

Being, becoming, subsumption

The Kantian roots of a Marxist problematic

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One of the fundamental tensions within Marx's writings arises from the complex relationship between the systematic and historical aspects of his description of capitalist society.¹ A century and a half after the publication of *Capital* – and in light of the historical adventures of communism that must, for the most part, be considered as an accumulation of catastrophic failures – this tension continues to both energise and attenuate the reception of Marx's thought, symptomatically expressing the radically distinctive and still elusory practical-theoretical foundations of his project. On the one hand, capital is depicted by Marx as an ensemble of social relations forming an apparently closed totality capable of reproducing itself purely through its own internal dynamism: capital as self-sufficient system. On the other hand, Marx reminds us that the capitalist mode of production does not fall from the sky but grows out of, or violently breaks free from, the economic structures of feudalism, developing within and in antithesis to past relations and technologies: capital as historical in nature and therefore subject to the turbulent play of conflictual energies shaping and propelling human history. For Marx the capitalist system is a whole, a totality of interlocking relations that presuppose and support one another. Yet at the same time, it is not a whole with a timeless, independent, self-moving existence, an essence suspended in the void. Capital does not develop from nothing but is a historical phenomenon subject to temporal emergence and decay amidst a whole host of 'disturbing influences'.²

The 'becoming' of capital as a system is thus dependent on a mode of development that is simultaneously a negation, absorption or negotiation of inherited social relations and forms (of wealth, technology, knowledge, institutions, social roles, practices, etc.) and their sub-

ordination to the logic of capital's own 'life-process'. As first and foremost a social relation of *production*, Marx describes, in just a few scattered fragments, how capital subordinates – or 'subsumes' – existing forms of production in order to configure them as capitalist valorisation processes, engines of profit for their owners.³ As Marx outlines, this can occur 'formally', simply through a transformation of the economic relationships involved in production (underpinned by the introduction of relations of exchange between buyers and sellers of labour-power). But subsumption under capital, Marx notes, can and does also occur in a deeper, 'real' form, which transforms the material composition of production (the techniques and technology of production as well as the products themselves). Both at the economic and material levels, Marx thus identifies the *mechanisms* by which specifically capitalist forms of social domination come into being, transforming existing apparatuses of production and property relations in order to secure the extraction of surplus labour from workers in the form of surplus-value. These 'formal' and 'real' modes of subsumption (along with further, 'hybrid' forms identified by Marx) constitute mechanisms of domination, mechanisms through which the becoming of capital, the augmentation of its exploitative and transformative power over human life, is achieved.⁴

Once a sufficient degree of such subsumption has occurred, once a sufficient mass of social substance has been incorporated and formed in accordance with capital's life process then it might be said that the system is no longer simply *becoming* but has attained *being* and, famously, seems to stand upon its own hind legs independently of the human hands which animate it. Marx describes the 'being' of capital as an organic system, that is, a system capable of reproducing its own conditions

of existence, sustaining itself through a cyclical metamorphosis which passes through a necessary sequence of stages or 'forms' regeneratively. Yet in distinction from other organic systems, capital's peculiarity is its need to expand, to accumulate. By definition capital cannot survive by 'simply' reproducing itself, by regenerating itself exactly as it was when its life cycle began. It must, rather, reproduce itself in an expanded form, is driven onwards and outwards to absorb an ever greater wealth of material that it can claim as its own through commodification, exploitation and accumulation. The *being* of capital thus implies no rest or stasis but rather *constant becoming*, constant growth, a spiralling outward of its centripetal energy which runs up against multiple barriers: the resistance of workers, the finitude of nature, even its own destructive drive for insatiable accumulation.

If the becoming of value toward more value, its axiomatic expansion, is systematically presupposed and necessitated by capital, how does this correlate with the other becoming of capital, its historical becoming (and anticipated eventual death) as a finite form of social production? When, how and as an effect of which social forces will capital's reign over human life come to an end?

Revolutionary (im)possibilities

As is well known, for Marx these were first and foremost practical questions, which nonetheless generated prolific theoretical reflection. In the tension which emerges between the being and becoming of capital, its 'organic coherence' yet historical transience, the Marxist problematic of revolution is central. Does revolution follow a progressive arc of necessity, emerging into actuality when capital's 'time has come'? Or does communist revolution rather subsist within and against capital from its beginning, as the ever-present possibility of overcoming that it harbours immanently within itself? The objectivist posture of the former, for which revolution follows a quasi-naturalistic or divine teleology, independent of any individual desires and intentions, is inverted in the subjectivism of the latter, for which revolution emerges as the voluntaristic interruption of capitalist normality: Walter Benjamin's 'emergency brake' on the train of historical progress.⁵ In light of communism's multiple defeats and capitalism's monopolistic installation as the

sole economic paradigm of the modern world system, neither standpoint would appear to offer a particularly credible horizon of revolutionary anticipation. To the historical objectivist, we may ask: when? To the subjectivist, we may ask: by who? Furthermore, in the absence of any revolutionary challenge to capital's reign, what are we to make of its unchecked development? Might capital's *being-becoming* approach a point of total absorption and saturation of the human life world, not only 'formally', but also 'really'? Might this point have already been crossed, leaving us in a 'post-historical' abyss with no way out?

Because of its implied consequences for the character and organisation of production, and thereby also for the struggles that grow out of production, Marx's tentative and fragmentary conceptualisation of capitalist subsumption has provided an evocative focal point for debates surrounding the transformations (or death) of labour-oriented revolutionary politics. If communism is first and foremost a workers movement, and the experience of work is shaped by the particular forms of domination operative in production, then an analysis of these forms and their evolution would seem to offer at the very least a point of departure, if not a comprehensive blueprint, for engaging critically with the trajectories of struggle that have the overcoming of capitalist social relations as their ultimate horizon.

The theory of capitalist subsumption – if such a theory can be said to exist – compresses synoptically the central significance of the analysis of surplus-value production in *Capital* (the modalities of command and exploitation of labour ranging from the extension of the working day to the introduction of machinery and automation) in an account of capital's tendency to transform not only the directly social and economic aspects of production (with the generalisation of waged work and its corresponding worker-boss power relation) but also the material and technological aspects of production (with the reconfiguration of the labour process and the ascent of the machine/algorithm). In this way, Marx was able to index the experience of specific forms of class-based interpersonal domination and 'objective' alienation (the power of the boss and the machine over workers) to his analysis of the structure and dynamics of capitalist accumulation (the production and realisation of surplus-value, at both a micro and macro level).

