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# Reexamining the Political Ontology of Class: An Investigation of a Central Marxist Concept

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REEXAMING THE POLITICAL ONTOLOGY OF CLASS:  
AN INVESTIGATION OF A CENTRAL MARXIST CONCEPT

by

Ciarán Coyle

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of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors  
(Philosophy)

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## Abstract

This thesis attempted to critically examine the concept of class as it has been developed and deployed by European Marxism. The central question that guided this investigation was: “what constitutes the being of a class?” In course of developing an answer to this ontological question, this thesis approached the problem of class from two different methodological perspectives. The first part of this thesis attempted to understand class via a brief examination of the history of the concept as it appears in the writing of Marxist theorists from the original writings of Marx and Engels to the more-politically oriented theories of Vladimir Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg. The examination of the writing of Marx and Engels revealed that the concept of class is ambiguous at the origins of Marxist theory. The study of Luxemburg and Lenin attempted to demonstrate how early 20<sup>th</sup> century Marxism tried to make sense of this ambiguity by fixing the essence of classes to an autonomous and determinate sphere of economic reality.

The second part of this thesis approached the problem of the ontology of class through social theory. It picked up where part 1 left off, with a critique of the theory of economic determinism that was developed by 20<sup>th</sup> century Marxism. After rejecting this understanding of social reality, part 2 attempted to develop an alternative social theory from Marxist principles in order to find a new ontological foundation for classes.

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# 1. Introduction

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At the heart of Marxist theory is the idea that the character and development of every society is determined by a class-struggle. To formulate this idea simply would be to state that society splits into specific classes via the economic division of labor and that these classes correspond to specific strata and hierarchical positions. The ruling class of every epoch forces other classes to toil in order to produce wealth that is then appropriated by that ruling class. In this way, every society is structured around specific relations of class domination and exploitation. These relations are not fixed or static; they are determined by a struggle for power between classes as each ruling class attempts to maintain its position while the exploited class seeks to overthrow the societal order that oppresses it and establish a new one in its image. In this political theory, classes are the agents of political and societal transformation; they are the privileged subjects of history.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels formulated the basis for this theory of class-struggle in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, when capitalism had only just emerged as a

dominant economic mode of production. Given their declaration, in *The Communist Manifesto*, that capitalism “cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society,” one ought to assume that the social reality in which these thinkers produced their works differs greatly from our own.<sup>1</sup> Given these historico-social transformations, I think that the concept of class, which forms such a central part of Marxist theory, should be re-examined. Moreover the re-examination of the concept of class is almost made into a necessity when one considers the ways in which the development of history has departed from the predictions of Marx and Engels. These authors asserted that the laws of the development of capitalism ensured the increasing polarization of society into two classes—bourgeoisie (capitalists) and proletariat (workers)—and that this self-movement of capitalism ensured the victory of the proletariat, which would inevitably make up a majority of the population of capitalist society. This prophesy clearly does not match the class schema today, given the development of a large “middle-class” in industrial and post-industrial economies of the global north.<sup>2</sup>

While the reassessment of the class divisions of capitalist societies today is already an ongoing and vigorous project within sociology at present, the goal of my thesis is to develop an ontological examination of the concept class within the

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, edit. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 476.

<sup>2</sup> For relatively recent sociological analyses of class division of modern capitalism, see Erik Olen Wright et. al., *The Debate on Classes* (London: Verso, 1989). The example of the middle class is taken from pages 3-8 of Wright’s introductory essay titled “A General Framework for the Analysis of Class Structure.”

Marxist tradition. The question that drives the following analyses will be “what is the ‘classness’ of class?”, or, “what defines a class *qua* class?” In other words, the following analyses will examine the specificity of the being of classes. In order to develop an answer to this question, the first part of this work will scrutinize the concept of class as it is presented in the early history of Marxist theory. This return to the origins of Marxist theory will reveal that the question of the concept of classes is still fairly ambiguous at the outset, despite the fact that the political project guided by this theory relies so heavily on the concept of the class-struggle. So, in this thesis, I intend to investigate the nature of class and evaluate the utility of this concept in the development of Marxist political theory.

I will approach the question of the classness of class through the following steps. In part 1, I will argue that the question of the being of classes was never properly formulated in the Marxist tradition. This argument will continue in chapter 2, through a rereading of selected writings of Marx and Engels and will develop the thesis that the term “class” designates a multiplicity of conceptual beings; I will ultimately argue that the term has no singular referent. In chapter 3, I will examine two prominent Marxist political theorists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century—Rosa Luxemburg and Vladimir Lenin—and will examine how their political proposals and ideas attempt to make sense of the ambiguous concept of class by grounding it in an autonomous and determinate economic sphere of reality. The goal of these chapters is not only to lend some ontological specificity to the concept of class within the Marxist tradition, but also to acquaint the reader with some of the general developments and theoretical legacies of the way in which the



being of class was elucidated (or mystified) by Marxism. Additionally, this analysis will demonstrate the diversity of thought within early Marxism.

After this brief historical exploration of the concept of class, chapter 4 will examine the ontological ground in which the concept of class was rooted by early Marxism through a critique of the theory of social reality that is divided into an economic base and a societal superstructure. Chapter 4 is also intended to serve the reader as an explanation of some key features of Marx's critique of capitalism in order to locate the concept of within this larger critical theoretical framework. These key concepts are the value-form of the commodity, the theory of exploitation, and the concept of commodity fetishism. By examining these concepts through a rereading of the first volume of Marx's *Capital*, chapter 4 will develop a critique of economic determinism. This critique will assert that the economic theory of exploitation developed in *Capital* is logically incompatible with economic determinism. By focusing on the arguments of Marx's magnum opus, this critique of the base/superstructure model seeks to attack this idea at its theoretical origins rather than by listing historical counterexamples, as Marxist theorists have been too quick to dismiss these empirical critiques on the grounds that they represent a perversion of theory. This argument attempts to confront the logic of economic determinism on the same discursive plane.

After discarding the base/superstructure as a model of understanding social reality, chapter 5 will attempt to develop a new social theory from key ideas of the Marxist tradition. This will be done in order to secure a new ontological foundation for classes. This chapter will begin by analyzing the various networks

of meaning in the German words that Marx and Engels use for “society,” “social,” and “societal.” After working out a new Marxist terminology for social reality, this analysis will look to the work of Étienne Balibar to understand class identity beyond exclusively economic relations. This chapter will then look at the theory of the multitude as it is presented by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire*. This will culminate in the illustration of a new Marxist social theory from which I will attempt to make sense of classes.

Despite my intentions at the outset of this project, this work will not culminate in a complete ontological account of classes. It is intended to lay the groundwork for further philosophical investigation of the concept of class and seeks to push the horizons of possibility for Marxist thought by uprooting some dogmatically held positions. In returning to the writings of Marx and Engels, this work does not mean to treat these texts as sacred documents, but rather to reveal that the traditional meanings that have been derived from them do not have an exclusive claim to authenticity.

Having said this, at no point will this work assert that classes are fictional beings or that they should be discarded by political theory. Economic stratification and related hierarchies of power are real. There are owners of capital and owners of labor-power and the former certainly exploits the latter. What the following analyses seek to demonstrate, however, is that the borders of classes are not as clearly defined as that simple formulation would seem to imply. This complication of the class-composition of capitalist society is meant to be a cautionary tale. If classes are not as readily definable as has been thought, then it

becomes difficult to assert that a given political movement or body has an exclusive claim to being the representative of a given class. This claim to representation of the proletariat has been laid by a number of vile and brutal dictators who justified their atrocities by claiming that they functioned as a means to liberation. This thesis does not seek to deny the existence of classes; it questions the validity of representative power that has been built on some problematic understandings of class ontology in Marxism.



# Part 1: Class through History

The Concept from Marx and Engels through Luxemburg and Lenin

## 2. Ambiguity at the Origins

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### Multiple Classes in Marx and Engels

Political theories in the Marxist tradition accept the validity and necessity of the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat against the capitalists. These two historical entities are conceived of as inherently antagonistic classes. Yet, all too often, these movements and systems of thought in the Marxist tradition fail to examine, first and foremost, what the political ontology of a “class” is. The primary result of this disagreement over, or lack of investigation into, this fundamental problem of the political being of the proletariat in various strains of Marxist thought has ensured that words like “class,” “proletariat,” and “bourgeoisie” have multiple definitions. These different conceptions of the “class” in various Marxist theories have produced radically different revolutionary political movements over the course of the past century and a half—from the early social democratic movement in Germany, and its political descendants in Western Europe, to the Bolshevik Revolution and the development of the Soviet state throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This first half of the thesis has two central goals. First, it will acquaint the reader with some of the various understandings of class in the Marxist tradition. Second, it will locate a common thread linking these heterogeneous notions of class; in doing so I hope to discover

a conceptual plane of consistency that could provide the groundwork for the development of an ontology of class—an effort that could, in turn, facilitate the development of class-consciousness.

Before diving into this historical investigation, some methodological concerns ought to be addressed. First, this explication of the multiplicity of concepts under the one label of “class” is rooted in a narrow and limited history of ideas. Its sources will be works of Marxist theory, and this chapter will be focused on the writings of Marx and Engels specifically. In chapter two, I will turn to writings of theorists working in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. I will not claim that these texts represent the totality of Marxist thought concerning the political ontology of class. The few sources upon which this investigation relies have been selected in order to give a balanced understanding of the heterogeneity of concepts of class in the Western Marxist tradition. Questions about the social, economic, and political forces that play a determining role in the development of the various concepts of class—in short, questions linking the conceptual interiority to a material and/or social exteriority, while important, are not of chief concern here. This investigation will seldom stray from the intellectual terrain of theory.

Second, this project is not explicitly or directly genealogical. While a genealogy of the concept of class would be fascinating and invaluable, the goal here is not to understand how or why the concept of class underwent a series of transformations in the past century and a half. Again, I am only aiming to understand in what ways one concept of class differs from another within the

Marxist tradition, and to attempt to find some way in which the various concepts participate in some commonality.

Third, the thesis of this analysis is that the single word “class” has denoted a multiplicity of conceptual beings throughout the history of the Marxist tradition. This work is non-genealogical in order to avoid linking the one word to one line of historical development from which one could simply interpret “class” as a singular but changing unity. By this I mean that there really are multiple concepts of class at play within Marxism and that “class” is not simply one concept that is being altered throughout the history of Marxism. We have not abandoned one concept of class for another, but these various ideas about the political ontology of class exist simultaneously in Marxist thought today—though each idea is linked to at least one historical period in which it occupied a privileged place in Marxist political theory produced in Europe. Though the next few pages will chronologically map the theoretical points in the history of the ideas of class, tracing or drawing possible lines of flight or development from one point to another is too bold a task to accomplish in this text.

### *I. Economic Duality of Master and Slave*

A brief examination of some passages from the collaborative writing of Marx and Engels reveals that “class” is already a fairly ambiguous concept. In their first collaborative work, *The Holy Family: A Critique of Critical Criticism*, Marx and Engels briefly analyze the essence of class-struggle in capitalism in a section titled “Alienation and Social Classes.” In this work, attention is given to only two

classes in capitalist society—the bourgeoisie (capital) and the proletariat (labor).<sup>3</sup>

“The proletariat and wealth are opposites. As such they form a whole. They are both products of the world of private property. The whole question is what position each of these two elements occupies within the opposition.”<sup>4</sup> These two classes, and the antagonism revolving around the relation to the mode of production between them, represent the totality of social reality in capitalism. That is to say that, in capitalism, society is divided into a binary made up of the owners of the means of production, which form the bourgeoisie, and that the laborers who produce commodities form the proletariat, which form the proletariat. Social reality in the age of capitalism is essentially determined by an antagonistic relationship between these two classes:

[The bourgeoisie] is compelled to preserve *its own existence* and thereby the existence of the proletariat. This is the *positive* side of the antagonism... The proletariat, on the other hand, is compelled to abolish itself and thereby its conditioning opposite—private property—which makes it a proletariat. This is the *negative* side of the antagonism... The possessing class and the proletarian class represent one and the same human self-alienation.<sup>5</sup>

Classes emerge from the specific relations of ownership of the means of production. There is, then, an already given structural element to classes in capitalism. The owners of the means of production are capitalists, and those who do not own the means of production, but who must still utilize them in order to obtain the means of subsistence, are proletarians. But Marx is arguing that the

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<sup>3</sup> The nouns “society” and “the social” are not synonymous in this work. The effort to distinguish these two symbols has been inspired by Michael Halewood, whose book, *Rethinking the Social through Durkheim, Marx, Weber, and Whitehead*, will play an important role in a later chapter of this project. So as not to leave the reader in the dark, suffice it to say here that, in the most basic sense, “society” refers to a specific structural organization on the plane of “the social.” The social is a broader metaphysical concept than society.

<sup>4</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 133.

<sup>5</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 133.



antagonism is societal and not individual: the issue is the system of economic relations that produces the specific class divisions that shape individuals.

The societal dimension of this schema is attested to by the fact that an historical movement is already given for this system of relations: the bourgeoisie will attempt to maintain the system of private property, while the proletariat will attempt to abolish this system. This historical struggle is not endless because the nature of the antagonism necessarily gives the proletariat the upper hand: “In its economic movement, it is true, private property presses towards its own dissolution, but it does this only by means of a developmental course that is unconscious and takes place independently of it and against its will, a course determined by the nature of the thing itself.”<sup>6</sup> The economy not only determines the structure of the class-antagonism in society but also determines the development of that antagonism in a way that is supposedly beyond the will of the ruling class. As capitalism develops, it further develops the “proletariat *as* proletariat—this poverty conscious of its own spiritual and physical poverty, this dehumanization which is conscious of itself as a dehumanization and hence abolishes itself.”<sup>7</sup> This economic and historical determinism would later be echoed in the first volume of *Capital* when Marx proclaims that “it is only in so far as the appropriation of ever more and more wealth in the abstract becomes the sole motive of his operations, that he functions as a capitalist, that is, as capital personified and endowed with consciousness and a will.”<sup>8</sup> The bourgeoisie is therefore defined as the instrument of the expansion of capital while the

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<sup>6</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 134.

<sup>7</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 134.

<sup>8</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 334.

proletariat is defined as the human poverty produced by this expansion of wealth and that seeks to abolish the world of private property, the system of economic relations that produces both classes.

Perhaps the most fascinating implication of this brief explanation of capitalism as class-antagonism is the issue of consciousness. The bourgeoisie is the unconscious structural agent of capitalism; it is therefore alienated from human agency and consciousness. The proletariat, on the other hand, is developed as self-conscious poverty in its alienation from the production of wealth. Yet the proletariat is still only an agent in so far as it recognizes its already determined role in material history: “It is not a matter of what this or that proletarian or even the proletariat as a whole *pictures* at present as its goal. It is a matter of *what the proletariat is in actuality* and what, in accordance with this *being*, it will historically be compelled to do.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, from this early work, we can see that: there are two classes in capitalist society (the bourgeoisie and the proletariat); these classes are determined by the structure of the economic system; the goals of each class are determined by historical and economic necessity (the bourgeoisie to expand capital and the proletariat to abolish private property); and, finally, the unconsciousness of the bourgeoisie and the self-consciousness of the proletariat ensure the victory of the proletariat as a necessary outcome of the development of capital.

## *II. The Dual Proletariat–Economic and Political Being(s)*

A new dimension is added to this notion of class-antagonism or class-struggle at the tail end of Marx’s book *The Poverty of Philosophy*. In this early text, Marx

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<sup>9</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 134-135.

declares that “the antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is a struggle of class against class, a struggle which carried to its highest expression is a total revolution... Do not say that social movement excludes political movement. There is never a political movement which is not at the same time social.”<sup>10</sup> The social/political division that Marx is attacking here is the Hegelian political notion that society is divided into the public realm of the state and the private realm of civil society, which includes the economic sphere. According to Hegel, it is the state that determines the structure of civil society and therefore political movements are only secondarily social. In other words, social movements are not political, but have been determined by the political apparatus.<sup>11</sup> Marx and Engels, however, have rooted the logic of historical development and of the structure of the society in the economic sphere. The class-struggle is thus an economic struggle first and foremost, but it is necessarily also a political struggle:

Economic conditions first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle... this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself. But the struggle of class against class is a political struggle.<sup>12</sup>

This restatement of the nature of class struggle adds a new level of complexity to the issue of class composition. At the economic level, there are already two opposed classes produced by capitalism. But the struggle between these classes is

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<sup>10</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 219.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Marx’s *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*: Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 16-18.

