowskiej krytyki ekonomii politycznej oraz pokazać, jak można je aktywować dzięki teologii. Szczególna uwaga skupi się na teologicznie uwydatnionym pojęciu alienacji, traktowanym nie tylko jako przedmiot, ale i metoda krytyki. Celem owej metody wyobcowującej jest to, by ujawnić „transcendentalny plan” historycznego *a priori* kapitalizmu. Dokona się to poprzez produkcję alegorii, to znaczy figuracje nieskończonego ruchu kapitalistycznej totalności. Zaczynając od krytyki odczarowanego euhemeryzmu Hardta i Negriego, którzy chcą zdemitologizować ekonomię polityczną jako nic więcej, jak tylko relacje między ludźmi, zamierzam pokazać ograniczenia ich podejścia, eksponując ustanowienie kapitału jako stworzenie rzeczywistości odwróconej. W tym procesie hipostaza pracy ludzkiej (tj. kapitał) zdobywa przewagę nad istotami ludzkimi nie tylko w wyobraźni, ale także realnie, podważając jasność podziału na byt realny i wyobrażony. Analizując centralne punkty tego procesu,

zamierzam wskazać na złożoną zależność kolejnych odczarowań i zaczarowań, które ustanawiają kapitał jako coś ponadludzkiego, jednocześnie naturalizując jego fantazmatyczne stawanie się do postaci samego rdzenia zasady rzeczywistości. Alienacja jako metoda próbuje przełamać jednoczesność zaczarowania/odczarowania, dzieląc rzekomo spójny pozór – fetysz – na oddzielne i potencjalnie skonfliktowane warstwy. Potencjał dla tego konfliktu wywoływany jest przez dwa efekty obcości. Po pierwsze, przez zestawienie skończonego podmiotu ludzkiego z nieskończonym procesem kapitału. Po drugie, poprzez myślenie o nawróceniu, które – stając się szczytem alienacji – uzdolniłoby istotę ludzką do ukonstytuowania się jako podmiot autonomiczny, przeciwstawiony bogom tego świata oraz swojej własnej, ziemskiej jaźni.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** ekonomia polityczna, teologia, fetyszyzm, efekty obcości, alegoria