For subsequent Marxist thinkers concerned with the historical fate of revolution, subsumption provided a technical vocabulary with which to designate the evolving relation between specific mechanisms of power and the overall dynamics of the capitalist system, between the experience of subjection to the command of capital and the guiding tendencies of accumulation. A putative theory of subsumption was thereby seen to offer the key to grasping not only the 'objective' path of capitalist development but also 'subjective' programs of resistance to it, thus uniting the configuration of conditions from within which revolution must emerge.

This reception of subsumption within Marxist theory has been by turns bombastic and muted, creative and conservative, deployed to diagnose the epochal shifts in capitalist power over society as a whole (as a linear movement through phases of 'formal', 'real' and eventually 'total' subsumption) or to re-affirm the consistency of a basic logic governing every existent and possible instance of capitalist socialisation (as in 'capital-logic' and 'value-form theory'). That is, interpretations of the theory have largely fallen on one side of the tension between history and system with which our discussion began. There is little need to rehearse these debates here, save to note that whilst the latter tendency may claim greater conceptual coherence and fidelity to Marx's texts, it is the former that has been more energising for critical debates, capturing the generalised – if fuzzy – sentiment that capitalist power has evolved and intensified to such a degree that it now invades and interferes with every aspect of our lives, offering no apparent way out. Real subsumption, accordingly, has for many come to stand as a catchword for the imperious enclosure of life by capital, like the map described in Borges' fragment which entirely covers the territory it represents, coinciding with it 'point for point'.⁶ No longer restricted in its effects to the 'rationalisation' of discrete labour processes, capital's logic of coercion and technical efficiency would, on this reading, penetrate and transform the entirety of human existence such that, in Negri's formulation, 'society itself has been converted into a factory', or, in Adorno's prognosis, 'the "alteration of the technical composition of capital" is prolonged within those encompassed, and indeed constituted by, the technological demands of the production process'.⁷ It is not only the worker's labour – a specific quantum of their time – that becomes 'one of the

modes of existence of capital' here, but the worker's (and indeed, the non-worker's) entire life, workers *as such*, individually and collectively, in their inner and outer being. This conception of real (or in some variants 'total') subsumption would thus encompass all that capital has done and continues to do to our world and ourselves, whilst simultaneously circumscribing the evaporating terrain of revolutionary possibilities – their tendential or even consummated impossibilities.

Such interpretations of subsumption imply a theoretical short circuit, whereby the logic of power specific to capitalist production is transposed onto the social totality in an unmediated and absolutised way, sacrificing a nuanced operation of Marx's critical apparatus in favour of a sensational rhetorical diagnosis of the present. Those who have sought to demonstrate the misreading of Marx at stake in these attempts to map formal and real subsumption onto historical phases of capitalist society have, by contrast, toiled to reinsert the theory of subsumption into a systematic account of capital.⁸ Yet the difficulty here is that while different forms of subsumption in production do not directly correspond to distinct phases of global capitalist development, those forms – in particular real subsumption – do have profound transformative effects that ripple outward through the broader sphere of life, reshaping the overall context of social action and struggle. The secure theoretical footing offered by a systematic account of capital's being essentially remains silent on the question of capital's historical becoming (and overcoming), other than through an affirmation of the unchanging laws and tendencies of accumulation which supposedly govern its developmental trajectory. The result is a decoupling of the system from its history which 'freezes' it in time.

It thus becomes clear that despite their apparent opposition, both interpretations of subsumption – the systematic and the historicist – reinforce the idea that at an ideological and practical level capital has effectively achieved the suppression of its own subjection to historical finitude. In doing so they sever the critical analysis of capitalism from the constructive problem of its revolutionary overcoming, aborting Marxism's central task. To interpret subsumption from either a purely historical *or* systemic perspective undermines precisely what is theoretically forceful and unique about the category of subsumption with respect to this task.

Subsumption has a privileged status within the Marxist conceptual apparatus because it marks the *interface* between capital as system and capital as history. Whereas categories such as value, commodity and capital are internal to the totality of capitalist form-determinations, subsumption designates the point of articulation between this organic ‘system-in-process’ and the historical substance through which it lives, which it must absorb and reform in order to exist. As we have seen, it is only through the subsumption of existing social forms of production that capital can emerge into being and establish itself. And even once this has occurred in its ‘real’ form, Marx insists, it continues to radically remould ‘all its social and technological conditions’ through a ‘constant revolutionising of production’.⁹ Subsumption is thus *the* category of mediation relating the capitalist system to its external and internal foundations, which of necessity are subject to the flux of historical time. Whatever is indicated by subsumption is thus that which joins capital as system to the history that it both

resides within and acts upon.

What, then, is indicated by subsumption? Here is where the problem resides. Given Marx’s rudimentary sketch of subsumption, its tentative appearance in drafts and notes and its failure to be integrated into the final version of *Capital*, the weight it seems to bear as the principle category of mediation between capital’s systematic and historical aspects is not supported by a developed conceptual framework. Lacking a robust apparatus of its own, the theory of subsumption has, as a result, been subordinated to two competing schemas of totality which have dominated Marxist thought: a systematic dialectic that totalises synchronically and a philosophy of history that totalises diachronically. Each of these in its own way functions to disarm the revolutionary tension between the form and content of capital, between the system and its history, between the perfect ideal and imperfect materiality of exploitation. In order to re-activate this tension on the plane of theory, so that Marxism can remain operable as a discourse which tracks the movement of