<sup>12</sup> Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 219.

supposed to take place at the political level. This means that in order for the proletariat to become a class against capital for itself, actually existing individuals must become conscious of their class position in the political sphere of society. Self-consciousness is no longer guaranteed to the proletariat; it must arrive at self-consciousness not simply through the reality of economic oppression, but through a contested political struggle against that oppression. In some sense, Marx is positing two separate classes or at least two beings of class: the economic class that is given and already constituted by the economic system, and the political class that is defined by the developments of the class-struggle. In place of the certainty of the proletarian revolution, “the last word of social science will always be: ‘Combat or death: bloody struggle or extinction. It is thus that the question is inexorably put.’”<sup>13</sup> This indeterminacy of the class struggle and the importance of the constitution of the proletariat as a political being are themes that are further developed in the *Communist Manifesto*.

### *III. The Problem of Class Consciousness*

There is a realization of the impact history has had on the character of classes in the *Manifesto* that adds to this indeterminacy of the class-struggle. The opening line of this text’s first section, “Bourgeois and Proletarians,” is the famous dictum that “[t]he history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.”<sup>14</sup> This definition of the class-struggle as history demands that Marx and Engels examine the implications of the history of class-struggle. It now needs to be explained how classes in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe are produced and defined

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<sup>13</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 218.

<sup>14</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 473.

by previous epochs. They begin by stating that the class-divisions of previous epochs were characterized by “a manifold gradation of social rank... the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinctive feature: it has simplified the class antagonisms... into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat.”<sup>15</sup> The result of this simplification is not the immediate extinction of all other classes and class-interests; we do not jump from one self-contained society to another similarly closed system. The movement from one epoch to another is characterized by a societal rupture that opens a system to its exterior—namely, the irruption of new productive forces that cannot be integrated into a structural order without that order and its elements changing in nature.

The *Manifesto* departs from the conception of class encountered in the earlier analysis of *The Holy Family* in that the bourgeoisie is no longer the already-constituted and static half of the societal-antagonism that defines the capitalist epoch. In the *Manifesto*, the bourgeoisie is given a genesis story that ontologically connects it with previous societies and class-relations:

We see then: the means of production and of exchange, on whose foundation the bourgeoisie built itself up, were generated in feudal society. At a certain stage in the development of these means of production and of exchange, the conditions under which feudal society produced and exchanged, the feudal organisation of agriculture and manufacturing industry, in one word, the feudal relations of property became no longer compatible with the already developed productive forces; they became so many fetters. They had to be burst asunder; they were burst asunder.<sup>16</sup>

We see, then, that the bourgeoisie partially developed and was developed by a rupture in feudal society. Marx and Engels identify the material origin of this

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<sup>15</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 474.

<sup>16</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 477-478.

rupture in the dual discovery of the Americas and a viable trade route to the East (via circumnavigation of the Cape of Good Hope). The European world was opened to a new exterior that expanded its markets and demanded more powerful productive relations than those that could be controlled by feudal class-structures.<sup>17</sup> It is at this point of societal rupture that the bourgeoisie emerged as a revolutionary productive force that ultimately determined the transition from one epoch to another.<sup>18</sup>

The account of the historical development of the proletariat in the *Manifesto* reveals that the rupture that makes the transition from one epoch to another possible is not completely abolished in the establishment of a societal system of productive relations. In other words, every society maintains a definitive relation to its past and previous form of societal organization. Just as the bourgeoisie is drawn from other classes in feudal society, “the proletariat is recruited from all classes of the population,” and the interests of those older classes are not immediately extinguished by the triumph of bourgeois society.<sup>19</sup>

For instance, at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, when the factory began to occupy a place of central importance in the mode of production, the individuals comprising the infantile proletariat directed their “attacks not against the bourgeois conditions of production, but against the instruments of production themselves,” and all of these efforts sought “to restore by force the vanished status of the workman of the Middle Ages.”<sup>20</sup> Marx and Engels build on the split-

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<sup>17</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 474.

<sup>18</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 474.

<sup>19</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 480.

<sup>20</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 480.

being of classes (discovered in *the Poverty of Philosophy*) to assert that, though the bourgeois relations of production actually constitute a fully formed proletariat as an economic entity with the onset of the industrial revolution, this class does not recognize itself at the political level and instead continues to identify with vestigial class-interests. The political or societal unity of individual proletarians, which constitute the proletariat as a class located at the level of economic reality, is “broken up by their mutual competition,” which is driven by an identification with vestigial class-interests at the political level of reality. “At this stage, therefore, the proletarians do not fight their enemies, but the enemies of their enemies, the remnants of absolute monarchy, the landowners, the non-industrial bourgeois, the petty bourgeoisie.”<sup>21</sup> The actions of the proletariat are not initially guided by its own economic class-interests, but by the interests of the classes from which the original proletarians were drawn—e.g., artisans, serfs, vassals, etc. “This organisation of the proletarians into a class, and consequently into a political party, is continually being upset again by the competition between the workers themselves.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, the ongoing political task of the proletariat is defined by the struggle to differentiate its own class interests from those of the classes from which it developed. The economic determinism of *The Holy Family* is replaced by the contingent project of political realization of class-interests in *The Communist Manifesto*.

#### *IV. Multiplication of Classes*

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<sup>21</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 480.

<sup>22</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 481.

This struggle of the proletariat to constitute itself as a self-conscious political entity is further complicated in the *Manifesto* by the existence of peripheral classes aside from the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. This recognition of multiple classes beyond the two that dominate the bourgeois societal-antagonism is a necessary result of the historicization of class-composition, since the transition from feudalism to capitalism did not immediately abolish every societal relation that was rooted in the feudal epoch. Marx and Engels principally highlight two classes: the “lower middle class” and the “dangerous class.” The former is made up of “the shopkeeper, the artisan, the peasant, [etc., and] all of these fight against the bourgeoisie, to save from extinction their existence as fractions of the middle class.”<sup>23</sup> What is most interesting in the definition of this class is that it is made up of a diverse array of economic agents; the artisan and the peasant are not involved in the same economic relations. The articulation of a common class-identity that links these individuals cannot be immediately explained with reference to some unity within the mode of production. The “classness” of the petty-bourgeoisie is, therefore, developed from the consistency of their reactionary political interests. This definition breaks with all previous accounts of the ontology of class in that it posits that the petty-bourgeoisie must first be politically united and can only secondarily constitute an economic class. These vestigial class-identities of an earlier society cannot constitute their identity around their productive relations in capitalist society because these productive relations no longer occupy a position of central importance in the bourgeois mode of production. The only economic commonality linking the members of this class, then, is their anachronism as a

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<sup>23</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 482.



productive force. Lacking a coherent economic basis for their identity, this class instead unifies its members through the articulation of a shared reactionary political program. In this way, the petty-bourgeoisie is a constructed class identity that is rooted solely in the political level of reality. The petty-bourgeoisie seeks to trace a political line of flight that can reverse the ruptural transition from feudalism to capitalism. The proletariat must not only distinguish its own interests from those of its ancestors, but also from the interests of this reactionary anti-capitalist class that persists alongside the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. This means that the proletarian struggle for self-consciousness is not only disrupted by its own past, but also by the interests of this marginal class existing in the present.

The dangerous class similarly threatens the proletarian political project. This “passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society, may, here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution; its conditions of life, however, prepare it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue.”<sup>24</sup> The dangerous class, or *lumpenproletariat*, is made up of the individuals who are intentionally kept from participating in the relations of production. The army of the unemployed is used by the bourgeoisie to threaten the members of the proletariat with economic insecurity. The example of extreme destitution and accompanying economic desperation that characterizes the condition of the lumpenproletariat justifies the idea that the proletariat’s opportunity to engage in wage-labor in order to secure the means of subsistence is its good fortune—a gift from the bourgeoisie. This gift of employment cannot be afforded to everyone and so only compliant and productive workers will continue

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<sup>24</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 482.

to be allowed to work for a capitalist.<sup>25</sup> Unlike the lower middle class, the dangerous class is a direct product of the new mode of production. It is an underclass so heavily and hopelessly exploited that in the eyes of Marx and Engels it is only fit to be a reactionary tool of the bourgeoisie.

The proletariat must, therefore, be careful not to identify too strongly with this desperate class in its political activity, since this extreme poverty could potentially exacerbate above mentioned “competition between workers themselves.” The problem of the identity of the dangerous class is the opposite of the problem of the identity of the lower middle class: whereas the lower middle class has no unified economic interest but only a unified political being, the dangerous class is unified in its exclusion from relations of production and exchange but cannot be politically unified due to its extreme deprivation.

In the end, the proletariat needs to recognize its unified economic interests beyond a simple anti-capitalist political program. This means that it will have to become politically self-conscious of itself as an economic being distinct from both the reactionary mass of the lower middle class and the precariously deprived dangerous class. In laying out this political project, the *Manifesto* presents a new schematization of classes. The proletariat and bourgeoisie are the two dominant, but not the only, classes in capitalist society. Proletarian and bourgeois identities

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<sup>25</sup> This understanding of wage-labor as a gift and not as an exploitative societal relation is commonplace among members of my generation today who may express their indignation at being overworked and underpaid only to negate the realization of their exploitation by asserting that they are lucky to work two jobs and thus secure food and shelter for themselves. I have all too frequently heard friends speak thusly: “I hate that I have to work for two weeks straight without a day to rest, but I guess I should be thankful to be able to work at all.” In statements like this, what sounds like an expression of sympathy for the unemployed and impoverished is really only a dismissal of real injustice suffered by workers. This is the way in which the poverty of the lumpenproletariat serves as a justification for the exploitation of the proletariat.

are rooted in material economic relations, but their identities must be realized at the political level of reality; the proletariat is not automatically self-conscious. The realization of political self-consciousness for the proletariat is not guaranteed given the impossibility of self-consciousness of the dangerous class. It may also not entirely be rooted in material economic relations, given that the unity of the lower middle class is secured at the political and not the economic level of reality.

*The Communist Manifesto* complicates the ontology of classes not only by introducing a whole series of class-identities that escape the traditional proletariat-capitalist dichotomy, but also by providing a sophisticated framework for the problem of class-consciousness of the proletariat itself. Each class, then, exists in social reality through multiple beings: there are either both an economic and a political incarnation of each, or there is at least a contested struggle to constitute a unified being-class in each of these spheres. This ontological division of classes leads Marx and Engels to apply the term “working-class” to the economic unity and the term “communist” to the effort at constituting a political unity for the proletariat.

Moreover, given the emergence of this crisis of class-consciousness, *The Communist Manifesto* seems to give some pride of place to “Communists” as the political *agents*—over the “working-class” with regard to the actualization of the revolutionary potential of the proletariat:<sup>26</sup>

Communists, therefore, are on the one hand, practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others; on the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat

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<sup>26</sup> “Communists” is spelled with a capital C throughout the text when it is referencing the politically conscious members of the working-class.

the advantage of clearly understanding... the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement.<sup>27</sup>

Communists are here defined as *the* class conscious segment of the working-class that will push forward the revolution. And yet, “Communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working class-parties. They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole.”<sup>28</sup> In these passages, the problem of class-consciousness is simply glossed over or discarded outright. Communists are defined as the political agents of the revolution who have overcome the divide that separates the political and economic beings of the proletariat without explaining how such an epistemological disconnect can be overcome.

The political interests of the Communists would, therefore, not be opposed to working-class political parties because Communists understand the historical destiny of the proletariat. The problem that this formulation hides is the fact that working-class parties may be opposed to the strategy and tactics of Communists and this possibility (and reality) could only be made consistent with the formulation above if it is argued that these working-class parties would then be working against the interests of the proletariat. What this theory needs to explain, then, is the classness of class that is understood by Communists and which escapes other political beings that claim to represent the interests of the working-class.

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<sup>27</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 484.

<sup>28</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 483.

## V. Theoretical Dissolution

Marx most clearly tries to tackle the problem of the classness of class in the posthumously published third volume of *Capital*. In the section of this work titled “Classes,” he briefly defines classes according to their relations of property ownership: “The owners merely of labour-power, owners of capital, and landowners, whose respective sources of income are wages, profit and ground-rent, in other words, wage-labourers, capitalists, and landowners, constitute then three big classes of modern society based upon the capitalist mode of production.”<sup>29</sup> In this initial formulation, class identities are clearly defined by their economic activity, specifically the property relations that define capitalism. Other classes, aside from those listed—such as the lumpenproletariat and the petty-bourgeoisie—are not denied class-status; they are considered marginal classes and they do not define the class composition of capitalism. Additionally, the simplistic articulation of the class-composition of capitalist society is no longer a dichotomy (bourgeoisie-proletariat), but is now framed as a triad. That is, landowners are now considered a distinct class that belongs to the epoch of capitalism (though, as we saw above, they are treated as a part of the petty-bourgeoisie in *The Communist Manifesto*).<sup>30</sup>

This altered and complicated schematization of classes in capitalist society quickly falls apart: “In England, modern society is indisputably most highly and classically developed in economic structure. Nevertheless, even here the stratification of classes *does not appear in its pure form*. Middle and intermediate

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<sup>29</sup> Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 441.

<sup>30</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 480.

strata even here obliterate lines of demarcation everywhere... however this is immaterial for our analysis.”<sup>31</sup> Marx essentially observes that his schema is empirically wrong, and then argues that it should be maintained simply because it theoretically makes sense. This is an inexplicably contradictory moment in which the historical materialist argues that lessons of material history be sacrificed for the sake of his ideas.<sup>32</sup> This disconnect between theory and history then forces Marx to ask: “What constitutes a [pure] class?” To which he responds:

At a first glance—the identity of revenues and the sources of revenues... However, from this standpoint, physicians and officials, e.g., would also constitute two classes, for they belong to two distinct social groups, the members of each of these groups receiving their revenue from one and the same source. The same would also be true of the infinite fragmentation of interest and rank into which the division of social labour splits the labourers as well as capitalists and landlords—the latter, e.g., into owners of vineyards, farm owners, owners of forests, mine owners, and owners of fisheries.<sup>33</sup>

The expansion of the division of labor into every field of economic activity—even the factory, where it is later intensified under Taylorism and Fordism and welders are differentiated from riveters—multiplies the distinct economic identities of workers, capitalists, and landowners to such an extent that one cannot find classes defined by a homogenous unity of interests for all members. In volume three of *Capital*, the idea of class unity becomes an inescapable crisis at the level of empirically observable economic activity. Moreover, Marx presents the reader

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<sup>31</sup> Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 441. Emphasis mine.

<sup>32</sup> This dismissal of the clunky history of class complexity for a more elegant theoretical schematization of class division will color the debate on the ontology of classes within Marxism for nearly a century. See Derek Sayer, *The Violence of Abstraction: The Analytic Foundations of Historical Materialism* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987). Especially chapter 3: “Relations of Production.”

<sup>33</sup> Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 441-442.

with no way out of the problem since the manuscript breaks off at the very end of the passage I just cited.

## *VI. Conceptual Multiplicity*

The preceding analysis has attempted to demonstrate that the idea of class is never settled by Marx and Engels. From the early formulation of class-antagonism that defines capitalism in *The Poverty of Philosophy* to the attempt to understand the classness of class in volume three of *Capital*, there is no definitive ontological account of classes or the class composition of society. In the beginning of this analysis, we saw a confident if simplistic schematization of classes in capitalist society—a dialectical struggle for domination between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat—while at the end of this analysis, it appears that the entire idea of class-identity was nearly beyond the realm of possibility. However, the reader should not conclude from this rhetorical trajectory that the concept of class must be abandoned by Marxism; although the exploration of texts in this work was broadly chronological, it is in no way teleological. All of the various concepts of class that have been revealed to hide under the same name in the writings of Marx and Engels have continued to live on in the history of political philosophy and sociology after Marx and Engels.<sup>34</sup> As we shall see in the next chapter, these conceptual beings are given some coherence by being tied to an economic plane of consistency by Marxist philosophers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>34</sup> This does mean that abandoning the central position that classes have in political theory is one possible solution to the problem of the ambiguity of the concept and that the preconditions for the realization of this solution already seem to be developed at the foundations Marxist theory.

# 3. The Early 20th Century and the Economic Plane of Consistency

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## Economic Determinism in Luxemburg and Lenin

The ambiguity of the concept of class as it is developed in the writing of Marx and Engels haunts Marxist political theory through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how the multiple conceptual beings that are referred to by Marx and Engels with the word “class” were woven together by early 20<sup>th</sup> century theorists with a thread of consistency that attempts to make sense of the concept by grounding it in a theory of economic determinism. Marxist theory in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century will declare that although “classes” may have multiple beings (political, economic, cultural, etc.), their primordial forms are determined at the level of the mode of production. The central problem facing the anticapitalist struggle, then, is to bring this economic reality to the level of consciousness.

This chapter will pick up where the last left off by examining how the concept of class is made consistent in the writings of Rosa Luxemburg and Vladimir Lenin. I am focusing this analysis on works written by two thinkers who critique the passivity of the international Social Democratic parties that were heirs to the political project of Marx and Engels after both died. Because both of the works examined below emerge from a remarkably similar political and theoretical



climate in the history of Marxism, the fact that they present two vastly different understandings of the nature of class-struggle and revolution demonstrates the diversity of thought emerging from early 20<sup>th</sup> century Marxist thought. This diversity of conclusions, however, belies the pervasive influence of economic determinism that is at work in the works of both thinkers and the Social Democrats to whom they were responding.