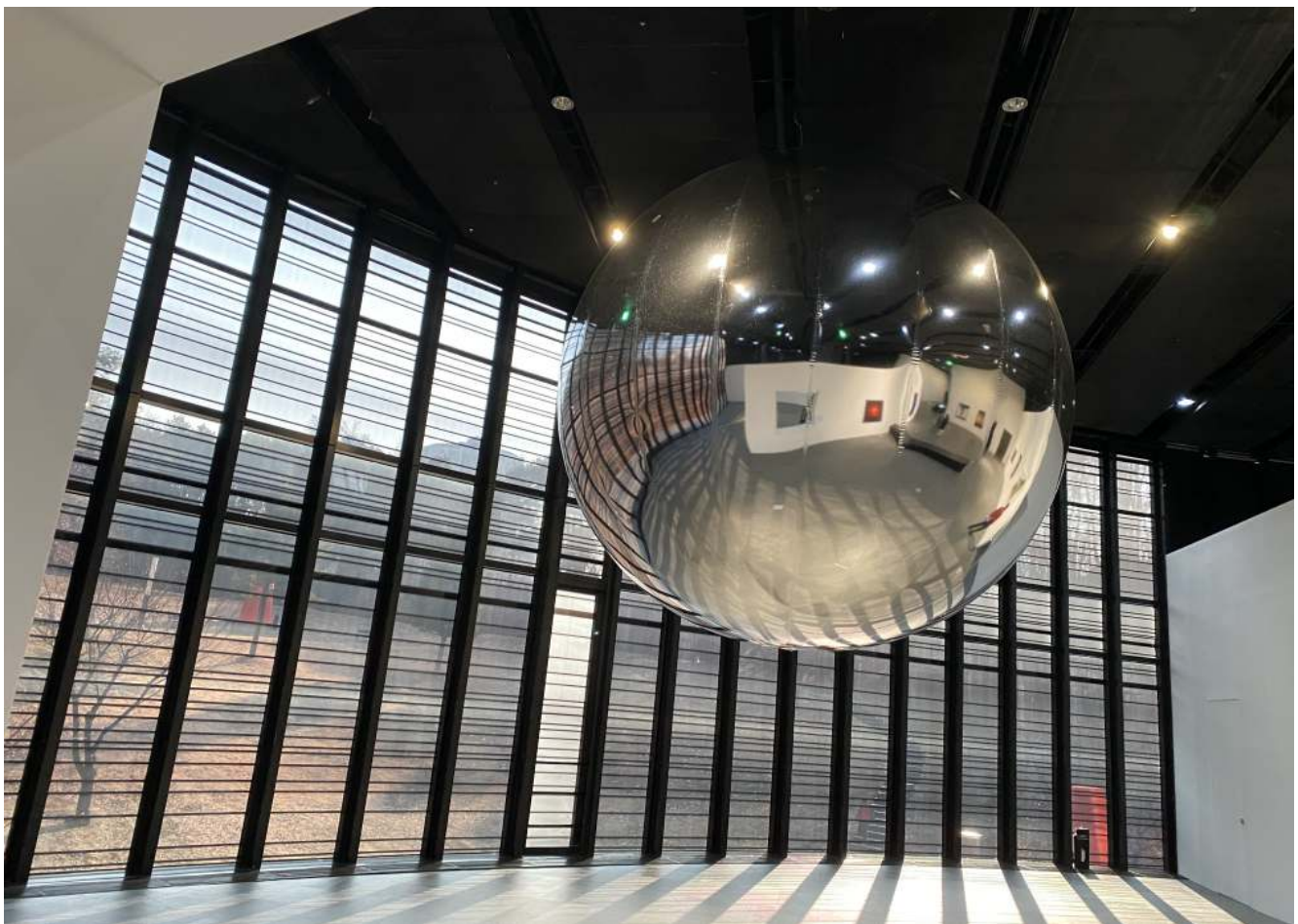


Photo: Panda Mery, ‘Prototype for a nonfunctional satellite (2013)’

a dynamic and unstable system, of concrete conditions which continually deform their own space of possibilities (to borrow a phrase from Guiseppe Longo), it is necessary to explore what exactly is at stake in the category of subsumption, both in its philosophical pre-history and in its passage to becoming a materialist category adequate to the critique of capitalist domination.¹⁰

A 'critical' concept of subsumption

The sporadic yet insistent appearance of the term subsumption throughout Marx's writings, from the early critiques of Hegel through to *Capital*, is symptomatic of the complex and ambivalent relation his work has to the German philosophical tradition. Much difficulty around the construction of a coherent Marxist conceptualisation of subsumption stems from a failure to appreciate the depth of this relation and the degree of continuity manifest in Marx's critical orientation, not only with Hegel's dialectic, but with an entire constellation of problems animated at least as early as Kant. Whilst seemingly far removed from the urgency of debates over the fate of revolutionary movements or the deepening of capitalist control over work and everyday life, the aporias within which the discussion of 'real subsumption' now appears confined can perhaps only be resolved through a reassessment of this philosophical inheritance.

Subsumption is broadly understood as a concept of classification or categorisation. In its most abstract and general philosophical form, it designates *a relation of belonging to a class of things, of incorporation into a more general category or into a formal unity*, as particulars are related to a universal, or species to a genus. Traditionally, then, subsumption has concerned the problem of ordering or organisation, of establishing a hierarchy between terms, ranging from the most particular to the most general. 'Plato' is subsumed under the genus 'man', which in turn is subsumed under the genus 'animal', and so on. The roots of such a hierarchy lie in Aristotle's taxonomic schema of being, formalised graphically in Medieval thought as 'Porphyry's tree'.

This is the meaning which subsumption had in pre-Kantian philosophy. If this was the sense in which Marx used the term when speaking of the 'subsumption of labour under capital' it would not enable him to pose the problem of subsumption in its properly 'critical' form.

Which is to say, beyond the problem of logically organising pre-given elements or tracing relations within a given system, he would not be able to develop an interrogation of how those elements come to be constituted in the first place, how they are given form such that they can be made to fit within a systematic totality; how, for example, human activity, which is common to all societies, comes to take the form of a commodity, as 'labour-power', which can be purchased and thus incorporated into capital's accumulation process. This is precisely what Marx must uncover if, in the course of his critical exposition of the system of political economy, he is to show *how* labour becomes one of the 'modes of existence' of capital and to demonstrate that this requires a specific conjunction of historical conditions and forces, rather than expressing a 'natural' relation of belonging. Without the Kantian intervention into the discourse of subsumption, Marx's use of it would express only that labour is incorporated into capital because, tautologically, it pertains to capital within the logic of the system. That is, it would offer no critical leverage on the constitution of the system and its historical impermanence.

Let us turn, then, to Kant's critical reframing of subsumption. At first sight Kant's use of subsumption seems to retain its straightforward and traditionally logical form. Indeed, the 'transcendental logic' which Kant developed and within which his account of subsumption figures was modelled upon the 'general logic' outlined above. But Kant went on to add a new and highly significant dimension to the problem of how a judgement of subsumption can be enacted: that of the heterogeneity between the elements that are to be related in the judgement. He asked not how subsumption is possible in its formally logical sense, as an ordering connection of thought determinations, but rather, in analysing the conditions of possibility for any experience of an object, he asked how sensibility and the understanding – cognitive faculties that are 'entirely unhomogeneous' with one another, and thus generate representations that are different in kind – could be connected subsumptively. This is a problem because 'in all subsumptions of an object under a concept the representations of the former must be *homogeneous* with the latter'.¹¹ Homogeneity is necessary because subsumption always implies identity: that which is subsumed under a category is said to be a particular instance *of that category*, whilst the subsum-

ing category ‘inheres’ *in* the particular, which is to say, is embodied *by it*. Whatever is subsumed under some category or form *is* that category or form, in some basic sense specified by the nature of the system (‘Socrates’ *is* a man and ‘man’ is embodied *in* Socrates). But whereas logical subsumption deals with universal and particular elements of the same kind (conceptual representations) that only have to be located appropriately within the system according to their generality and specificity (‘animal’ being higher than ‘man’ but distinct from ‘mineral’, etc.) transcendental subsumption deals with non-conceptual elements (sensible representations) that nonetheless are to be subsumed under concepts. How is this identity between unlike elements possible? How can sensations be adapted to concepts, such that they can be presented as ‘belonging’ under them? This is the basic problem of subsumption in its ‘critical’ form.

Kant’s solution to this problem rests on the identification of a productive act of ‘form-determination’ by which sensible representations are constituted as particulars for concepts, and so can be presented as subsumed under them. Beyond a relational distribution of homogeneous elements, situated at the appropriate level according to their rank in the systemic hierarchy, Kant exposes a mechanics of cognitive production whereby any particular subsumed under a concept must first have been *produced* as a particular through an act of form-determination (a ‘judgement’). The particular element must have been reworked and endowed with conceptual form in order to participate in the system’s internal economy.

For Kant, this form-determination occurs through a dissolution of the spontaneous and singular form of unity which the object initially has when received by the senses and its subsequent re-articulation according to a generic schema of conceptual relations. Through this productive process, every object of experience comes to share in the same basic set of organising determinations, a universal form of objectivity common to all subjective experience (both within an individual consciousness over time, and between subjects). Aesthetic representations are subsumed under the ‘pure concepts of the understanding’ so that something ‘unthinkable’ becomes ‘thinkable’, something private becomes communicable. The configuration of an initial ‘given’ series (sense data) is dissected and its elements are resynthesised according to the logic of

a second, dominant series (pure concepts) that determines their unity in a new way. Those elements, in their new interconnected form, now instantiate the universal, abstract ‘form’ of objectivity in a particular, concrete object (for Kant, the abstract, ‘empty’ concepts become filled with a sensible ‘content’). In this way, the elements of the first series are subsumed under the second series *through a process of synthetic form-determination*. This process forms the object generically, such that it can be related and compared with other objects and so integrated within the system (of self-conscious experience) according to its appropriate place.

Kant thus shows that only through the unifying form-determination of the ‘transcendental synthesis’ – the division of that which is given to sensation and a subsequent synthesis governed by the concepts of the understanding – can the identity (of particular and universal) implied in subsumption be produced. Rather than solely exploring how *particulars* relate to *universals*, the question of how *individual* or *singular* entities (perhaps even *pre-individuals*) first come to be formed as particular instantiations of a general category thereby also enters into view. The problem of subsumption does not consist in slotting isolated elements into a pre-given structure naturalistically or theistically (that is, assuming their pre-ordained commensurability and belonging to a harmonious order) but of the appropriative reconfiguration of one series or topological distribution according to a second; a forcing achieved by division and recombination. Kant’s model is one of production, a fusion of elements that do not in themselves ‘belong’ together. More important still, it is not simply that the two types of representation (concepts and sensible intuitions) in the subsumptive relation are heterogeneous *per se*, but that they possess kinds of unity that obey heterogeneous logics of composition (the aesthetic and the discursive). Sensibility generates an entirely different kind of unity (a spontaneous and singular, unrepeatable unity) to that determined on the basis of conceptual relations (which are by definition universal and generic). Kant’s account of transcendental synthesis centres on the negation of one kind of unity or organisation that is alien to the dominant logic and its re-formation according to another, thereby enabling the subsumed entity to be absorbed within the framework of a system.

Subsumption and system

This is the deeper, 'critical' problem of subsumption which Kant establishes and within which Marx's use of subsumption is inscribed, a problem which reaches to the foundations of systematicity, asking which processes ground the emergence of a basic, objective set of relations and forms, rather than taking those relations and forms as given by nature. It marks the threshold at which the discourse of subsumption moves from structure to genesis, from taxonomic arrangement to a genetic analysis of the formal homogeneity presupposed by all taxonomy, from a problem of recognition to one of constitution. Acknowledging the distinctive outlines which the problem of subsumption takes on in its properly critical, post-Kantian form is crucial if we are to fully grasp the significance of subsumption in Marx's thought, the status and interconnection of the different forms of subsumption under capital that he outlines, and the political horizons of action implied in the notion of 'real subsumption'.

Considered from the critical standpoint outlined above, subsumption is not simply a procedure which articulates or surveys the internal organisation of a system (understood as an ensemble of forms and their relations) but is rather a category of mediation between such a system and the content or substance which it seeks to form, which it needs in order to live. To speak of forms of subsumption is to speak of modes of *incorporation* into a systematic totality; this is precisely what is at stake in the subsumptive relation, as much for Kant and Hegel as it is for Marx (despite the radically different contexts and evaluations of subsumption in their writings). Subsumption in its critical conception denotes not merely belonging but the process by which such belonging is effected, a process of form-determination which shapes particulars *as* the particulars of that which subsumes them. As we have noted, already with Kant – however obliquely and incompletely posed – subsumption implies moving from the analysis of relations between given things to an analysis of their production, prefiguring the transition Marx makes in *Capital* from the analysis of exchange, as relations between commodities, to the production processes whereby those commodities come to be. Marx is not only interested in the position of the worker within capitalist society or how their labour functions within

the cycle of accumulation, but also in how individuals are *formed* as workers, how labour is *formed* as wage-labour, how surplus-labour is *formed* as surplus-value, how the product of labour is *formed* as a commodity, etc. In short, all of those processes of form-determination on which the being and becoming of capital depends and in which capital's life-process are expressed.