Staying in line with the preceding analysis, this will not be a genealogical investigation. There is no unified ontological account of classes in the Marxist tradition, and it would be wrong to say that each variation represents a new step on the historical development of the concept of class. The same is to be said with this economic materialist grounding of the concept. The play of similarities and differences between the ideas and approaches of Luxemburg and Lenin are not teleological developments but a series of responses that do not supplant one another.

### *I. Luxemburg and Praxis*

Rosa Luxemburg wrote *The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions* as a critique of the German Social Democratic Party's treatment of the tactic of the mass strike as anathema. She argues that the problem with the Social Democrats' conception of the mass strike is that it attempts to differentiate economic strikes from political strikes and presupposes that such movements are only useful for the proletariat if they can be controlled or directed by the party. Luxemburg argues that Social Democrats are right to say that the mass strike cannot be directed or propagated by a representative party, but this should not

matter because it is only through the self-movement of the mass strike that the proletariat can hope to achieve unity and self-consciousness.<sup>35</sup>

By making the mass strike a model of self-conscious revolutionary activity, Rosa Luxemburg attempts to overcome the problem of class-consciousness present in the work of Marx and Engels by filtering epistemology through praxis. In 1906, the mass strike was a hotly contested tactic of the proletarian struggle. It had been the dominant form of resistance and upheaval during the first Russian revolution against the Tsarist state and had thus seemed to prove itself to be an effective means of advancing proletarian interests. The problem for German Social Democrats, however, was the question of how the mass strike could be planned and implemented in a directly political manner. Luxemburg disagreed with the terms of this debate on the efficacy of the mass strike, arguing that “the mass strike is not artificially ‘made,’ not ‘decided’ at random, not ‘propagated,’ but that it is an historical phenomenon which, at a given moment, results from social conditions with historical inevitability.”<sup>36</sup> She argues that there is no guiding political being that could determine, through contemplation, the direction of the mass strike beforehand and then direct its every development; the mass strike is a response to the determined trajectory of history.

What Luxemburg opposes in the Social Democrats’ debate about the efficacy of the mass strike is the presupposition that the intellectual labor aristocracy is responsible for the development of class-consciousness for the rest of the

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<sup>35</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, “The Mass Strike, Political Parties, and Trade Unions,” in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, edit. Peter Rudis and Kevin B. Anderson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 170-172

<sup>36</sup> Luxemburg, *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, 170.

proletariat. She argues that this debate is characterized by a fundamental misrecognition of the active process of the development of class-consciousness.

In order to be able to overthrow it [absolutism] the proletariat require a high degree of political education, of class consciousness and organization. All these conditions cannot be fulfilled by pamphlets and leaflets, but only by the living political school, by the fight and in the fight, in the continuous course of the revolution.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, she asserts in a preceding passage that “[r]evolution’ like ‘mass strike’ signifies nothing but an external form of the class struggle which can have sense and meaning only in connection with definite political situations.”<sup>38</sup>

Revolution is therefore only the political realization of the antagonism immanent in the class-struggle, which brings about a crisis. It, like the mass strike, is already made necessary by a determined historical trajectory. The process of the realization of this trajectory, the realization of revolution, is not achieved by removing a portion of the working-class from the experience of class-struggle in order to contemplate it, but by intensifying the antagonism of the class-struggle through political action.

Her argument modifies *The Communist Manifesto*’s assertion that Communists as the class-conscious portion of the working-class will advance the interests of the proletariat by denying that their “advantage of clearly understanding... the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement” gives them any ability to command the revolution or develop class-consciousness outside of the activity of the revolution. In her view, Communists can *initiate*, but cannot *direct*, antagonistic confrontations through which the class-consciousness of the

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<sup>37</sup> Luxemburg, *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, 182.

<sup>38</sup> Luxemburg, *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, 171.

proletariat will be developed.<sup>39</sup> In this way, Luxemburg posits a solution to the absolute disintegration of all classes through the ever expanding division of labor by attacking the division between the workers and the labor aristocracy that is supposed to represent them. This is the first step toward the unification of the proletariat.

Thus far, however, we have not discovered the being of the proletariat as it is discussed in Luxemburg's work. What this analysis seeks to understand is the classness of class that defines the proletariat and that must be raised to the level of consciousness in political activity. We at least find an expression of the ontological foundation of classes through Luxemburg's understanding of the mass strike as both a political and an economic struggle. "In a word, the economic struggle is the transmitter from one political center to another; the political struggle is the periodic fertilization of the soil for the economic struggle... [they are] two interlacing sides of the proletarian class struggle in Russia. And, their unity is precisely the mass strike."<sup>40</sup> Luxemburg defines the mass strike as the performative link bridging the discontinuous planes of economic and political reality. The dual being of the proletariat that we saw emerge in the works of Marx and Engels resurfaces again in Luxemburg who provides an answer to the problem of class-consciousness. Though the two beings are united in the movement of the mass strike, it is important to note that ontological primacy is given to the economic activity in determining the being of the proletariat. The economic struggle taking place at the relations of production is the soil of the

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<sup>39</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 484.

<sup>40</sup> Luxemburg, *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, 195

proletarian struggle as a whole. There is certainly a dialectical character to the interplay between the economic and political struggles in which the latter rises up from the former in order to fertilize it, but the only permanent plane of being for the proletariat is economic. So Luxemburg ultimately argues that the political struggle of the proletariat is only a conscious expression of the antagonistic character of the economic relations of production. This means that the historical determinism that we encountered earlier is really the temporal expression of economic determinism; political activity and reality is only an outgrowth of the internal logic of the economic sphere.

## *II. Lenin and Representation*

### *A. The Vanguard Party*

The ontological primacy that Luxemburg gives the economic relations of production in determining the being of classes is brought to its most historically-striking conclusion in Lenin's formulation of the necessity of the vanguard party. In *What is to be Done?*, a pamphlet published in 1902, Lenin attempts to settle a debate within the Russian Social Democracy Party as to whether the proletariat will attain class-consciousness through economic struggle and the development of the mode of production or whether a political struggle is necessary to revolutionize the proletariat. Lenin argues for the latter, asserting that "the task of Social-Democracy, is to combat spontaneity [of the development of consciousness], to divert the working-class movement from this spontaneous, trade-unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie, and to bring it

under the wing of revolutionary Social Democracy.”<sup>41</sup> Lenin argues that the history of the development of working-class movements across Europe demonstrates that it progresses toward a phase of trade-unionism that is managed by the bourgeois state as a non-political struggle relegated to the antagonistic confrontation of workers and owners of capital. Quoting Karl Kautsky, Lenin argues that the restriction of the development of proletarian class-consciousness to the antagonistic confrontation between workers and owners of capital ignores the fact that “socialist consciousness is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle from without... and not something that arose within it spontaneously [urwüchsig].”<sup>42</sup> Lenin is here agreeing with Kautsky’s observation that socialist theory was produced by individuals who were members of the bourgeoisie—for instance, Karl Marx’s father was a relatively wealthy lawyer, who provided him with a liberal bourgeois education, and Friedrich Engels’ father was a capitalist, who owned textile factories that Engels’ would later run. Lenin asserts that it was because theorists like Marx and Engels were not immersed fully in the economic class-struggle that they could observe the laws of economic development and class-antagonism that would lead and determine the class-struggle.<sup>43</sup>

This distinction between socialist ideology or consciousness and the material working-class struggle reintroduces the dichotomy of economic and political reality that framed the whole problem of class-consciousness in the writings of

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<sup>41</sup> Vladimir Lenin, *What is to be Done?*, trans. Joe Fineberg and George Hanna (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), 23.

<sup>42</sup> Lenin, *What is to be Done?*, 23.

<sup>43</sup> Lenin, *What is to be Done?*, 48.

Marx and Engels, and of Luxemburg. Lenin would agree with Luxemburg's argument that the unity of the proletariat cannot be secured through economic activity alone, but would contend that this class-struggle must be given an explicitly political being. The language of this last sentence echoes the ontological primacy given to the economy in determining reality—namely, the need to develop the political being of the class struggle is built from the actually existing economic struggle between already-constituted classes.

Lenin proposes an incredibly different solution to the problem of class-consciousness and unity than Luxemburg did. Where Luxemburg posits the mass strike as a praxis that would spontaneously secure the unity of the proletariat by politicizing the economic struggle, Lenin proposes the formation of a vanguard party that will educate the proletariat on the principles of the class-struggle and also forge class alliances that are explicitly political in that they project the class interests of the proletariat beyond the economic-struggle and into the entire class-division of society.<sup>44</sup> While Luxemburg's formulation of the unifying praxis of the mass strike assures spontaneous class-alliances by which the petty-bourgeoisie and lumpenproletariat are swept up into the radical action of the proletariat proper, Lenin reverses the order of radicalization by arguing that Social Democrats "must 'go among all classes of the population' as theoreticians, as propagandists, as agitators, and as organisers."<sup>45</sup> In short, Lenin is arguing for the formation of a representative political body above the proletariat that fully understands proletarian class interests and spreads them throughout the social

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<sup>44</sup> Lenin, *What is to be Done?*, 48.

<sup>45</sup> Lenin, *What is to be Done?*, 50.

strata to “proletarianize” the masses *before* praxis is initiated. Along these lines he writes: “In our time only a party that will *organise* really *nation-wide* exposures can become the vanguard of the revolutionary forces.”<sup>46</sup>

This formulation of the vanguard party is opposed to Luxemburg’s understanding of the complexity of historical reality that cannot be fully grasped by any representative body of the proletariat. In *The Mass Strike...*, the political unity of the proletariat is secured in the movement from the economic struggle (with already-constituted classes and class-relations) to the political struggle in which all other classes recognize their interests in the action of the proletariat. Luxemburg’s understanding of the development of class-consciousness is a constitutive one at the level of political reality.<sup>47</sup> Contrary to this, Lenin’s theory places the agential power of the proletarian revolution in the hands of a representative body that fully understands the laws of history by asserting that nation-wide political organization is a pre-condition of revolution.

#### *B. Revolution against Economism?*

At a first glance this may seem to imply that Lenin believes classes are not exclusively determined by an autonomous economic realm—i.e., that the political being of the class-struggle precedes its economic being. This perspective would, however, overlook the fact that Lenin believes in independent laws of history and societal development that are immanent in the economic struggle. Lenin is not arguing that the vanguard party needs to invent the interests of the proletariat, but rather that it can know the *actual* class interests of the proletariat as a *distinct*

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<sup>46</sup> Lenin, *What is to be Done?*, 55.

<sup>47</sup> The process of political constitution is secured, however, by the already-constituted classes that emerge onto the political sphere to end a new dimension to the class-struggle.



*economic being* and can use this knowledge to alter the course of history by forging alliances with other classes that are exploited by the bourgeoisie but are also given some societal privileges (e.g., the petty-bourgeoisie).<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, Lenin asserts that consciousness is built from the objective development of history and is therefore only an expression of material reality.<sup>49</sup> This presupposition of epistemological immediacy of economic reality implies that the party that is conscious of proletariat interests is merely the representative of this actually existing revolutionary class and can act and lead in its favor without any doubt as to the validity of this principle of ontological and epistemological certainty and immediacy.

The key thing to remember about Russian Social Democracy, especially as its theory was advanced by Lenin and Trotsky, is that it did not develop in an advanced capitalist economy. The Russian state was still a centralized Tsarist structure propped up by a powerful military presence that was opposed not only to the proletarian revolution, but also to the bourgeois revolution which was to usher in the age of capitalism.<sup>50</sup> As Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe argue, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*:

[I]n the struggle against absolutism, none of the Russian Social Democratic analyses suggests that bourgeois tasks cease to be bourgeois when they are assumed by the proletariat. Class identity is constituted on the basis of the relations of production... Now, the clarity of this [Marxist materialist] history is marred by the

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<sup>48</sup> See Vladimir Lenin, *State and Revolution*, trans. Todd Chretien (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), 66.

<sup>49</sup> Lenin, *What is to be Done?*, 29.

<sup>50</sup> Lenin, *What is to Be Done?*, 82.

emergence of an anomaly: the bourgeois class cannot fulfil its role, and this has to be taken over by another character...<sup>51</sup>

The success of the Tsarist state in thwarting a bourgeois revolution only pushes the responsibility for this first revolution to the proletariat, which must then incorporate a pseudo-bourgeois stage of development into its overall strategy. But this does not imply that the interests of the bourgeoisie are transformed into proletarian class interests, since these class interests are determined at the level of relations of production. At the political level, however, the vanguard party which *represents* the proletariat can be the concrete agent that carries out the class-tasks, which are bourgeois by nature of the relations of production from which would logically emerge. Leninism asserts the necessity for the vanguard party on the basis of the extremely muddled stratification of classes that Marx acknowledged in the third volume of *Capital*, as we saw in the previous chapter.<sup>52</sup> This transition of agential responsibility for historically necessary class-tasks is one basis for the necessity of the class-alliance in Lenin. But the specificity of the link between each class-task and its “natural” agent as it is determined by the economic relations of production ensures that the vanguard party of the proletariat can develop class-alliances without losing sight of or betraying the interests of the proletariat.

This logic short-circuits the linear narrative of historical materialism, which argues that the proletarian revolution can only be possible given a specific stage of economic development—i.e., advanced industrial capitalism. The knowledge of

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<sup>51</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 2014), 40.

<sup>52</sup> See above 22-23.

the laws of historical development that the vanguard party acquires allows it to determine another path toward the development of socialism in Russia that does not follow the model laid out by Marx and Engels. This short-circuit, however, does not imply that Lenin is breaking from the linear vision of history that guides historical materialism. On the contrary, Laclau and Mouffe assert that

there is no specificity, either for Trotsky or for Lenin, which can assure the survival of a Soviet State unless a socialist revolution breaks out in Europe, unless the victorious working classes of the advanced industrial countries come to the aid of the Russian revolutionaries. Here the ‘abnormality’ of the dislocation of [economic] stages [of development] in Russia links up with the ‘normal’ development of the West...<sup>53</sup>

In other words, the “break” that the Russian Social Democrats make with economic determinism is limited exclusively to the material and historical conditions of Russia as they are situated within a much broader framework of an increasingly *global* capitalist system. Therefore, the validity of this Russian theory of proletarian revolution is still predicated upon the logical necessity of an orthodox revolution in the industrial West that follows the laws of historical development as they were laid out by Marx and Engels.

Lenin’s theory of revolution, then, is not a revolution against the economic determinism that seems to guide Marx’s *Capital*.<sup>54</sup> On the contrary, the entire theory only makes sense within a broader theory of economic determinism. The Russian deviation from orthodox class-struggle through the formation of the vanguard party and class-alliances is justified with reference to the way in which

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<sup>53</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 44.

<sup>54</sup> In “The Revolution against *Capital*,” an article published in 1917, Antonio Gramsci argued that the Russian Revolution disproved economically determinist theories of Marxism that assert that social proletarian revolution is impossible without the development of advanced capitalism first (Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 39).

the historico-economic reality of Russia deviated from the “natural” development of Marx’s historical theory. The revolution and the class-identities that drive it are still profoundly tied up in an economic reality that ontologically precedes political reality and is the essential basis for the latter.

### *III. Economic Reality and Class Identity*


We have now seen that Lenin’s theory of proletarian politics posits the necessity of the *representative* power of the vanguard party in securing a unified political being of classes that will bring the proletariat to self-consciousness. Luxemburg, on the other hand, argues that the political unity of the proletariat could only be secured through the *constitutive* praxis of the “mass strike”—or “revolution,” more broadly—which could not be directed by any representative political party. These two theorists put forward very different political ideals for the development of class-consciousness for the proletariat. The success of the Russian revolution would ultimately secure a pride of place for Leninist political theory in the Marxist tradition, but the marginalization of Luxemburg’s concept of the constitutive formation of class-consciousness would not be forgotten by Marxism and, indeed, her theory could be placed within a less statist Marxist lineage that persists among radical theorists and political groups to the present day.

Despite their different conclusions as to how the consciousness of the proletariat must be developed, both of these thinkers begin to formulate the ideas, which we explored above, as a part of a critique of more passive economic trends in the Social Democratic movements of Germany and Russia. Moreover,

both Lenin and Luxemburg end up rooting the political being of the proletariat in the economic sphere of reality—namely, where relations of production produce definite classes that determine the shape of society through the class-struggle. For both of them, then, the being of the proletariat as a class is a fact rooted in the economy of which individual proletarians must become conscious in their political life.