However, recognising the theoretical transition from given elements to their production processes does not exhaust the scope of transformation which subsumption undergoes in this critical phase of thought, whose interrogations span from pure reason to political economy. The central question opened up by Kant's intervention is as follows: if subsumption is not merely the recognition and distribution of elements within a system but depends on the *productive process* of synthesis by which each subsumed entity is formed as a *particular* instance of the *universal* which subsumes it, what is the nature of this formative process? What do we speak of when we speak of the form-determination of that which is subsumed? How does the division and synthetic recomposition 'work'?

Kant offers notoriously technical and intricate answers to these questions, all of which ultimately rely on an innovative reworking of classical and early modern conceptions of how the intellect functions (procedures of analysis, comparison, deduction, etc.). In this sense his account of the form-determination of objects of experience is eminently idealist in character: it occurs as a 'judgement', involves multiple procedures of cognition and generates purely subjective effects that make no claim on things as they are in themselves. And yet, however unconsciously it is presented, there is undoubtedly a proto-materialist impulse in Kant's account of subsumption insofar as he recognises the resistant 'materiality' and heterogeneity of the sensible 'content' that is to be formed conceptually in order for such objectivity to be engendered. Unlike Hegel, for whom content and form merely *appear* to be exterior to one another but are in truth linked organically as necessary moments of a single encompassing 'idea', Kant recognises that subsumption involves a kind of arbitrary or contingent transition between diverse logics of composition. There is nothing about sensible representations as such that necessitates their discursive re-configuration (there exist beings that feel but do not think). But because the system

into which these representations are to be internalised is discursive in character, it demands this re-configuration in order to be able to incorporate them. The system must form the matter that it needs in order to function, and lives more the more it forms (otherwise, Kant says, conceptual form without sensible content remains 'empty', lifeless). This view was the result of Kant's acceptance that there was no metaphysical or logical guarantee underpinning a correspondence between the order of our experience and a 'real' order of things outside of the mind. This proposition meant that the subject could not merely 'intuit' the order of the universe but rather had to generate it in the first place. Unless one adheres to the notion of a 'pure' or absolute order of forms established by a creator god, one is forced to acknowledge that every discrete system depends on the formation of a content or substance that obeys diverse and heterogeneous logics of composition, that is, it depends upon the act of *production*. A system thus lives to the extent that it can successfully form-determine this substance in accordance with its own logic, which is to say, produce it as a moment of its own existence and so *subsume* it.

Metabolic materialism

Marx's great invention, which would establish the foundations for his account of capitalist subsumption, was to take up this insight and repose it in materialist terms. For Marx, the immense power of form-determination that was so central to German idealism was undermined by its limitation to processes of a subjective and ideal character, to theory rather than practice. Marx sought to liberate the force of this synthesis by grounding form-determination not in the dynamics of cognition – processes of conceptual analysis and synthesis, judgement and syllogism – but rather in what he, following Feuerbach, emphatically referred to as the 'real life' of 'real individuals', a notion of life grounded in human flesh and blood instead of rarefied ideas. In this way, Marx's early 'humanism' recoded German idealism's conception of a subjective activity which unfolds in an abstract, ideal domain, transforming it into a conception of objective activity (*'gegenständliche Tätigkeit'*) which plays out in the material domain of human-nature interactions. Marx theorised the essential structure of these practical interactions with increasing precision throughout his writ-

ings, conceptualising them as *labour* and, more broadly, *production*. The synthesis underpinning capitalist subsumption derives its content from this materialist conception of 'real' human activity as production: a process of form-determination grounded in the transformative and appropriative relationship between social individuals and their material environment.

Developing a materialist account of subsumption thus implied reconstructing (rather than rejecting) the idealist account of form-determination, according to the character and constraints of the human-nature relationship as it plays out on the stage of history, rather than according to the character and constraints of discursive cognition as it plays out within a 'pure' rational subject. Crucially, from the 1850's onwards Marx began to conceptualise productive activity as bound by the conservationist laws of metabolic interchange (the exchange of matter and energy between an organic system and its environment), stipulating that human labour 'can only proceed as nature does ... can only change the form of the materials' it works upon, through 'composition and division' rather than pure 'acts of creation'.¹² Just as with Kant, form-determination here occurs by a dissolution of some previous organisation of the 'content' and its subsequent re-synthesis according to a new schema of objectivity.¹³ However, Marx's metabolic reconceptualisation of this process not only establishes material (rather than cognitive) constraints on how it can occur, but founds the objectivity of its resulting product upon an entirely different logic of form, one in which practical *instrumentality* rather than pure rationality is the guiding principle.¹⁴ Accordingly, through labour, as it unfolds in a technically structured production process, human agents are able to appropriate matter and energy in its 'spontaneously' occurring natural forms and rework it in order to produce new, 'synthetic' forms of objectivity that more effectively satisfy their needs and wants. The notion of 'form' at work here does not simply denote some new physical organisation of the material (although this is a necessary condition) but the instrumental end which the material is intended to serve (e.g., the satisfaction of hunger, or the cutting of trees). Labour thus enacts the subsumption of physical material under a practical end, a form-determination of the material which endows it with a novel or enhanced usability.

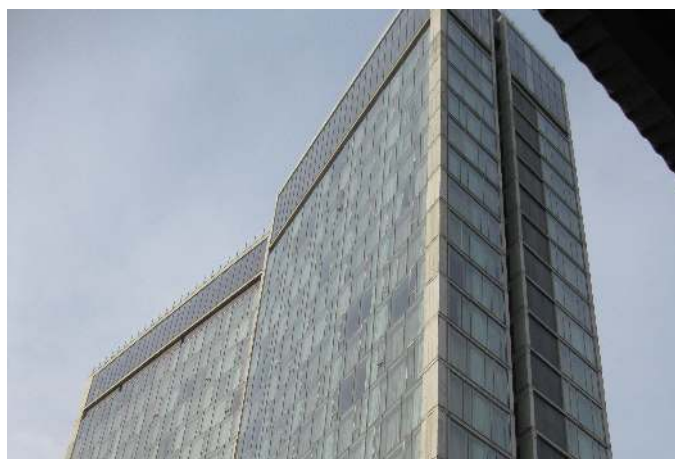
The objective forms which are thereby produced –

what, in the context of Marx's analysis of the commodity, are designated 'use-values' – are forms whose possibility is conditioned by the inherent properties and limitations of the natural materials from which they are composed. However, this conditioning places only a constraint on what and how humans can produce. Within Marx's materialist framework there is no necessary connection leading from content (natural material) to form (practically useful thing). Instead, as Marx repeatedly affirms, this connection varies contingently across time and place, always being determined by a particular society and its 'mode of production'.¹⁵ Furthermore, as Marx insists, the needs that are to be satisfied through the production of use-values are themselves variable and evolve in relation to the development of production: new forms of production generate new needs in a unceasing creative spiral which describes the becoming of history.

The objective forms that result from the synthetic activity of labour are thus always specific to a certain society and can so be properly thought of as *social forms*. Their production is a process of *social form-determination*: a society practically determining (that is, inventing and actualising) the forms it gives to the natural resources at its disposal so that, through collective effort, collective needs can be satisfied. Modes of production can be thought of as contrasting – and often competing – logics of material organisation or synthesis; instrumental and technical logics which govern the construction of social forms of objectivity. These objective forms are resources for satisfying needs and thereby securing the reproduction of the individuals that make up the society which produces them, as well as all of the material conditions of their existence (that is, the reproduction of the society as a whole). The satisfaction of needs offered by such produced resources can have a greater or lesser temporal and technical immediacy: an animal hunted and cooked satisfies physiological needs directly whereas the cultivation of crops or the formation of complex infrastructure, scientific knowledge, communication networks, etc., satisfy needs in a less direct manner (for example, as 'means of production') or simply satisfy needs that are less 'direct' (in a physiological sense).

There are two basic senses of subsumption operative in this general outline of social reproduction, prior to its specification as capitalist social reproduction: first, the subsumption of some mass of material (encountered in a

naturally or historically given configuration) under practical forms of objectivity, which is implied in every act of labour; second, the subsumption of social individuals (those who produce) under a 'mode of production' which regulates their labour activity through a particular conjunction of social relations and technical forces.¹⁶ Both are processes that determine a historically and socially specific form of unity among elements whose prior unity first has to be dissolved (a prior 'objective' unity: *the tree*; a prior mode of production: *feudalism*).



A fundamental reciprocity obtains between these two moments of subsumption in that a 'mode of production' is constituted through human practice (which is form-determining as such) yet comes to shape human practice. It is an objectified result of action that acts back upon the active subjects that bring it into existence and sustain it. Or, to put this in temporal terms, it is a structure produced by past activity that comes to determine future activity (although for much of human history and for many of those subject to them, modes of production have appeared as immutable structures, a matrix of 'second nature' rather than explicitly 'artificial' and impermanent forms of life that can be contested and re-made). Mapping this onto the critical model of subsumption outlined above, it can be said that the metabolic appropriation of natural material that occurs in labour is the mechanism by which the system of collective human existence (as some particular 'society') integrates the 'content' it needs in order to live, endowing it with a practical form appropriate to the society's particular needs. Correspondingly, the subsumption of individuals and their form-determining activity under a 'mode of production' is what guarantees systemic cohesion among all of the discrete acts of labour (and consumption); it unites

and determines the overall configuration of all of the discrete forms and their production, aggregating them as a functional totality (just as, for Kant, the transcendental unity of apperception unites every discrete act of subsuming intuitions under concepts, binding them all together in the continuum of a single conscious experience).

Capitalist subsumption

When Marx speaks of capitalist subsumption – more precisely, of the ‘formal’ and ‘real’ subsumption of labour under capital – this entire model of metabolic form-determination and social reproduction is presupposed. For Marx, the subsumption of labour under capital is a shorthand which expresses abstractly, as a relation between two elements, what is in fact a relation between two processes: the labour process and the valorisation process. In this relation, the labour process (the metabolic activity of practical form-determination outlined above) is subsumed under the valorisation process (the ‘miraculous’ increase of capital achieved simply through the cyclical metamorphoses of its forms). Through its subsumption under the valorisation process the labour process acquires a new ‘form’ or logic of organisation. It has suddenly become ‘about’ or ‘for’ something entirely different to that which has historically been its primary purpose. It is no longer oriented towards the satisfaction of needs (however unevenly that satisfaction may have been distributed among social individuals and classes) but now serves the goal of increasing abstract wealth and further, expanded production. In this new form, labour becomes the material engine or ‘content’ of economic accumulation, a subordinate aspect or moment of capital’s life processes:

*The labour process posited prior to value, as point of departure – which, owing to its abstractness, its pure materiality, is common to all forms of production – here reappears again within capital, as a process which proceeds within its substance and forms its content.*¹⁷

However, as we have seen, in contexts where subsumed and subsuming elements are in some sense ‘heterogeneous’, we have not adequately grasped subsumption simply by stating what is subsumed under what – we have merely presented it. What is demanded is to explain *how* something comes to be subsumed, to trace the underlying synthesis, the concrete mechanisms of form-

determination whose *result* is the subsumptive relation as a *fait accompli*.

Formal and real subsumption describe strategies or mechanisms by which the labour process is adapted or reconfigured (*form-determined*) such that it becomes a valorisation process, and so can be effectively integrated into the system of capitalist accumulation. This primarily involves subordinating the intrinsic goal of labour (the production of use-values) to the goal of valorisation (the production of surplus-value) such that the accumulation of capital rather than the satisfaction of social needs comes to be the principal logic of organisation (the ‘form’) governing production. Given that surplus-value production is achieved only through the *exploitation* of surplus-labour, what is involved here are mechanisms for ensuring and perfecting the exploitation of labour.