From what has just been said, it is clear that their critiques of economism do not attempt to assert that classes are not ontologically rooted in economic relations of production, but that the success of the proletarian revolution is not guaranteed by the development of the economy. Rather, as Lenin and Luxemburg both argue, the economic class-struggle must be given a political being or assigned a political character in order for the proletariat to emerge as a revolutionary force. But in each case the conditions of possibility for the development of the political character of the class-struggle are secured by economic developments: according to Luxemburg, it is the intolerable oppression of workers in specific sites of production that will move them to politicize their class-struggle by taking the mass strike to the streets, where it will symbolically politicize other similar economic relations of oppression and usher in a general revolution; according to Lenin, it is the fact that the bourgeoisie cannot develop the definite relations of production necessary to bring about a proletarian revolution that makes the vanguard party responsible for forming political class-alliances that will further the class-interests of the proletariat. Moreover, the latter theory only makes sense within the context of an increasingly *global* capitalist

system from which principles of historical development can be extracted and adapted for the abnormal Russian situation. The fact that these two thinkers develop two radically different political programs out of such similar conditions is not our concern here; the point to keep in mind is that it is only by theoretically establishing an autonomous and determinate sphere of economic reality that these early 20<sup>th</sup> century thinker can make sense of the multiple concepts of class that are present in the works of Marx and Engels.



# Part 2: Class through Social Theory

Base/Superstructure Model and Beyond

## 4. Crisis of Base and Superstructure

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### The Incompatibility of Economic Determinism with Marx's Theory of Exploitation

The ontological primacy that 20<sup>th</sup> century Marxism gave to the economic sphere in determining the rest of social reality produces a dichotomy of social reality. But this division of social reality is rooted in Marx's assertion that the character of society and every social development—from culture, politics, social organization, and dominant modes of thought—can be explained and critiqued through an examination of the material conditions of reality. This dictum establishes a division between a material economic *base*, the functioning of which determines the character of an institutional *superstructure* and its ideological *superstructural effects*. This division between base and superstructure gave rise to the idea that anyone who gave primary importance to superstructural elements in any analysis was making the claim that ideas shape the world and not the inverse. This is to say that analyses that attempt to explain a societal institution (such as the prison system) or a mode of consciousness (such as the concept of criminality) without reference to the economic mode of production in which they were



situated were dismissed for failing to recognize that societal structures are determined by the economy.<sup>55</sup> Thus the distinction between base and superstructure functioned practically as a rubric for recognizing theorists who were enemies of the proletarian revolution. When theorists steeped in the Marxist tradition began to depart from or challenge the importance of the economic/social dichotomy, their work amounted to a betrayal in the eyes of the proponents of traditional Marxist thought.<sup>56</sup>

This departure from the dichotomy, however, may not amount to a betrayal of the ideas laid out by Marx himself. A close reading some of Marx's works that flesh out his critical materialist methodology—*the German Ideology, the Grundrisse, the Theses on Feuerbach, the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, or the Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (to name only a few)—uncovers a different set of meanings in the phrase “material conditions of reality” beyond exclusively economic relations. One could return to Marx through any of these texts, but for the purposes of this analysis, I will begin this Marxist “revolution” by returning to the work that is supposed to justify the more positivist Marxist theories of economic essentialism—namely, *Capital*.

Before returning to the writing of Marx, however, the topographical model for understanding social reality that was hinted at by the political theories of

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<sup>55</sup> The parenthetical examples are references to Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.

<sup>56</sup> Foucault was a student of Althusser and the influence Marxism had on him is apparent in sections of *Power/Knowledge*, comprised of selected interviews and writings from Foucault. See, in particular, Michel Foucault, “On Popular Justice: A Discussion with Maoists,” in *Power/Knowledge*, edit. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Soper (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 1-36.

Luxemburg and Lenin must be clarified in order to ensure that the following critique recognizes its target and does not develop into a strawman argument. To accomplish this, this chapter will begin by analyzing Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)"—an essay published in 1970 in a collection titled *Lenin and Philosophy*. This work presents one of the clearest and most succinct elaborations on and illustrations of the base/superstructure model. It will, therefore, serve as an excellent referent for the argument of this chapter. Furthermore, its date of publication will serve as an indication of the lasting legacy of the modes of thought presented in the first part of this work. The analysis of Althusser's work will thus serve to further the argument of the preceding chapter—namely, that the theoretical development of the economic sphere as an ontological plane of consistency for the concept of classes holds true for modern Marxism.

### *I. Base and Superstructure*

Althusser contends that the base/superstructure model is first put forward by Marx as a model that represents the "social whole."<sup>57</sup> He is right to assert that the division of social reality into a base and superstructure originates in Marx: in a footnote to the first chapter of *Capital*, Marx writes that his

view is that each particular mode of production, and the relations of production corresponding to it at each given moment, in short the 'economic structure of society', is 'the real foundation on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness' and that the

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<sup>57</sup> Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in *Mapping Ideology*, edit. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2012), 104.

‘mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life.’<sup>58</sup>

Marx is arguing that institutions that are not immediately economic in their nature are determined in their character by the mode of production. Furthermore, beyond this institutional level, the superstructure is also made up of “definite modes of social consciousness,” which will also be referred to in this work as “superstructural effects.” There are, then, three layers or “floors” to social reality, two of which are determined by the economic base: first there is the mode of production itself which then determines the politico-legal level as well as the ideological level.<sup>59</sup>

Asserting that the economic base determines all other layers of society is not to say that superstructural institutions and effects do not play any role in determining of social reality—the effects of the Tsarist state in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian society, as they were analyzed by Lenin, would serve as an obvious counter example to this. Rather, as Althusser argues, “It is possible to say that the floors of the superstructure are not determinant in the last instance, but that they are determined by the effectivity of the base; that if they are determinant in their own (as yet undefined) ways, this is true only in so far as they are determined by the base.”<sup>60</sup> This more nuanced interpretation of the determinant character of the superstructure fits well with the discussion of the logic of the necessity of the

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<sup>58</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I* (London: Penguin, 1990), trans. Ben Fowkes, 175n. This quote is actually an amalgamation of two passages from the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. The idea is not introduced to socialist political theory in a footnote. I have chosen to cite the footnote in *Capital* in order to demonstrate that the validity of this social model is maintained by Marx throughout his writing and that it exerts a definite influence on the analyses of *Capital*.

<sup>59</sup> Althusser rephrases this subdivision of “floors” of the superstructure as a division between the “politico-legal” level of law and the state and the level of “ideology.” Althusser, “Ideological State Apparatuses,” 105.

<sup>60</sup> Althusser, “Ideological State Apparatuses,” 105.

vanguard party discussed in the previous chapter. As we saw in the preceding chapter, the capacity of the Russian proletariat to carry out a revolution without the anterior development of bourgeois relations of production can only be possible given the context of Russia's location within a larger, increasingly global, capitalist system—in other words, bourgeois relations of production and circulation in other countries were naturally beginning to spread to Russia through global networks of circulation and production.

From Althusser's brief illustration of this social theory of the determinant economic base and the determined societal superstructure I can draw a few key points that will be helpful in setting up the rest of this chapter. First, the whole of the economic mode of production determines or produces the specific character of the societal superstructure. Second, Althusser asserts that the base/superstructure model is a theory of the whole of social reality; therefore, to understand any development of society it is necessary to first understand how it originates from economic relations. Third, the superstructure splits into two levels: an institutional state-centric level and an ethereal and decentered level of ideology, or, to borrow Marx's phrase, "definite modes of social consciousness." These floors of the superstructure can be determinant of social relations, but only in so far as the superstructural levels themselves have already been determined by the economic base. Fourth and finally, the economic sphere, I would conclude, is privileged with a high level of autonomy and that all beings produced in other spheres of society are rooted in that autonomous and already determined economic sphere. The autonomy of the economic sphere with regard to the superstructures is the

only way to explain why it is given such a determinate role in societal formation. If the superstructure could effect profound changes of the economic base that did not develop from the determinations of the base itself, then it would be impossible to say that the economy is determinate of the social whole. With this argument in mind, let us now turn to *Capital* and compare the economic theory contained within that text with the topographical model that was just laid out. This will allow me to evaluate the logical compatibility of the principle of economic autonomy against Marx's own theory of exploitation.

## *II. What is Capital?*

### *A. The Importance of the Text*

*Capital* has been seen by many as the most thorough and rigorous of Marx's critical analyses of capitalism. For this reason it has been considered something like *the* authoritative and foundational text in the Marxist theory.<sup>61</sup> The fact that this methodical and comprehensive work was branded by its author as a scientific treatise on capitalist economics inspired the positivistic developments of early Marxism, which reified the base/superstructure dichotomy, seeing this as a cornerstone of truth around which a rigorous scientific method of economic and social critique could be built. And if we, who would place ourselves within the

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<sup>61</sup> For example, in his preface to the second edition of *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Robert C Tucker argues that "Marx without *Capital* is Kant without *The Critique of Pure Reason* or Darwin without *The Origin of Species*... *Capital* turns out to be not simply Marx's major treatise on political economy, but his principle work on man, society, and government—indeed the fullest expression of his entire worldview" (Robert C Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, x).

Marxist tradition, accept the insights of Marx himself as a valid starting point for examining reality, then the position held by the positivists seems difficult to depart from given the footnote to the first chapter of *Capital* cited above.<sup>62</sup>

Thankfully, for those who remain skeptical of economic determinism, an argument against the positivistic interpretation of the base/superstructure distinction (outlined above) can be drawn from *Capital* itself. To do this I will have to examine the claims being made about the functioning of two particular processes within the economic base: exchange and production. The development of this examination will summarize Marx's analysis of the economic operations of capitalism, thereby acquainting the reader with key concepts of Marxist theory (such as exploitation, fetishism, and value), and it will also situate the concept of class within the broader framework of this critical theory.

### *B. The Commodity in the Market and the Factory*

Though Marx is exceptionally critical of capitalism in *Capital*, the first guiding question in the text is not “what is wrong with capitalism?”, but “what is capital?”; his critique of political economy begins with an analysis of the nature of political economy. In order to explore the question of the nature of capital, Marx begins *Capital* with an analysis of the commodity, since “the wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an ‘immense collection of commodities.’”<sup>63</sup> The opening section of the text quickly

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<sup>62</sup> The distinction between economic base and societal superstructure is definitely formulated by Marx. However, this does not necessarily mean that the logical structure of the distinction follows the reasoning of Althusser's analysis. We can only say that the formulation of this metaphor for social reality by Marx is used to justify economic determinism developed by later Marxist theorists.

<sup>63</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 125.

dives into an analysis of the commodity's two economic essences: use-value and exchange-value. The former belongs to the actual physical body of the commodity: the commodity is useful for others because of its physical traits. The exchange-value is the measurement by which "use-values of one kind exchange for use-values of another kind."<sup>64</sup> Both of these essences are similar in that they are representations of abstract material relations. Use-values are only ever made real through the process of the consumption of the commodity: a saw resting on the wall has no real use-value until the lumber worker makes use of it to fell a tree. Use-value, then, is actualized in the relation between commodities and people: this particular relation is one of consumption by which a product of labor is taken out of circulation in order to produce value for the consumer. Additionally, with the use of the term "value," Marx is referring to an exclusively economic sense of activity. There may be other "values," more broadly conceived – e.g., in the saw when it is resting on the wall – but these are not values that make the saw a commodity per se.

Though the example of a saw and a lumber worker may strike the reader as more of a process of production than one of consumption, the two are in fact closely related and oftentimes two sides of the same material process.<sup>65</sup> "Labor

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<sup>64</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 126.

<sup>65</sup> My terminology may be a bit confusing for those who have studied Marxist theory. By "economic activity" and "economic process," I am referring to relations that are immediately economic (e.g., production, exchange, etc.). When I deploy the terms "material activity" and "material process," I am referring simply to the material relations involved in an action before it has been given an economic dimension (perhaps because there are material actions that overflow what we would code as "economic activity"). This distinction is brought to bear on the preceding example in the following way: the material activity is action of a person felling a tree with a saw. Overcoded onto this material activity (or perhaps contained within it) are two differentiated and simultaneous economic processes: 1) the consumption of the use-value of the saw, and 2) the production of the timber commodity.

uses up its material elements... It consumes them and therefore is a process of consumption.”<sup>66</sup> The commodity as use-value enters the scene of production as the means of production that laborers utilize in order to produce wealth. My example of the saw-worker-tree relation not only clarifies the relational nature of use-values, but also introduces us to the differentiated processes located at the economic base—in this case, production and consumption—and shows us that these processes often occur simultaneously in the same material activity. Looked at one way, the utilization of the saw to cut down a tree is a non-exhaustive consumption of the saw’s use-value. Looked at from another angle, the process of cutting the tree is one of harvesting timber as a commodity; it is, therefore, also the production of an exchange-value.

Exchange-value’s realization is located in a different series of relations and is wrapped up in different economic processes. Because exchange-value is a measurement of what quantity of one commodity can be exchanged for a quantity of another commodity, this value materializes in the process of circulation in the market as a relation between different commodities. The circulation of commodities in economies built around the consumption of use-values follows a pattern in which a commodity is exchanged for money that is then exchanged for another commodity (C-M-C’, where C represents a commodity, C’ represents a

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<sup>66</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 290. All production is consumption, but not all consumption is productive in the economic sense. Marx stresses that there is an objective and qualitative difference between consumption in labor and individual consumption of a commodity in that the former produces another commodity while the latter produces the consumer himself. This distinction, however, seems to be rather arbitrary when we consider the fact that the proletariat sells labor-power as a commodity to the capitalist. Therefore, individual consumption also (re)produces the commodity of labor-power. In both cases, a commodity is produced through consumption. Individual consumption for the sake of subsistence and the reproduction of the life of the individual worker, therefore, must be recognized as a productive act.



qualitatively different commodity, and M represents money). The exchange-value is present in this mode of exchange only as a means of trading one use-value for another. Circulation is intended to maximize the satisfaction of needs of consumers; it ends when commodities are consumed and the needs of the consumers are satisfied.

The mode of circulation in capitalism follows a different pattern—namely, one in which money is exchanged for a commodity that is then exchanged for more money (M-C-M', where M' represents a transformed exchange-value). (If it is an efficient exchange, then M' will represent a greater exchange-value than M).<sup>67</sup> In this model of circulation, the attainment of money as the signifier of exchange-value is the chief concern of economic agents, which is why Marx refers to exchange-value simply as value, as will be done in this work from now on. In capitalism, the circulation of commodities is not done for consumption and the satisfaction of needs, but in order to generate more wealth. Individual commodities may go through a number of exchanges before being consumed and exiting the sphere of circulation. This means that, in capitalist economies, commodities fulfil their purpose when they are sold on the market and not when they are consumed and thus leave the economic sphere. In capitalism, therefore, the mode of circulation begins to play a more important economic role than it did in economies organized around the consumption and exchange of the use-values of commodities.

Circulation and exchange are mediated by money, which functions as the representative of value. Whatever the material substance of the money-

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<sup>67</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 247-251. More will be said about the model M-C-M' in section IV.

commodity may be—gold, silver, paper, digitized data—its use-value is derived from its designation as the universal measurement of equivalence among all other commodities. In this sense, it is a symbol. But this is not wholly unique to money, because “every commodity is a symbol, since, as value, it is only the material shell of human labor expended on it.”<sup>68</sup> This is because the value of a commodity is derived from the cost of the raw materials and the use-value of the labor that produced it. Thus, what is made equivalent in exchange value is general human labor in the abstract: if the raw materials and (simple) labor-time for a couch and an ax cost the same amount, then they would have the same value. Thus, what money really symbolizes is the equivalence of abstract labor time invested in each commodity. Therefore, as the mediator of the exchange of commodities, money is the value-form of commodities—a symbol of value alone and therefore a symbol of abstract human labor.

Marx emphasizes the fact that value is a measure of *abstract* human labor because in order for two qualitatively different commodities to be exchanged, the qualitative differences of the labor that produced them must be negated or ignored. For an ax to be equivalent in value to a vase, not only must the cost of the labor and raw materials be equal, but the differences between glassblowing and ax making must also be considered inconsequential to the value of the objects. Value is a measurement of a quantity of labor-time abstracted from the particularities of each type of labor. Labor-power, from which value is derived, is then the average productivity of an unskilled individual producer. But, to find the average productivity of a worker, one must first find the productivity of a mass of

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<sup>68</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 185.

workers and then evenly divide this for each of the individuals in the mass. Value is, therefore, a measurement of abstract individual labor-power only after it is a measure of abstract social labor.

### *C. Fetishism*

We have now discovered that our earlier claim—namely, that value is realized in circulation as a direct relation equating different commodities to one another in order to facilitate their exchange—is false. Arguing against this understanding of exchange-value, Marx asserts that “the commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labor within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity... It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things.”<sup>69</sup> What the earlier formulation of the value of commodities hides is the fact that value is the product of social processes, i.e., the work of human beings, and is not something that emerges naturally from things exchanged. This displacement of the source of value in things and not in the producers of things is what Marx calls commodity fetishism and its result is the mediation of circulation and exchange through the use of money as the universal equivalent of the value of commodities. The simplest expression of the economic effect of fetishism is the alienation of use-value for exchange-value and the alienation of the source of value—i.e., labor.