First, with formal subsumption the capitalist uses their ‘formal’ ownership of the worker’s labour time (a contractually agreed duration of work) to appropriate a surplus of product ‘containing’ surplus-value. In exchange for a wage the capitalist has purchased the right to use the worker’s capacities and to appropriate the results. By their legally entitled command over labour, acting as ‘capital personified’, they are thus able to ‘form-determine’ this activity as *surplus-value producing* activity, rather than merely use-value producing activity (ensuring, for example, that work is done to a sufficient standard and with a competitive level of productivity).¹⁸ It is only in this way that labour has acted *as* capital – has effectively valorised an initial sum of value, increasing it. The form-determination of the labour process as a valorisation process, achieved through this ‘formal’ right of ownership and command, is how, in the most basic sense, labour is subsumed under capital, made ‘one of its moments’, even though the labour process remains essentially unchanged in its technical methods or objective results.¹⁹

Second, real subsumption designates a second mechanism for form-determining the labour process as a valorisation process. Rather than relying on the capitalist’s economic power over labour to ensure its adequate exploitation, real subsumption involves a reconfiguration of the technical structure and material composition of the labour process itself, in order to maximise the production of surplus-value. Here, the metabolic basis of production, which has become the material content of

a capitalist social form, is altered in its *materiality* by the capitalist. The labour process is transformed not only socially, in terms of the economic relationships and forms through which it is organised, but at the level of the activity of labour itself and the technologies that enable and orient this activity. The worker is now not only subject to the direct domination of the employer, but also to the indirect domination of the objects that the worker must use in order to realise their metabolism with nature, in order to work at all. Tracing this deeper sense of form-determination through the successive stages of co-operation, manufacture and large-scale industry based on machinery, Marx shows how real subsumption brings about a complete transformation of the modern labour process.

As Patrick Murray has noted, the contrast between formal and real subsumption establishes a distinction between ‘social’ and ‘material’ mechanisms of form-determining the labour process (though of course, in a less direct sense, the social is always material and *vice versa*).²⁰ Maintaining focus on *how* these mechanisms actually operate, it is crucial to stress that this form-determination occurs as a process of *domination and exploitation*, that capitalist subsumption is not an ‘automatic’ process driven by a logic of natural necessity but an inherently antagonistic and contested social process. In striving to determine the labour process in a new form corresponding to the end of valorisation (an end which is intrinsically contradictory to workers’ interests and well-being) capital encounters a resistant materiality, an ‘obstinate yet elastic barrier’.²¹ This is not simply resistance of a ‘passive’ materiality as occurs in every act of labour, the inertia of every natural form that seeks to remain as it is against the force of entropy (if nature can be said to be ‘passive’ in this way), but of the ‘active’ materiality of workers’ subjectivity, a subjectivity capable of posing its own conflicting ends. On the one hand, we can speak of the ‘active’ resistance of labour to its exploitation by the capitalist, of the rift between the two claims on labour famously dramatised by Marx in his chapter on the working day: the worker’s claim over their own body (which bears the capacity for labour) and the capitalist’s claim over the commodity they have bought (the use of that capacity).²² On the other hand, real subsumption clearly expresses a strategy of maximising this exploitation by other means than direct interpersonal command.

Which is to say, rather than relying on managerial discipline and the threat of unemployment to motivate the worker’s productivity, the owners of the production process can reconfigure its technical structure in order to make the worker’s exploitation an objective feature of that process. Here, the worker must toil not because a capitalist commands it but because the means of production do. The labour process itself is designed to exploit the worker, and so, in order to work at all, the worker must submit to this objective apparatus of domination, becoming a means to *its* end rather than vice versa.

This inversion of the means and ends of production is at the core of the problem of real subsumption, which Marx describes as rendering capitalist power, exploitation and alienation a ‘technological fact’.²³ Yet the significance of real subsumption is not limited to the immediate context of exploitation and subjection of the worker in production, it also bears on the wider problem of the historical being and becoming of capital. With the increasing complexity and integrated character of the instrumental forms that have emerged in modernity and whose constant revolutionising is presupposed in capitalist accumulation, the social means of production, taken as a totality, pose the threat of locking humanity into the social logics of the present – which is to say, the destructive logics of class domination and unbound capital accumulation – as they become increasingly ‘built in’ to the technical apparatuses humanity depends on to live. Driven by competition, capitalists ceaselessly strive to implement ever more effective ways of increasing the productivity and exploitability of labour, but in transforming the labour process, these effects bleed out into the rest of society, which, after all, is composed materially of all of the products that result from these discrete labour processes. Gradually, patterns of consumption, the formation of identities, social institutions, infrastructure and communication, international relations – in short, the entire life-world of humanity – comes to be reshaped by the effects of a process whose driving logic is capital accumulation.

Yet to whatever degree this vast machinery of domination expands and envelops the totality of what we might call life, we have seen that the power of capital is rooted in its effort to control production, in its subsumption of the labour process in which the practical form and instrumental purpose of the means of social existence are

decided. This subsumption, however, is riven by tension and conflict, revealing the struggle at the core of the attempt to integrate the resistant materiality of labour into the system of capitalist social forms. In its resistance, labour expresses its being as something other than merely identical with the form and goal it is subsumed under in this system (a system within which it appears as ‘variable capital’). It is an element that refuses to submit to the new synthesis imposed upon it, either recalcitrantly or by proposing another synthesis altogether. What is at stake here is not simply a question of worker control and autonomy, but of which ends the human metabolism with nature serves. Capitalist subsumption involves a struggle over the form determination of this metabolism (as a ‘labour process’) and its product, which by implication is also an indirect struggle over the form-determination of society as a whole. It is in this sense that we can grasp real subsumption as the crucial point of mediation between the abstract being of capital as a system and its concrete historical becoming. By appropriating the human metabolism with nature, capital has highjacked the practical mechanism by which human societies reproduce their life and world, subverting the qualitatively evolving interplay between productive capacities and consumption needs (the basis for all historical becoming). Whilst this metabolism has for much of history served to sustain contexts of exploitation and class domination, the specificity of its capitalist subsumption is its re-orientation toward an abstract, purely quantitative end. This is why Marx claims that, through real subsumption, ‘only capital has subjugated historical progress to the service of wealth’.²⁴

From Kant to Marx

Was it necessary to take this Kantian detour, through concepts, cognition, synthesis and form-determination, in order to adequately address the relation between capital as system and capital as history? In order to enucleate the problem of real subsumption and its implications for revolutionary struggles? It is not difficult to anticipate the criticisms that such a ‘philosophical’ framing of these problems might elicit, a framing that may at first sight appear to pull Marx back into the theoretical field from which he sought so intently to escape in the early years of his intellectual formation. Yet paradoxically, it is only by

addressing the critical refounding of subsumption which occurs within Kantian philosophy that we can appreciate the full significance of this category for Marx’s developed materialism and critique of political economy. It is a case, not of an abstract negation of the philosophical outlook, but one that appropriates its elements whilst transcending its limits.