Money’s mediation of exchange hides the double abstraction of value from the consciousness of economic agents. This double abstraction is: 1) the commodity’s symbolization of the cost of the labor-time involved in its production, and 2)

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<sup>69</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 165.

money's symbolization of that cost as a measurement of the value of the commodity. The result is that the *idea* of value is separated from the *material* body of the valuable thing and this valuable thing is abstracted from the *social* process of its production from which the specificity of its actual value originates. This issue is succinctly summarized by Slavoj Žižek when he states that “during the act of exchange, individuals proceed *as if* the commodity is not submitted to physical material changes; *as if* it is excluded from the natural cycle of generation and corruption...”<sup>70</sup> Because the abstraction of value is a presupposition of exchange in capitalism, fetishism does not simply facilitate exchange; indeed, by separating value from both the physical body of the commodity and the social process that produced it, fetishism makes exchange possible.

Borrowing from Marx's language that established the groundwork for the base/superstructure dichotomy, fetishism is clearly a “definite form of social consciousness.” According to the original formula that Marx gave us for the base/superstructure dichotomy, definite forms of social consciousness correspond to the legal and political superstructure of society, which arises from the economic foundation. Because of the determining influence of fetishism at this point of the economic base, economic determinism is now confronted with a seemingly insurmountable challenge: how can a superstructural effect like fetishism play such a central role in the operations of the economic base when the economic base is supposed to determine the social institutions and practices that produce fetishism in the first place? The inconsistency of this social model with

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<sup>70</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), 12.

Marx's own theory of capitalism erodes the ontological ground on which classes were situated in the preceding chapter.

To escape this contradiction and to rescue an ontological foundation for classes, we must either argue that fetishism is not so causally important in capitalist economics, or we must rethink the concept of a base/superstructure dichotomy. Though I have no interest in defending the economic determinist mode of thinking, I will have to examine the objections that proponents of this view would raise with respect to what has been argued to this point. Doing so will simultaneously allow me to explore the character of fetishism further.

### *III. Critiques and Responses*

#### *A. Failure to Grasp Production as the Economic Real?*

The first possible objection that could be raised against the *reducto ad absurdum* that this paper has built—i.e., that orthodox economic determinism is incompatible with Marx's own economic theory—is that too much importance has been given to the money fetishism that manifests at the level of exchange, but is actually produced at a deeper level—namely, in the sphere of economic production. In other words, the orthodox Marxist would claim that this analysis has only dealt with the surface of capitalism, the market, and has divorced it from the real matter of the capitalist system, the factory. In some sense this critique of the preceding argument would be a reductionist position since it would limit the economic base solely to the realm of production. This would mean that in the Marxist topography of social reality, the market would have to be considered alongside legal and political institutions as another aspect of the superstructure, albeit one more closely related to the determining sphere of material reality.

This position must be rejected because production clearly presupposes a market in which goods can be exchanged, so that compensation can be secured for workers and profits generated for capitalists. Were there no market until production determined its character, then there would be no way to purchase the means of production needed to produce goods that could be used by commodity owners to establish the first markets. Marx himself states that products of labor “are not as yet commodities, but become so only through the act of exchange.”<sup>71</sup> Production in capitalism is done to produce commodities as exchange values, so to relegate the market to the superstructure would be senseless and only imply a greater causal role for superstructural forces in the operation of the economic base.

This problem brings us back to the simultaneity of differentiated economic processes in the same material activity (e.g., my earlier analysis of the lumber worker-saw-tree relation, which is both the consumption of the use-value of the ax by the worker and the production of lumber that will enter the market as a value). In this case, however, there is the presupposition of different and simultaneous material activities (which may be made up of simultaneous economic processes) in order for one economic process to make sense. The market is a fundamental sphere of capitalist economics and not outside of it. If we were to arbitrarily locate the market in the superstructure, this would not save the base/superstructure dichotomy, but only further problematize it given the fact that the market would nonetheless be so intertwined with the realm of production. The simultaneity of economic processes is what makes an autonomous economic

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<sup>71</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 181

sphere thinkable in the first place. The superstructure would be entering the economic base in a more pervasive way if we limited the economic base to the sphere of production alone.

### *B. Fetish and Fantasy*

A second objection to the importance of fetishism in the economic base would be to assert that fetishism is not necessary for capitalism to function, though it does allow it to function more effectively. This argument would assert that the superstructural effects of fetishism have an economic purpose, but that its economic effects would not be a driving force in capitalism. In this line of reasoning, the money fetish would be like pavement on the road to market: economic actors can bring commodities to the market (which already presupposes the process of production, since these actors would be traveling to the market from the factory—i.e., the site of production) and engage in exchange there without the pavement, but this pavement smooths out any roughness in the “path to the market”—from the sphere of production—and it exists for this reason alone. The problem with this objection is that money fetishism is not simply a pavement that smooths out a pocked road to the market: it is 1) the ground on which the capitalist market and its model of circulation—M-C-M’—stands, and, 2) also the very road from the factory to the market and vice versa. Let us look at these two characteristics of fetishism in turn.

With respect to the first point, fetishism allows us to accept money as the representative of value without looking back on the series of abstractions that produced it. In that chain of abstraction, money is a symbol of the qualitatively

equivalent value in commodities, and the value of a commodity is itself a symbol of the labor expended in its production. But the labor symbolized in the commodity is not the specific labor belonging to particular laborers; it is abstract individual labor-power, which is only quantitatively arrived at after calculating some general value for untrained social productive labor as a whole. It is only because money fetishism allows us to ignore this chain of abstractions by which value is inextricably linked to the material social reality of production that individual economic agents can act as though money is the universal and immaterial body of value. Commodity/money fetishism, which is built into the very form of the commodity, is what allows us to participate in an economy built around the production and exchange of commodities (so that the capitalist may accumulate more money) without reflecting on the material roots of value, which would necessitate the realization that money and, by extension, the commodity have no value in themselves.<sup>72</sup> If daily economic activity reflected this knowledge, then the circularity inherent in the capitalist system would become apparent. Buying commodities with money in order to sell those commodities for more money—M-C-M', the capitalist model of circulation—would be exposed as a

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<sup>72</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 164: “Whence, then, arises the enigmatical character of the product of labour, as soon as it assumes the form of commodities? Clearly from this form itself.”

This fact—that value is derived from the fetishistic commodity-form itself, and not the material content of money or of the commodity—is a traumatic kernel that must be repressed if the capitalist symbolic order is to properly function. This use of the term traumatic kernel is borrowed from Žižek, who wrote: “there is always a hard kernel, a leftover which persists and cannot be reduced to a universal play of illusory mirroring... [and] *the only point at which we approach this hard kernel of the Real is indeed the dream*. When we awaken into reality after a dream, we usually say to ourselves 'it was just a dream', thereby blinding ourselves to the fact that in our everyday, wakening reality we are *nothing but a consciousness of this dream*... It is the same with the ideological dream, with the determination of ideology as a dreamlike construction hindering us from seeing the real state of things, reality as such” (Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 48). The recognition of the existence of commodity fetishism can never suffice to dispel the ideological fantasy. The fantasy is a real material framework that *structures individual consciousness*. Recognition of this fact is not an escape from it; it requires more than thought to change thought.



redundant system built around expanding value without recognizing that value is originally only a measurement of equivalence of use-values between commodities. Without money fetishism, use-value would be revealed as the primary form of value in a commodity, since value is derived from use-value. Rational economic agents (mythic beings whose existence the original theorists of capitalism presupposed) would lose faith in money as the universal embodiment of value and economic activity would have to be adjusted accordingly: the model of circulation and exchange would become C-M-C'. This is to say that the satisfaction of needs would take precedence over the expansion of wealth.

At this point, it is worth pointing out that money fetishism does not primarily function at the level of *individual* consciousness, but at the level of *social* consciousness. Marx asserts that the principle ideological result of fetishism is that people treat money as the actual body of wealth (value) “without being aware of it.”<sup>73</sup> This claim would be almost absurd if it were made only at the level of the consciousness of the individual. After all, one can understand that money is worthless in and of itself while still using it to actually purchase goods.

The point is not that fetishism is an idea influencing the consciousness of individuals, but that it is a fantasy structuring social reality itself. Individual consciousness emerges from, or is the product of, social reality. Žižek compellingly articulates this point when he argues that the problem is not that

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<sup>73</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 166-167. “Men do not therefore bring the products of labor into relation with each other in exchange as values because they see these objects merely as the material integuments of homogenous human labor. The reverse is true: by equating their different products to each other in exchange as values, they equate their different kinds of labor as human labor. They do this without being aware of it.”

people cannot *understand* the chain of abstraction hidden behind the fetishistic illusion, but rather that

in their social activity itself, in what they are *doing*, they are *acting* as if money, in its material reality, is the immediate embodiment of wealth as such... What they 'do not know', what they misrecognize, is the fact that in their social reality itself, in their social activity—in the act of commodity exchange—they are guided by the fetishistic illusion.<sup>74</sup>

What is being posited by Žižek is a dislocation of ideology from the consciousness of individuals to its existence as a real material force in social reality. Ideology is such a pervasive social force that recognizing and identifying, at the level of individual consciousness, structural flaws, which are located at the level of social reality, is simply not enough fix these flaws. Social consciousness is produced through social action and, therefore, in order to change social reality we must change the very ways in which we act. This is one key truth that fetishism keeps us from grasping.<sup>75</sup>

Now, in turning to the second characteristic of fetishism identified above, I can say that, by hiding the truth of the chain of abstractions from the conscious activity of economic agents, fetishism also obscures the fact that capitalism is inherently exploitative of labor. We must remember that the model of exchange in capitalist circulation follows the model  $M-C-M'$ .  $M'$  is equal to  $M + M\Delta$ , where  $M$  is the original value of the commodity and  $M\Delta$  is the change in value of the

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<sup>74</sup> Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 28.

<sup>75</sup> Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 48: "In vain do we try to break out of this ideological dream by 'opening our eyes and trying to see reality as it is', by throwing away the ideological spectacles: as the subjects of such a post-ideological, objective, sober look, free of so-called ideological prejudices, as the subjects of a look which views the facts as they are, we remain throughout 'the consciousness of our ideological dream'. The only way to break the power of our ideological dream is to confront the Real of our desire which announces itself in this dream."

commodity.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore,  $M'$  is supposed to represent more money than  $M$  if the exchange is profitable (as all good capitalist exchanges ought to be), and, for this reason, Marx calls  $M\Delta$  “surplus-value”. The commodity at the heart of the exchange is really only there to facilitate the circulation of money according to the capitalist model. Therefore, when we remove this intermediary from the model, we are left with the formula  $M-M'$ , or, in Marx’s words, ““money which begets money’, such is the description of capital given by its first interpreters, the Mercantilists.”<sup>77</sup> We have now arrived at the answer to the question I posed in the second section of this chapter—namely, “what is capital?” Capital is money that begets money; it is the wealth (value) invested in the production of surplus-value.

This surplus value ( $M\Delta$ ) is converted into  $M'$  in exchange, but this conversion cannot be located at the sphere of circulation. Certainly a commodity could be bought by one person and sold to another for a higher price, thereby generating profit, but at the level of an economic system—at the level of social reality—this practice cannot be the source of social capital, since there will be a loss of wealth on the part of the second person engaged in the exchange that is equivalent to the gain of the first participant. Something material must be added to the commodity in order for it to be sold at a higher price than that at which it was bought.

This brings the investigation of the origin of surplus value out of the sphere of circulation and into the sphere of production. Since the commodity is the expression of material and social relations of production, the value of a commodity cannot increase without an augmentation of the social/material

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<sup>76</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 252-257.

<sup>77</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 256.

processes that produced it. In other words, something must be added to the commodity for its value to increase. In order to be exchanged for M', the commodity must actually leave the market and enter the site of production as a raw material to be consumed by labor in the production of a new commodity. Because I am now jumping to a different sphere of the economic base, which is as yet untouched territory for this analysis, I will have to provide an outline of Marx's theory of surplus-labor, from which surplus-value is derived.

#### *IV. MΔ's Mirror and Origin: Surplus-Labor*

Production in capitalism revolves around private ownership of the means of production. As we saw in chapter 2, those who own the tools used to produce commodities are capitalists. Capitalists utilize their wealth to hire those who have no source of wealth other than their labor-power. Class position is thus determined by one's relation to the means of production: if you own the means of production and employ workers, you are a capitalist; if you sell your labor to the capitalist and produce commodities for him, you are a proletarian. Summarizing what we learned about class from chapters 2 and 3, class positions are derived from the structure of the economic base. The class relations that define an economic system are mediated by the means of production. This is to say that, in capitalism, the means of production forms the intermediary objective base upon which class relations are built. When a specific power-relation, ownership, is applied to the intermediary object, class positions come into being. In order to understand class positions, one must determine the principle of ownership of the means of production and understand how the products of labor are appropriated.

I have already discussed the abstract valuation of labor-power, but have not yet fully emphasized that this abstract value is an exchange-value: (would-be) workers and capitalists first meet in the labor market where the workers sell the capitalists the one commodity they own in order to secure some means of subsistence (in the form of wages—in the form of money). Therefore, “the value of labor-power is the value of the means of subsistence necessary for the maintenance of its owner.”<sup>78</sup> In other words, labor-power is valued according to the cost of satisfying the needs of workers sufficiently enough to sustain their productive capabilities.<sup>79</sup> The workers then make use of the capitalists’ means of production in order to shape raw-materials into refined commodities. It is in this actual economic activity of production that the use-value of the workers’ labor emerges and is consumed. It is from this difference between actual and potential, use and exchange, that surplus value is extracted: “The fact that half a day’s labor is necessary to keep a worker alive for 24 hours does not in any way prevent him from working a whole day.”<sup>80</sup> The capitalist compensates a worker for day’s work with a day’s means of subsistence, but the actual productivity of the worker outpaces the value of the labor-power exchanged.

An entirely new series of relations immanent in the capitalist model of circulation now comes to light. To understand the importance of these new relations, I will rework Marx’s model of capitalist exchange, which is revealed to

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<sup>78</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 274.

<sup>79</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 275. There is also an “historical and moral element” to the cost of the means of subsistence determined by the wealth of the society in which the worker lives. The value of a worker’s labor-power is not simply based on the cost of materials necessary to keep the worker from starving.

<sup>80</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 300.

have a far more complex form than M-C-M'. On the market, the capitalist exchanges money (M) for a commodity (C), which becomes raw material for the production of a more valuable commodity. It is at this point that the commodity leaves the market and enters the factory. However, in order to produce this second commodity, the capitalist must first enter the labor market where he exchanges money (M) simultaneously for labor-power (L) and the means of production (P). Within the factory, the consumption of both labor-power and the means of production yields the use-value of labor, or "surplus-labor" (L'). This surplus labor then produces the more valuable commodity (C'), which then returns to the market where it is sold and exchanged for more money (M').

The true representation of exchange now appears as M-C-<{M-(L+P)}-[L'-C']>-M':<sup>81</sup> The relation symbolized inside the curly brackets represents activity on the labor market and the relation inside the square brackets represents the activity of production. The symbols that are not bound represent the visible components model of exchange in capitalism and the stages bound by the arrows represent the steps of the production of value that are hidden by fetishism, which, it turns out, make up the vast majority of the value-form of capital. The big take-away is this: capitalists pay workers enough to maintain their productivity and appropriate the actual value they produce, which is greater than the cost of their means of subsistence. In this sense, the expanded model of capitalist circulation—*a chain that incorporates production*—is also the model of capitalist exploitation. The fetishism of money, which abstracts value from its material root, also hides this exploitative nature of the circulation of labor and production by hiding the

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<sup>81</sup> The dashes are links in the chain of production and not minus signs.

most essential links in the chain:  $\langle \{M-L+P\} - [L' - C'] \rangle$ . Thanks to money fetishism, “the seller of labor-power, like the seller of any other commodity, realizes its exchange-value, and alienates its use-value.”<sup>82</sup> The money fetish does not simply lubricate the capitalist machine: it functions as the machine’s source of power.

There are a few powerful lessons to be learned from our journey through the economic underworld that is the sphere of production. First, production ought to be seen as a phase in the larger model of capitalist circulation. To exclude the links  $\langle \{M-L+P\} - [L' - C'] \rangle$  from the formula of circulation is to completely ignore the role of labor and its exploitation in capitalism. If we simply accept the model  $M-C-M'$ , then we deny labor any agency and produce a fetishistic misrepresentation of the structure of social reality. Second, fetishism blinds workers to the real value of their labor, i.e., its use-value. Workers see money as the embodiment of value divorced from the social relations that produced it and thus fail to see that all exchange-value is merely the representation of equivalence between use-values; they fail to recognize use-value as the real root of value. Workers are compensated solely for the cost of the means of subsistence necessary for them to function as a means of production for the capitalist. This means that workers are paid a representation of value (wages as money) that is equivalent to the value of the social labor expended in the production of the means of subsistence that had to be consumed in order to maintain their continued productive existence. In other words, the value of the workers’ wages is a measurement of equivalence of use-values. This is the definition of exchange-

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<sup>82</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 301.

value. It is the power of the money fetish that leads workers to alienate the use-value of their labor for the exchange-value of their labor-power on the labor market.

Third, without fetishism the capitalist mode of circulation would be regarded as wildly irrational and unjust. To say that all capital is derived from the production of surplus-value is to say that all capital is built by surplus-labor, which is derived from the exploitation of workers by the capitalist. This mode of production does not serve the interests of all members of society, only those who own the means of production. The continued participation of labor in this exploitative system is therefore irrational and necessary for the functioning of capitalism. Fourth and finally, the fact that the entire economic base relies on a superstructural effect demands that we rethink the conceptual validity and value of the base/superstructure dichotomy. But before forging ahead with this task, one final critique must be considered.

#### *V. A Final Critique: A Defense of History*

A critic may finally object to the analysis laid out thus far by claiming that my understanding of fetishism is fundamentally ahistorical. This softer economic determinist, a dialectical historian, would assert that fetishism is not uniquely rooted in capitalist economic practice; after all, Marx himself cites Aristotle's critique of money fetishism in his analysis of the capitalist model of circulation.<sup>83</sup> This dialectical historical position would rightly assert that there was no social state of nature in which capitalism functioned solely as an economic mode of production that then produced all other aspects of society later. Instead, this critic

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<sup>83</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 267.



would posit that capitalism emerged from a larger history made up of a succession of modes of production. Fetishism would simply be a “tradition of all past generations [that] weighs like a nightmare upon the brain of the living.”<sup>84</sup> The existence of fetishism would not need to be explained solely within a capitalist paradigm in order for it to be considered a superstructural effect. This particular superstructural effect can be seen as the echo of a material economic force when its theoretically primordial origins are kept in mind. This objection would at least grant some causal power to superstructural effects like fetishism, but only after it is made clear that they have their own specific economic origins. In this sense, the positivist deployment of the base/superstructure concept has already been rethought. This revision, however, has not gone far enough.

Though this criticism is right to point out that capitalism emerged from a dynamic historical process, it is wrong to assert that the money and commodity fetishism that drives the capitalist economy existed as a definite social consciousness before capitalism. As we have already discovered, there is an important distinction to be made between fetishism as a “definite social consciousness” and the individual behavior of fetishism. With Žižek’s help, we discovered that social consciousness is produced through social action. Fetishism as a definite mode of social consciousness is an ideological fantasy that structures economic practice and, for this reason, is located firmly in what has been referred to as the economic base. Of course, there are examples of money fetishists throughout history, but, by and large, the fetishistic fantasy was not a dominant

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<sup>84</sup> Karl Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 595. This famous passage is taken from the *18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

mode of social consciousness. The moneylender that Aristotle criticizes does not derive his wealth from workers who willingly alienate the use-value of their labor for the exchange-value of their labor-power. There is certainly pervasive economic exploitation in the Athenian economy; however, the exploitation of labor is not defined by the relation of *wage-slavery*, but by *actual slavery*. The slave's reality does not need to be, and perhaps cannot be, structured by the fetishistic fantasy when they are so overtly exploited by material power relations. "A stupid despot may constrain his slaves with iron chains; but a true politician binds them even more strongly by the chain of their own ideas... on the soft fibers of the brain is founded the unshakable base of the soundest of Empires."<sup>85</sup> Slave-owners in Athens were "stupid despots," but the capitalist is a true politician.<sup>86</sup> Certainly in Athens there were individuals who engaged in fetishistic practices, but it was not a definite mode of social consciousness structuring all of social reality.

Let me not restrict my counterexamples to Classical Greece. The Medieval Catholic Church outlawed money lending.<sup>87</sup> In the case of the Church, since it was official religious doctrine, it was heretical to charge interest on loans of money. The reason for this was that there is no material basis on which the interest on the loan could be justified. The Catholic state apparatus regarded making money from money as a dangerous sin. The production of capital and the money fetishism on which it is based was the work of the devil.

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<sup>85</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 105.

<sup>86</sup> Here, again, we see the political being of the class emerge.

<sup>87</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy: With Some of Their Applications to Social Philosophy*, edit. Stephen Nathanson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), 266-268.

Additionally, the dominant economic mode of production for the late medieval period, feudalism, did not produce fetishism as a mode of social consciousness. The static hierarchy of the feudal system was not built around a principle of exchanging commodities for money. The aristocratic class exploited the labor of the mass of agricultural peasants, who had to produce enough goods to satisfy their own needs as well as the needs of the knights who “watched over” them. The peasants had no say in this. They could not move or change professions. Peasants were born into servitude and died in servitude. They did not see compensation for their labor, but only received tenants’ rights to farmland and the promise of protection from the lord to whom they were loyal, and only so long as they were loyal. For the vast majority of people in the feudal system, money hardly entered their world except to buy use-values that they would consume. Properly speaking, commodities did not exist in this mode of production, since a product of labor only becomes a commodity after it has been exchanged in the sphere of circulation.

By overlooking these key differences between capitalism and previous economic epochs, and by ignoring the distinction between fetishism as an economic practice and fetishism as a definite mode of social consciousness, my critic would not have presented a defense of history, but a fundamental misrepresentation of the interplay of history and economics. The recognition of the fact that fetishism is a definite mode of social consciousness that is unique to the capitalist mode of production is at the same time a recognition and a defense

of the dynamic movement of history. With this last response, the economic determinist position has been sufficiently destabilized, if not refuted altogether.

#### *VI. Dissolution of Base and Superstructure*

The preceding analysis reveals that the strict base/superstructure division is not a viable concept. Commodity fetishism, a superstructural effect according to the traditional Marxist formulation of the base/superstructure dichotomy, must necessarily be presupposed as a precondition of capitalist economic activity if Marx's theory of exploitation is to make any sense. Moreover, this fetishism cannot be presupposed as an ideological specter of a previous economic epoch that allowed for the passage from feudalism to capitalism, since as a definite mode of social consciousness, it must be a product of social labor organized around the production of exchange-values and the alienation of use-values. The feudal mode of production, however, was organized around the production of use-values. Commodity fetishism, as a definite mode of social consciousness, is uniquely linked to the bourgeois mode of production both as a paradoxical precondition and as a product. That is to say that capitalism requires that the practice of all social agents—proletarians and capitalists, as well as those belonging to other classes existing alongside this central class-antagonism (the dangerous class and the petty-bourgeoisie that we encountered in chapter 2)—reinforce and be driven by the ideological fetishism of the exchange-value of the commodity.

By now, it should not be a secret that at the heart of the base/superstructure dichotomy was a claim made about the way in which reality fundamentally

functions. If everything we observe in the social can be explained exclusively with recourse to economic activity, then theorists need only unpack the total set of determining economic relations so that revolutionaries can go about deconstructing and reorganizing all of reality. One cannot help delighting in the pragmatic optimism of a political theory that posited an attainable and unquestionable truth in the form of an autonomous and determinate economic Real, which could be used to bring about a more just world. In some sense, it is unfortunate that there is no autonomous economic base, at least not in the simple terms that the positivist Marxists envisioned it. We must now ask if this is truly how Marx envisioned his metaphysical/epistemological division of the social.

# 5. A New Topography of Social Reality

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## Towards a New Ontological Foundation for Class

The question that has been central to this work is a question of the political ontology of the concept of class. We have seen how the term does not designate a coherent conceptual unity in the writing of Marx and Engels, and also how the multiple concepts of class have haunted Marxist thought throughout the 20th century. For a brief moment, it appeared that we had at least found a plane of consistency for the various concepts of class in the autonomous and determinate sphere of the economy. However, the analysis of the last chapter demonstrated the incompatibility of Marx's theory of capitalist economics with economic determinist models of Marxism and, in doing so, revealed that the tidy distinction between the infrastructure (economy or private sphere) and the superstructure (public sphere or all society aside from the economy) is not a valid topography of social reality. Moreover, not only "class," but also "society" and "capitalism" became floating signifiers with the dissolution of this Marxist topography.

The intertwining of the ideological and the economic aspects of society forces us to seek a new model of understanding the "social whole," as Althusser phrased it. I will begin again by returning to some writings of Marx and Engels via Michael Halewood's *Rethinking the Social through Durkheim, Marx, Weber, and Whitehead* to understand how Marx and Engels discuss social reality before it is filtered through a theory of economic determinism. In this section of the chapter, I

will develop a new distinction between the concepts of sociality and society deployed by Marx and Engels. After establishing a new terminology and using it to develop a rudimentary topography of social reality, the forthcoming analysis will look to Étienne Balibar, as well as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, in order to make sense of the position of class within this new framework.

### *I. The Social/Societal Distinction*

The distinction between the social and society lays the groundwork for a theory of historical change and continuity in the absence of a model built from a base/superstructure distinction. The two are linked, then, in their conceptual purposiveness. But one should not simply understand this new distinction as a sort of rewording of the same problem in Marxist political theory. The base/superstructure was a vertical model of society in which the upper level was always determined by the movement of the lower level. This lower level was the mode of production, and the development of the economy was guided by a dialectical logic that would be reproduced at the level of politics and society more broadly. This means that economic determinism gets translated into historical determinism in which the success of the proletarian revolution is guaranteed by the logical development of the mode of production.<sup>88</sup> For the purposes of this

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<sup>88</sup> The best example of this historical determinism in the writing of Marx and Engels can be found in *the Communist Manifesto*, at the tail end of the section I—“Bourgeois and Proletarians:” “The essential condition for the existence, and for the sway of the bourgeois class, is the formation and augmentation of capital; the condition for capital is wage-labour. Wage-labour rests exclusively on competition between labourers. The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by their revolutionary combination, due to association. The development of Modern Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable” (Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 483).

argument, this deterministic logic will not play a role in the development of the distinction between the social and society.

This illustration of the social/societal distinction will build on Michael Halewood's terminological analysis of the use of the words "social," "societal," and "society" by Marx and Engels. Halewood's work reveals that this distinction between the social and society is at least somewhat present at the origins of the Marxist tradition. His terminological dissection begins with a rereading of *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. In this work, Marx uses two words for "society": "gesellschaft" and "sozietät." The former was used by Hegel to define "civil society," while the latter does not appear in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* at all. The term's absence from the work Marx is critiquing indicates that Marx's use of sozietät is driving at a differentiated meaning between the two, and this difference allows Marx to highlight another aspect of social reality. As Halewood writes, "[s]ozietät has the connotation of a local, joint practice, which does not have a set of rules but comes about through common interests."<sup>89</sup> Later Halewood adds, that: "[b]y deploying a term which Hegel does not use, Marx is distancing himself from the apparently rational but wholly theoretical account that Hegel is attempting to construct. Marx wants to bring in the messy but real, material, lives of individuals which, in an important way, also make them what they are."<sup>90</sup> So, it appears that in using sozietät, Marx is attempting to differentiate the ideal structure of the concept of society from the actual and overdetermined play of material forces out of which a society emerges.

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<sup>89</sup> Michael Halewood, *Rethinking the Social through Durkheim, Marx, Weber, and Whitehead* (London: Anthem Press, 2014), 64.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, 66.



Halewood goes on to argue that the fact that “sozietät” is used most frequently with reference to feudal society indicates that the Marx’s usage of the term lines up with an historical development from “sozietät” to “civil society.” Marx states that “in the Middle Ages property, trade, society [sozietät], man are political;... every private sphere has a political character or is a political sphere; that is, politics is a characteristic of the private spheres too.”<sup>91</sup> Civil society, on the other hand, is characterized by an “abstract dualism” through which individual citizens become split between their freedom in private life (economic activity) and their subjection to a state apparatus that appears outside of that life (the public realm).<sup>92</sup> To summarize Halewood’s argument thus far, “gesellschaft” refers to “society” in the limited sense of “civil society” or “bourgeois society,” while “sozietät” refers to the underlying social reality out of which bridges the public and private spheres in previous epochs. Halewood asserts that by using sozietät in this way, Marx is highlighting that Hegel’s understanding of “society” as “gesellschaft” is specific to an historical epoch: the age of capitalism. The distinction between public and private that is tied in with “gesellschaft” is, then, both an abstraction and an historical reality—the public/private division is a defining feature of capitalist society.

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<sup>91</sup> Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 22. Halewood, *Rethinking the Social...*, 63. The bracketed German terms are included in Halewood’s quotation of the same passages of *The German Ideology*. The quotes used here have been cited in *The Marx-Engels Reader* to give the reader a reference consistent with other chapters of this work. Additionally, many of the quotes used here are either abbreviated or lengthier than those used by Halewood.

<sup>92</sup> The conjunction of public and private in feudal societies is a result of the fact that property relations are legally determined and inextricably linked to the political form of the state—relations between vassals and lords were simultaneously political and economic. “The dislocation of the political from the civil is premised on the freedom of the private sphere, of individuals to apparently pursue their own interests, separately from the requirements of their family status and social position...” Halewood, *Rethinking the Social...*, 65.

The rationale behind the *gesellschaft/sozietät* split is complicated and clarified in passages of *The German Ideology* where Marx uses both terms to refer to communist society. As Halewood Argues:

Marx envisages communist society in terms of *Gesellschaft* not *Sozietät*. That is, communism, considered as a society, is not a return to a previous societal formation but shares features of modern capitalist *society*. More important though is the retention of the adjective *sozial* to express the difference between “free” social activity and the objectification of such social activity which becomes external to us, returns to haunt us, in the societal formation of the historical development of societies up until now... It would seem that within communism we could indulge our social (*sozial*) activities even if communism is conceived of as a society in terms of *Gesellschaft*.<sup>93</sup>

We can see that a conception of society as *sozietät* and a conception of society as *gesellschaft* are not as distinct as the analysis of the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* would suggest. If *gesellschaft* is an historical development unique to capitalist society, then it does not necessarily supplant *sozietät*. *Sozietät* represents a qualitatively different form of society that can intersect or overlap with *gesellschaft*. Neither is reducible to the other.

Halewood argues that by linking *sozietät* and *gesellschaft* to their respectively correlated adjectives (*sozial* and *gesellschaftlich*), we can begin to understand how the two are differentiated. Earlier in *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels provide a brief clarification of their use of *gesellschaftlich*:

By soci[et]al [*gesellschaftlich*] we understand the co-operation of several individuals, no matter under what conditions, in what manner, and to what end... [A] certain mode of production... is always combined with a certain mode of cooperation, or soci[et]al

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<sup>93</sup> Halewood, *Rethinking the Social...*, 74.

[gesellschaftlicher] stage... the multitude of productive forces accessible to men determines the nature of society.<sup>94</sup>

From this passage I can say that, at least as it is deployed in *The German Ideology*, gesellschaft is a neutral and transhistorical term referring to the idea of society in general and not to the specific societal form in a given historical epoch; it is the mode of cooperation considered in the abstract and not under specific conditions. Furthermore, because of the vague definition of “societal” as cooperation of individuals in any matter toward any end, I can add that this definition of the mode of cooperation is not essentially economic, though it plays a central role in economic activity.

The more interesting lesson that should be drawn out of this definition of gesellschaftlich is the fact that it is the “multitude of productive forces accessible to men” that determines the character of a gesellschaft. This is remarkable when considered alongside the definition for “social power” (“soziale Macht”) that Marx and Engels provide a few pages later: “The social power [soziale Macht], i.e., the multiple productive force, which arises through the co-operation of different individuals as it is determined by the division of labour...”<sup>95</sup> In the preceding paragraph the gesellschaft was determined by “the multitude of productive forces” which, as we have now seen, is the definition of sozial macht. And yet now it appears that the sozial power is itself determined by the general division of labor. It would seem, then, that society is determined by social power,

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<sup>94</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 157; Halewood, *Rethinking the Social...*, 75. For the sake of specificity, “gesellschaftlich” will be translated in this chapter as “societal” and not as “social” (as it was translated in the above quote). This makes particular sense in the case of the passage above because it is derived from the same root as the final word of the quote, which is translated as “society” in the English.

<sup>95</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 161; Halewood, *Rethinking the Social...*, 74.

which is determined by economic structure and that this search for a new topography of the social beyond the base/superstructure has only resurrected the economic determinism that failed us earlier—with the incredibly important caveat that we have now found an intermediary between the economic base and the ideological and institutional superstructure in the movement of social power.