Two proto-materialist aspects of subsumption in Kant’s thought open the possibility for Marx’s reworking and redeployment of subsumption: first, the recognition that ‘matter’ is internally differentiated, or organised according to heterogeneous logics of form (discursive, aesthetic, etc.); second, (and related), the rejection of a ‘naturalistic’ internalisation of all forms within a single, closed system of being or space of possibilities, a creationist model of the causality of things which would guarantee their co-belonging and harmonious unity in advance. These pre-critical commitments would imply conceptualising subsumption as little more than the hierarchical arrangement of already given entities, a situating of things in their appropriate place within the order of creation. Kant’s model, by contrast, is one of production: a synthetic fusion of elements that do not in and of themselves belong together. This enables the problem of subsumption to be posed as two-fold. First, *how* (or by which process) is form determined? Second, *which* forms are to be determined? Both of these aspects of subsumption are relativised according to the specificity of the systemic context within which subsumption occurs.

Appropriating and intensifying these Kantian innovations, the critical elaboration of subsumption as synthetic form-determination is torn by Marx from its idealist context (‘cognition’) and recoded as a description of the metabolic process of material production (‘practice’). Insofar as capital is conceptualised as a system of social forms through which material production is organised and directed (a ‘mode of production’), this system possesses historical actuality to the extent that it *subsumes* (and thereby transforms) existing forms of production such that they become capitalist production processes, with all of the social and material repercussions we have seen to result from this. Different forms of capitalist subsumption (formal, real, hybrid) designate the different modalities of this process of reconfiguring production and dominating workers, and thus different articulations of the abstract logic of capitalist accumulation with con-

crete historical forms of social production and reproduction.

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Notes

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2. Karl Marx, *Capital: a Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London and New York: Penguin, 1976), 90.

3. Marx, 'The Results of the Immediate Production Process', in *Capital, Vol.1*, 1019–1038; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, volumes 30–34 (London: Lawrence & Wishart), esp. vol. 30, 54–348; vol. 33, 372–387; vol. 34, 93–121.

4. Marx, *Capital, Vol.1*, 645.

5. Walter Benjamin, 'Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History"', trans. Edmund Jephcott and Howard Eiland, in *Selected Writings Vol. 4: 1938-1940*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 402.

6. Jorge Luis Borges, 'On Exactitude in Science', in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (London: Penguin, 2000).

7. Antonio Negri, 'N for Negri: Antonio Negri in Conversation with Carles Guerra', eds. and trans. Jorge Mestre et al., *Grey Room 11* (Spring 2003), 105; Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans., E. F. N. Jephcott (London and New York: Verso, 2005), 229.

8. See, for example, Christopher J. Arthur, *The New Dialectic and Marx's Capital* (Leiden, Boston and Cologne: Brill, 2004), and 'The Possessive Spirit of Capital: Subsumption/Inversion/Contradiction', in *Re-reading Marx: New Perspectives after the Critical Edition*, eds. Riccardo Bellofiore and Roberto Fineschi (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 148–62; Patrick Murray, 'The Social and Material Transformation of Production by Capital: Formal and Real Subsumption in Capital, Volume I', in *The Constitution of Capital: Essays on Volume I of Marx's Capital*, eds. Riccardo Bellofiore and Nicola Taylor (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 243–273.

9. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 34, 30; Marx and Engels, 'Manifesto of the Communist Party', in *Collected Works*, Vol. 6, 487.

10. '... in the analysis of life phenomena, not only biological but also societal phenomena, there is no way to predetermine (math-

ematically) that space of possible evolutions, the "phase space" of life ... No ecosystem or economic system is in a state of equilibrium, nor approaching equilibrium, with its unique pre-given space of geodesics, unless all its "agents" are dead. Not only is life a process far removed from equilibrium, but it is permanently in "transition", at a critical threshold ... Like the economy, it is always "in crisis", that is, from our perspective, it continually changes space of possibilities and its symmetries.' Giuseppe Longo and Sara Longo, 'Infinity of God and Space of Men in Painting, Conditions of Possibility for the Scientific Revolution', in *Mathematics in the Visual Arts*, eds. Ruth Scheps and Marie Christie Maurel (ISTE-Wiley, 2020).

11. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allan W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A137/B176.

12. Marx (citing Pietro Verri), *Capital, Vol.1*, 133.

13. This new schema is that of a 'practical objectivity'. As Bolívar Echeverría elaborates, 'Whichever element of nature ... whichever section of material, of whichever materiality it may be, when it is integrated into a social process of production and consumption, of the reproduction of a social subject, constitutes that which we could call a practical object, or an object that has a socio-natural form'. Bolívar Echeverría, *La contradicción del valor y del valor de uso en El Capital de Karl Marx* (Mexico City: Itaca, 1998), 15 (my translation).

14. In this way, Marx was able to counter idealism without reverting to a mechanistic and deterministic conception of natural objectivity as intentionless process. At the same time, he was able to refine and elaborate the basic notion of human praxis or 'objective activity' which distinguished his materialist outlook, grounding it in the structure of metabolic relationality characterising all organic life. Thus, as Alfred Schmidt notes, 'with the concept of "metabolism," Marx introduced a completely new understanding of man's relation to nature.' *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: NLB, 1971), 78–79.

15. 'Every useful thing is a whole composed of many properties; it can therefore be useful in various ways. The discovery of these ways and hence of the manifold uses of things is the work of history.' Marx, *Capital, Vol.1*, 125.

16. Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London and New York: Penguin, 1993), 96.

17. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 304.

18. 'With his money, the money owner has ... bought disposition over labour capacity so that he can use up, consume, this labour capacity as such, i.e. have it operate as actual labour, in short, so that he can have the worker really work.' Karl Marx, *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 30, 64.

19. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 298.

20. Patrick Murray, 'The Social and Material Transformation of Production by Capital', 243–273.

21. Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1*, 527.

22. Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1*, 242–3; 989–90.

23. Marx, *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 34, 30.

24. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 590.