Such a reading, however, would miss the crucial context for the definition of sozial Macht within *The German Ideology*. In the full passage, Marx and Engels are actually saying that *when* the accessibility of the multitude of productive forces to men is *determined* by the division of labor, social power

appears to these individuals, since their cooperation is not voluntary but has come about naturally, not as their own united power, but as an alien force existing outside them... which they thus cannot control, which on the contrary passes through a peculiar series of phases and stages independent of the will and the action of man.<sup>96</sup>

The spontaneous movement of gesellschaft is therefore secured by the alienation of individuals from the soziale macht, which is rooted in their cooperative conjunction with the multitude of productive forces. Furthermore, “this mode of cooperation is itself a ‘productive force’”—i.e., both societal and economic.<sup>97</sup>

The societal (gesellschaftlich) mode of cooperation is a productive force that makes possible the multiplication of other productive forces. The societal mode of cooperation should be thought of as the prism through which other productive forces must pass in order to be multiplied and thereby to constitute social power. The alienation of social power from individuals, who comprise the societal mode of cooperation, originates from the division of labor—a societal limitation imposed

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<sup>96</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 161.

<sup>97</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 157.

on the free social activity of individuals. This means that social power is not determined by the division of labor in the sense that the latter *produces* the former, but in the sense that it limits the potential form of social power. In other words, it would be better to say that though the division of labor conditions social power, the sociality from which social power is derived, is irreducible to the structure of the economic mode of production.

## *II. Nature*

In order to further develop an understanding of the interplay of these concepts of social reality, it may be important to briefly depart from Halewood's analysis and note a distinction between the two German words that are translated as "nature" in the English versions of *The German Ideology*—namely, "zustand" and "natur." The word used earlier in the *German Ideology* to assert that "the multitude of productive forces" (soziale macht) determines the *nature* of society, as gesellschaft, is "zustand," which is commonly translated as "state" or "condition." Thus it bears a more temporary or contingent meaning than the English use of nature in a phrase like the "state of nature," for example. However, when Marx and Engels are discussing the way in which individuals see their social power as something alien because "their cooperation is not voluntary but has come about naturally," the German word that is translated as "naturally" is "naturwüchsig," and it is more directly related to nature in a scientific or ecological sense. These vastly different connotations are made explicit when

Marx and Engels write that “the natural conditions [Naturbedingungen] in which man finds himself—geological, orohydrographical, climatic and so on.”<sup>98</sup>

Moreover, before they give their definition of gesellschaftlich, Marx and Engels write: “The production of life, both of one’s own in labour and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a double relationship: on the one hand as a natural, and on the other hand as a social relationship.”<sup>99</sup> “Natural” here is “natürliches” in the German and bears an intimate etymological relation to “naturwüchsig.”<sup>100</sup> It would appear then, that Marx and Engels are using these terms to differentiate two levels of material reality: “natural” refers to a qualitatively distinct level of reality other than the level referred to as “societal” (gesellschaftlich). The latter may be understood as natural only secondarily—e.g., as an anthropological nature that humanity develops from biological nature.<sup>101</sup> The use of the word “natural” to refer to the form of social power (soziale macht) determined by the division of labor seems, however, to blur this line: it refers to the division of labor as a (societal) limitation imposed upon social power. Social power, therefore, can be seen as the conjunction of the productive forces of humanity and of nature that is limited by specific societal formations such as the division of labor.

Social power is the intermediary between nature and society at the same time as it is the intermediary between the base and the superstructure. The mode of cooperation is a productive force of society, whereas social power is the multitude

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<sup>98</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 149-150. The original German words for nature were found in: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Die Deutsche Ideologie* (Berlin: Verlag Detlev Auvermann KG Glashütten im Taunus, 1970), 10.

<sup>99</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 157.

<sup>100</sup> Marx and Engels, *Die Deutsche Ideologie*, 19, 23.

<sup>101</sup> This is just what Robert C. Tucker does in his introduction to *The Marx-Engels Reader*: “Original nature is overlaid with a man-made or ‘anthropological nature’” (xxiv).

of productive forces accessible to humanity. Social power is the emergence of productive forces from outside of society through the societal mode of cooperation, which is itself a productive force. Social power determines the character of society, but is also conditioned by the division of labor, which limits the horizon of the emergence of social power. The regulation of the mode of cooperation through the division of labor attempts to limit the influx or multiplication of productive forces from outside of the society. As Halewood argues, “[t]here is always a manner, a mode, in which cooperation occurs. It is not that society is a fixed object; there is no such ‘thing’ as capitalism. It gains its strength and its existence through the extent to which it informs ways of doing things.”<sup>102</sup> The mode of cooperation, then, is the point at which society opens onto the social and it must be meticulously managed by capitalism if capitalism is to continue to exist. When Halewood declares that there is no such “thing” as capitalism, he is pointing out that there is never a closed capitalist system, but rather only a regular pattern of capitalist accumulation and expansion of wealth that requires the management of the mode of cooperation through the division of labor. Social power is the source of power for every society, but it is not generated within a societal structure; it is channeled through a specific societal mode of cooperation from outside of that societal form: “Capitalist relations may be the preponderant societal relations but there are always other ‘social’ relations which both reinforce and inhibit such relations. The most important point is that there is a tension between the two. Nothing is settled.”<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Halewood, *Rethinking the Social...*, 129.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, 129

### *III. Notes Towards a New Topography*

From Halewood's discursive analysis and my own rereading of *The German Ideology*, I have derived a terminology of the social from the works of Marx and Engels. I have also begun to develop a new topography of the social beyond the base and superstructure. Yet, the rough sketch of a theory of the social that was just outlined is neither Marx's nor Engels'. By working with the specific terminology deployed by these thinkers, I am simply looking to root a theory of the social in a distinctly Marxist discourse. This will allow hopefully allow me to work towards a new social theory that maintains the integrity and validity of Marx's theory of exploitation while also providing a new ontological foundation for classes. In order to be clear, then, about the development of my discourse on the social, let me briefly pause here to review some definitions.

First, "society" (*gesellschaft*) is an abstract, and general structure of productive human relations. In other words, the character of a society is determined by the mode of production. In capitalist society, there is a disjunction of public and private through which the state controls or manages the relations of the public sphere, while the division of labor manages the private sphere. Second, "societal" (*gesellschaftlich-*) designates an abstract mode of cooperation of individuals. Different modes of cooperation correspond to different societies: "it follows from this that a certain mode of production, or industrial stage, is always combined with a certain mode of cooperation, or soci[et]al stage, and this mode of cooperation is itself a productive force."<sup>104</sup> Thus the mode of cooperation—the

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<sup>104</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 157.



societal—is always subsumed under a definite form of society. That said, a given form of society does not include or determine all of human reality.

Third, this analysis establishes that behind both the state apparatus (which controls the public sphere of society) and the economic division of labor (which manages the private sphere), there is social power (*sozial Macht*). Halewood points toward this idea of social reality that is irreducible to the societal structures which attempt to manage it when he draws a distinction “between the general organization of a particular society (*Gesellschaft*) which makes up the totality of the relations which consist at a given moment, and the social might of the multiplied productive force. The social (*sozial*), as has been seen, invokes both more and less than the societal relations of *Gesellschaft*.”<sup>105</sup> Social power, as the multiplied productive forces, is given societal expression through its conjunction with the means of cooperation. Because social power is irreducible to a given society, it poses a threat at the same time as it is the source of societal wealth. It must, therefore, be managed by society through the state, through ideology, and through the division of labor. Capital attempts to subsume the productive forces of social power, but these productive forces can also be weaponized by the masses: social power is both a potential source of wealth and a potential revolutionary force.

Fourth and finally, I argue that if social power is derived from outside of a given society or societal form, then this outside can be recognized as something distinct, and this will here be given the term “sociality” (roughly analogous to *sozietät*). Sociality should be thought of as a smooth space upon which societal

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<sup>105</sup> Halewood, *Rethinking the Social...*, 75.

territories are inscribed. These territories limit the potential influx of social power through the state—a reification of legal and illegal political relations—and the division of labor—a reification of legitimate and illegitimate property relations. Borrowing terminology that will be vital to a later section of this chapter, I will say that societal power is developed by transcendent apparatuses of control that seek to manage social power, which is immanent in material reality conceived of as sociality.<sup>106</sup>

As we discovered in the preceding chapter, in order to establish the capitalist division of labor on the smooth space of sociality, economic relations must first be fetishized. That is, social power must be channeled through an economic division of labor predicated on a fetishized societal consciousness.<sup>107</sup> One could argue that ideology is the hegemonic link that makes capitalism into a coherent form of society by bridging the apparatuses of control in the public and private spheres. The most important conclusion to be drawn from this rough outline of a social theory is a reformulation of the fact that classes are products of the division of labor: they are territorialized identities that belong to a given society. The point of the proletarian revolution, however, is to liberate productive forces from the division of labor and, therefore, the proletariat cannot be a revolutionary class without also dismantling its own class identity.

#### *IV. State, Economy, and Sociality*

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<sup>106</sup> For more on the idea of transcendent apparatuses, see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, “Two Europes, Two Modernities”, in *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 74-83.

<sup>107</sup> Halewood reveals that the “definite modes of social consciousness” referred to by Marx in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, and again in *Capital*, are referred to as “gesellschaftliches” in the German. Given the schema I have just laid out, it would therefore be more appropriate to refer to them as “definite modes of societal consciousness.” Halewood, *Rethinking the Social...*, 61.

The four conclusions that can be drawn from the distinction between sociality and society still do little to clarify how society functions or what it is. In order to develop this line of thought, the division of bourgeois society into the state and the division of labor as two means of maintaining a regular pattern of productivity must be subjected to further investigation. In *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx*, Étienne Balibar sheds some light on the politico-economic functioning of society in a section titled "In Search of the Proletariat: The Notion of Class Politics in Marx." Late in this piece, Balibar argues that

the labor relation (as a relation of exploitation) is immediately economic and political; the form of the "economic community" and that of the state "grow" simultaneously out of this "basis." There can therefore be no ambiguity: if there are "mediations," neither do they take place between pre-existing economic and political spheres, nor does one originate from a pre-existing other. Rather, the formation and the evolution of each of them occurs from their permanent common basis, which precisely explains the "correlation" that remains between the two. In other words, the relations of the exploitation of labor are both the "seed" of the market ("economic community") and the seed of the state (sovereignty/ servitude).<sup>108</sup>

Bourgeois ideology divides social reality into separate spheres of economics and politics and, through Hegel, brings with this division the idea that the economic evolves out of the state. Marx's own analysis of society has been frequently read as a reversal of the Hegelian logic regarding the determinant relation between the state and civil society.<sup>109</sup> In this traditional reading, Marx argues that the state

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<sup>108</sup> Étienne Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx*, trans. James Swenson (New York: Routledge, 1994), 138-139.

<sup>109</sup> For example, Robert C. Tucker writes that "One could discover social reality... by turning Hegel 'right side up'... Marx inverted the Hegelian proposition on the relation between the state and "civil society" (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*, by which Hegel meant the realm of private

evolves out of civil society. According to Balibar, however, the real Marxist subversion of bourgeois ideology is in the rejection of the division between the two spheres. This subversion is done by asserting that the public and private spheres are both erected on a third principle—the labor relation—that is irreducible to either sphere.

The labor-relation is always something more than societal; it is not limited to the system of capitalism in an exclusively economic sense and it is for this very reason that the labor-relation produces effects outside of the economic realm. The labor relation that overflows the economic and the political, and which is also the basis for these two spheres, is, moreover, a relation of exploitation. And here, through Balibar, we return to our earlier discussion of the theory of exploitation: “What Marx calls exploitation is a process with two sides, neither of which has a privileged position over the other; they are designated by the two correlative terms *surplus labor* and *surplus value*...”<sup>110</sup> Surplus labor is the difference between the socially necessary labor, symbolized by money, that the capitalist used to purchase labor-power and the value actually produced by the labor that was bought: it is the unpaid labor that generates value appropriated by the capitalist. This appropriated value is surplus-value—“the ‘abstract’ movement of the valorization of value, or the differential in the increase of capital.”<sup>111</sup> The extraction of surplus-labor and its valorization as surplus-value is what defines the exploitative labor-relation of capitalism; it is

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economic endeavor). Civil society was not an outgrowth of the state, as in Hegel’s view; rather, the state was an outgrowth of civil society” (*The Marx-Engels Reader*, xxiii-xxiv).

<sup>110</sup> Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, 139.

<sup>111</sup> Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, 139.

a social relation in which labor-power is treated as a ‘commodity,’ and occurs only to the extent that it can be so treated (for it does resist). In other words, [this] self-movement [of capitalism] presupposes a series of unstable *conditions*, some created in the sphere of production (labor discipline and habits, a hierarchy of skills and salaries, etc.), and others created ‘outside’ of this sphere, in the ‘social’ space supervised by the state.<sup>112</sup>

The phrase “self-movement of capitalism” is taken from Marx’s *Capital* and refers to the pattern of regularity that defines the capitalist system. Combining this notion of the self-movement of capitalism with Halewood’s assertion that capitalism is not a “thing” in the sense of a static and self-contained unity, I can say that the self-movement of capitalism is its exploitation of labor in order to valorize surplus labor as surplus value. Labor carried out at the level of the mode of cooperation—the point at which society opens up to its exteriority in sociality—must be restricted and managed by a whole series of technologies that maintain the exploitative relationship and repress other productive possibilities that would rupture the societal territory. These restrictive technologies are conditions that secure the reproduction of the societal regularity: that is to say that these technologies, both economic and political, are ideological constraints placed upon social power.

Balibar reveals another side of the labor relation when he asserts that labor-power resists being treated as a commodity. The mode of cooperation is the societal organization of social activity, but there is activity that overflows the mode of cooperation itself. The mode of cooperation is the initial societal territory carved out of sociality, the ground of social reality: “the analysis of exploitation implies that any soci[et]al relation must be the organization of a material

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<sup>112</sup> Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, 139.

constraint upon social groups defined as a function of the nature of this constraint.”<sup>113</sup> It is in this way that the division of labor *produces* classes through a series of technologies of power that produce the bodies they seek to control. But the entities produced by the techniques of power also resist these technologies. The territorializing movement of society implies the deterritorializing force of sociality; this fundamental antagonism determines the boundaries of the possible as it is envisioned from within the scope of a society, and it is for this reason that “proletarian demands are directly perceived, in the [societal] space of the dominant ideology, as ‘nonpolitical,’ even if in order to obtain such a result a whole arsenal of forms of state action must be deployed.”<sup>114</sup> The state—a transcendent apparatus of control over the sociality, which is territorialized as the public realm—must enact a series of operations in order to maintain the distinction between public and private. This is done in order to keep social power from emerging as both a political and economic force that can be harnessed by the exploited and dominated as a revolutionary force. But this abstract formulation is as yet unclear.

In any case, the most important insight that Balibar has provided us is that classes are produced by the division of labor and a host of other requisite technologies of power that secure the pattern of regularity that defines the society. But these classes do not themselves pose a threat to the societal structure; the very social power that is managed and subsumed within capital is the real radical force of change. That is to say, the “working-class” is itself the product of a societal

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<sup>113</sup> Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, 140-141.

<sup>114</sup> Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, 141.

territorialization (according to the division of labor and the mode of production). And, now we must discover what the material components of classes are in order to understand how societal change is even possible. What I am really asking is: beyond the territorial production or “classification” of the “working-class,” what is the vital force that makes societal change thinkable?

#### *V. From Class to Mass to Multitude*

Balibar argues that there is a dual sense to the being of the proletariat. It appears to surface in Marx’s writing as either a class or a mass and sometimes as both. Balibar Writes: “In *The German Ideology*,” for instance, “only the bourgeoisie is a ‘class’; the proletariat, on the contrary, is defined as a ‘mass’, as the last product of the decomposition of society. This definition precisely makes it the agent for a *communist* revolution in which no ‘particular’ interest (no ‘class interest’) need be advanced.”<sup>115</sup> This interpretation of the proletariat further complicates a Marxist understanding social reality. Society is made up of classes and to some extent is determined by them in the sense that the division of labor conditions the mode of cooperation through which social power is realized and determines the conditions of society in general. But now there is, aside from classes, the existence of a mass (if not a plurality of masses) that is supposed to transcend or subvert class distinctions.

Balibar adds that the ontology of “mass,” much like the ontology of “class,” has never been fully clarified within the Marxist tradition, but that the concept of deployment of the term “mass”

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<sup>115</sup> Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, 144.

keeps oscillating between the description of a social condition, in which the “communal bonds” of traditional societies are collapsing and a radical isolation of individuals is emerging, and the description of a movement, in which the diversity of conditions is covered over by a common “consciousness” or ideology which aims at the transformation of the existing order.<sup>116</sup>

In other words, the emergence of masses as political beings coincides with a societal crisis in which the mode of cooperation specific to a given society seems to be in the process of dissolving—i.e., there is an atomization of social entities as traditional identities collapse—while at the same time there is a movement toward a greater collective power outside of the societally restricted boundaries of the possible. Putting this in the context of the critical moment of chapter 2, in which we saw Marx giving up on defining the concept of class in the third volume of *Capital*, I could say that the ideological links that bind classes together unravel to reveal the social disunity upon which the societal order is founded. At the same time as class identities unravel, however, the movement of social power develops into a revolutionizing constitutive moment in which the entire societal order is transformed.

The conceptual bridge that makes this dissolution of societally produced and mediated subjectivities coincide with a constitution of a collective and revolutionized social power is the concept of population. In *Capital*, Marx argues that “a surplus population of workers is a necessary product of... [and] a condition for the existence of the capitalist mode of production.”<sup>117</sup> Later in this same text, he argues that the development of the capitalist mode of production in different spheres of economic activity produces specific population flows: as

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<sup>116</sup> Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, 145.

<sup>117</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 784.



agriculture is incorporated into the capitalist mode of production and its productivity is enhanced both by the use of machinery and through capitalist techniques of management, for example, the requisite number of agricultural workers falls and workers are forced to look to cities for employment.<sup>118</sup> “Part of the agricultural population is therefore constantly on the point of passing over into an urban or manufacturing proletariat, and on the lookout for opportunities to complete this transformation.”<sup>119</sup> During the birth of capitalism, at a macro-level, then, society attempts to control and establish regular patterns of population development according to developments and sanctions of economic and legal apparatuses. As Balibar argues, “[f]rom this point of view, the concept of population in Marx is the mediation *par excellence* between the idea of ‘class’ and the idea of ‘mass.’ And I could go so far as to say that ‘population movements’ are the main basis of explanation for ‘mass movements.’”<sup>120</sup>

To better frame this within the context of my analysis of Michael Halewood and *The German Ideology*, let me say that population now appears as a double relationship. On the one hand, it is societally regulated (by law and commerce) and stratified (by the division of labor); on the other hand, it is the *natural* root of social power.<sup>121</sup> To say that population control is a precondition and a production of capitalism’s pattern of regularity is then to say that capitalism is not only an economically or politically exploitative societal form; it also requires a network of

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<sup>118</sup> The eradication of the English agricultural commons in the 18<sup>th</sup> century takes this principle of population control one step further by integrating the law into the economy in order to push workers to the city and develop a suitably productive proletarian population in industrial manufacturing.

<sup>119</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 796.

<sup>120</sup> Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, 146.

<sup>121</sup> For the multiple sub-classes within the proletariat that are developed by the capitalist law of population, see Marx, *Capital*, 794-802.

biopolitical regulation, which is expanded and intensified with the development of bourgeois society.<sup>122</sup>

I can now put forward the thesis that the regulation of the mode of cooperation is precisely this biopolitical aspect of capitalist society, and this becomes clear when I stress that the sociality of cooperation as it is defined in *The German Ideology* applies not only to cooperative labor, but also to any cooperative intercourse, and is specifically connected to procreation. The mode of cooperation is active in determining society not only in terms of its economic or political productivity, but also in terms of its regulation and production of life. Capital, and its value-form, attempts to subsume all of life, not just economically productive labor.

From what has just been said, I can assert that masses are vital entities that exist on the plane of sociality and are regulated within societal territories. They are territorialized as classes by societal apparatuses of control (economic, political, and biopolitical). Classes, therefore, cannot be revolutionary, since the specificity of their existence is a production of the techniques of power that seek to dominate and exploit their underlying social power. The proletariat, for this very reason, is not, strictly speaking, a “class.” Rather, the proletariat is the mass that is partially territorialized, or incorporated into society, as the working-class. Balibar is correct in asserting that the revolutionary proletariat is a mass. But, to facilitate dialogue with other thinkers who address a very similar set of issues, I

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<sup>122</sup> The developments of workers housing and, later, company towns represent some of the most crude forms of the expansion of biopolitical power in capitalism.

should say that the revolutionary potential of the proletariat is rooted in *the multitude*.<sup>123</sup>

### *VI. A Brief Refrain*

The Marxist terminology that was derived earlier provided me with an excellent groundwork for constructing a new theory of social reality. Michael Halewood's work helped me to examine how some inchoate distinctions between society and sociality already exist in Marx. By clarifying some definitions for the four terms deployed by Marx and Engels with reference to social reality, I was able to develop a new topography of the social in place of the base/ superstructure model. The work of Étienne Balibar fleshed out this rudimentary theory with a precise consideration of the ontology of classes beyond economic determinism. It is imperative now, however, that I review the developments of this analysis in order to ensure that I maintain conceptual clarity.

In the first section, I argued that "society" is a territorialization of "sociality" that orders the chaos of the latter according to a pattern of regularity that defines the former. Society is the hierarchized territory inscribed on sociality. Sociality is a smooth space of being that is not, as yet ordered—it is immanent social reality.<sup>124</sup> This departs from the relations of determination that define the base/superstructure model in that in this new theory there is no hierarchical

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<sup>123</sup> In the first chapter of *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, Balibar analyzes the radical democratic politics of Baruch Spinoza and translates his "multitudo" as "mass." Hardt and Negri, however, translate the Spinozist term into its English cognate, "multitude." Because Balibar's own use of "mass" is drawn from Spinoza's "multitude," this alteration of terminology should not pose a methodological problem.

<sup>124</sup> See Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the "plane of immanence." Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "The Plane of Immanence," in *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 35-60.

subordination of society to sociality; the social is a ground of emergence for societies.

The pattern of regularity—or principle of “self-movement,” to use a more Marxist phrase—of a society is determined by apparatuses and networks of control that are political, economic, and biopolitical. This principle of self-movement of “society” reveals that it is not a static thing, but an ordering dynamic that attempts to limit the possible multiplication of social power beyond those that it can control and convert, in capitalism, into wealth.

“Social power” is the life-force of a society and its potential source of dissolution. “Social power” is the multiplication of productive forces of sociality that is channeled through the mode of cooperation, which incorporates it into the pattern of regularity of society. The mode of cooperation is a societally mediated productive force; it is the point at which society must remain open to sociality. (Were it to close itself off to its exterior, it would stagnate and cease to exist.)

In my analysis of Balibar, in section 4, I asserted that Classes are societal entities produced by the division of labor and organized according to the mode of cooperation. Their identities only make sense within a given societal form, and they cease to exist when that societal form enters a revolutionary period of crisis. For this reason, classes themselves are not revolutionary entities. They are the products of societal territorialization of the multitude, which is an immanent aspect of sociality. That is to say that the multitude is the external social force to which society must remain open. Moreover, the multitude resists territorialization and subsumption carried out by capital. It is in this resistance against

classification that the multitude is capable of introducing revolutionized social power into society.

Revolution, then, is an irruption of societally repressed or regulated forces of sociality into society. As Balibar argues:

This thesis... admits that the emergence of a revolutionary form of subjectivity (or identity) is always a partial effect and never a specific property of nature, and therefore brings with it no guarantees, but obliges us to search for the conditions in a conjuncture that can precipitate class struggles into mass movements...<sup>125</sup>

The outcome of the revolution is not determined by any laws or logic; it is the contingent outcome of the struggle against classification and against the techniques of power that drive it.

Because the irruption of revolutionized social power presupposes such techniques of societal power it follows that the limit of the revolution is the absolute destruction of society as a transhistorical concept and construct. Sociality only finds its expression in society. It is either a source of power, incorporated into the reproduction of a societal pattern of regularity, or it is a revolutionary force that ruptures the pattern of regularity; in either case, there is no immanent return to pure sociality. Every territorialization presupposes a deterritorializing force of resistance, and the reverse is also true. This is why communist society is imagined as a *gesellschaft*: we must return to an order of things. The goal of the proletarian revolution, then, is to establish an order, a society, with borders that are not impassible horizons, but zones of indetermination. A communist society

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<sup>125</sup> Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, 147.

would be one that sets borders into variation so that they may be reconstituted according to the movement of sociality—the life of the multitude.

Finally, from all that has just been said, I conclude that capitalism is a form of society defined by a pattern of regularity that attempts to code all of social life, and not just productive labor-time restricted to the mode of production (or the sphere of production within the mode of production). Not only is labor-power subsumed by capital as a commodity, but all of social life is incorporated into the production of capital. Guy Debord dubbed this subsumption of social reality into capital the production of the “society of the spectacle,” which “corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life... [when] the world we see is the world of the commodity.”<sup>126</sup>

### *VII. Iteration—What is Capital (Crisis)?*

Thus far in this chapter, much attention has been paid to the functioning of society and its apparatuses of control, but little has been said about the particular character of this relation of domination. As has already been stated, territorialization implies deterritorialization in the same way that every relation of domination also implies a force of resistance. Therefore, just as the success of the revolution is never guaranteed, the subsumption of all of social life into capital is never complete; a society must remain open to its social exterior. In this way, social reality must overflow societal capture if there is to be a continued process of subsumption. This excess of sociality is not a surplus in the sense of surplus-

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<sup>126</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 29.

value or surplus-labor; it is in a very real way useless for the self-movement of capital except in that it secures its condition of continuation.

This excess of social reality, however, is also the condition of revolution and societal dissolution. In *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri write that “capitalist crisis is not simply a function of capital’s own dynamics but is caused directly by proletarian conflict.”<sup>127</sup> The class-struggle itself determines the laws of capitalism’s self-movement and it is this other side of the production of a societal pattern of regularity that is obscured by the same fetishism that alienates use-value for exchange-value.<sup>128</sup> Fetishism is the original pattern of regularity that secures the stability of the value-form of capital by hiding the contingent reality upon which its reproduction is based from the proletariat, which is both the real source of capital’s value and its object of exploitation.

This means that at the same time as the forces of societal reproduction constrain the influx of social power, the influx of social power limits the process of societal territorialization. “Proletarian struggles constitute—in real ontological terms—the motor of capitalist development... The struggles force capital continually to reform the relations of production and transform the relations of domination.”<sup>129</sup> The point here is that the form of capitalist society and, by extension, the value-form of capital is not determined by the internal logic of a society, but rather by the violent irruption of social power—particularly the power

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<sup>127</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 261.

<sup>128</sup> “Class-struggle” should be understood, in the context of this analysis, as the struggle of the ruling class to control and limit the productive social power of the multitude. This fits with Hardt’s and Negri’s definition of the proletariat “as a broad category that includes all those whose labor is directly or indirectly exploited and subjected to capitalist norms of production and reproduction,” and not just the sellers of labor-power (Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 52).

<sup>129</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 208.

of the multitude that disrupts the mode of cooperation in its effort to resist being subsumed by capital.

There is no better illustration of this point than the militant labor activism that swept across the United States of America in the middle of the Great Depression. Despite the fact that unemployment is, as we have seen, systemically built into capitalism as a means of controlling workers by threatening them with job insecurity (e.g., the possibility of being replaced at any minute by a more willing worker), Depression-era workers across the country rose up and seized control of the means of production in order to demand higher-wages and better working conditions. The majority of these strikes resulted in at least partial victories for the workers, and, perhaps most impressively, this phenomena of labor militancy emerged without and fought against the representative leadership of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), which consistently pressured workers to end the strikes.<sup>130</sup> The societal logic of capitalism would have thought such an event impossible given that the industrial reserve army of the unemployed was supposed to guarantee the impossibility or at least the failure of workers' uprisings in such conditions of economic instability. Furthermore, these strikes resulted in an intensification of the reduction in the rate of profit, in order to meet workers' demands, which flies in the face of the law of the expansion of capital and should be particularly unthinkable in a time when profit rates had already plummeted. Finally, these strikes were not directed or controlled by an organization that was supposed to represent the interests of the working-class.

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<sup>130</sup> Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003), 395-401.



Contrary to the example we just explored, the commonplace narrative concerning the development of improved labor conditions is guided by a liberal capitalist logic in which worker conditions improved in direct relation to the expansion of societal wealth. In this way, the successes of the workers movements have been ideologically transformed into successes of the liberal capitalist system, insofar as representative bodies such as the AFL can be considered a part of this societal form. This pervasive mode of thought is visible in “democratic-socialist” presidential candidate Bernie Sanders’ rhetoric regarding raising the minimum wage to \$15/hr:

Despite huge advancements in technology and productivity, millions of Americans are working longer hours for lower wages. The real median income of male workers is \$783 less than it was 42 years ago; while the real median income of female workers is over \$1,300 less than it was in 2007. That is unacceptable and that has got to change.<sup>131</sup>

The basic justification for such a proposal is that stagnant workers’ wages have not “kept pace” with increasing worker productivity and skyrocketing GDP. This argument essentially boils down to an appeal to the bourgeois state to raise the minimum wage in order ensure that workers have more spending power. This argument fits squarely within the logic of capitalism. The strike wave of 1934, however, proves that the developments of capitalism do not exclusively obey an internal societal logic, but are pushed by the power of the proletariat. This “power of the proletariat imposes limits on capital and not only determines the crisis, but also dictates the terms and nature of the transformation. *The proletariat actually*

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<sup>131</sup> “Issues: Income and Wealth Inequality,” accessed April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2016, <https://berniesanders.com/issues/income-and-wealth-inequality/>

*invents the soci[et]al forms that capital will be forced to adopt in the future.*”<sup>132</sup>

These Depression-era strikes, for instance, not only resulted in local workers’ victories at the sites of labor agitation, they also served as a reason for passing the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, which guaranteed workers a right to unionize.<sup>133</sup>

The societal forms that the proletariat forces capital to invent, however, are not restricted to the immediate demands the proletariat puts forth in an antagonistic encounter; capital also anticipates future demands of the multitude and attempts to restrict them by controlling their conditions of emergence—i.e., their social autonomy. In this sense, “[e]very innovation is a revolution which failed - but also one which was attempted.”<sup>134</sup> It is for this reason that social reality must be subsumed by capital to such an extent that its rebellious potential is limited. This is precisely the case today when the globalized mode of “production of capital converges ever more with the production and reproduction of social life itself; it thus becomes ever more difficult to maintain distinctions among productive, reproductive, and unproductive labor.”<sup>135</sup> Domestic labor, or “caring labor,” has long posed a problem to these distinctions in a way that has pointed out a

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<sup>132</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 268.

<sup>133</sup> See Robert F. Wagner, “The National Labor Relations Act,” in *The Era of Franklin D. Roosevelt 1933-1945: A Brief History with Documents*, edit. Richard Polenberg (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2000), 68-71. With this bill, Senator Wagner attempted to limit the revolutionary potential of the labor agitation by securing the working-class institutions that would represent them: “The break-down of section 7(a) [of the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933, which established a right of workers to unionize,] brings results equally disastrous to industry and to labor. Last summer it led to a procession of bloody and costly strikes, which in some cases swelled almost to the magnitude of national emergencies... Far from suggesting a change, it [the National Labor Relations Act] merely preserves the status quo.”

<sup>134</sup> Antonio Negri, “Interpretation of the Class Situation Today,” in *Open Marxism Volume II: Theory and Practice*, edit. Werner Bonefeld, Richard Gunn, and Kosmas Psychopedis (London: Pluto Press 1992), 80.

<sup>135</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 403.

patriarchal tendency in the Marxist tradition that ensures the marginalization, or even the dismissal, of the value of what has traditionally been termed “women’s work,” regardless of how socially necessary such work is.<sup>136</sup> To situate Hardt and Negri’s point in a more modern context and illustrate how it is useful beyond critiquing the patriarchal tendencies of Marxist theory, let us briefly examine the production of capital from social media sites like Facebook. Certainly Facebook employs workers to whom it pays a wage based on their labor time, but the real source of wealth for Facebook is the multitude of individuals who reproduce their lives in virtuality.<sup>137</sup> The virtual (re)production of social life generates information that Facebook then sells to advertising firms as a means to increasing their financial efficacy by targeting individuals whose interests match products those firms are advertising.<sup>138</sup> Furthermore, not only is demographic information sold to advertisers to facilitate targeted marketing, Facebook also produces “scientific knowledge” by running sociological/psychological experiments on users in order to better understand human social functioning in a way that can also be translated into value.<sup>139</sup> This information is valorized in a manner similar to capital’s valorization of the wage-labor of the industrial worker; in each case, wealth is produced socially and appropriated privately (but in the example of Facebook, the producers of wealth receive absolutely none of the value of their

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<sup>136</sup> See Heidi Hartman, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: towards a more progressive Union,” *Capital and Class* 12 (1979): 1-33.

<sup>137</sup> On the concept of unpaid labor and the digital economy see Tiziana Terranova, “Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy,” *Social Text* 18 (Summer 2000): 33-58.

<sup>138</sup> Justin P. Johnson, “Targeted Advertising and Advertising Avoidance,” *The RAND Journal of Economics* 44 (Spring 2013): 128-144.

<sup>139</sup> E. Alex Jung, “Is it time to quit Facebook?,” *AlJazeera America*, August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014, accessed April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016, <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/8/facebook-unpaid-labordataadvertising.html>

life-activity). The reproduction of social life itself, then, cannot be termed “unproductive labor” since it is a direct source of capital. This subsumption of social life by capital not only demonstrates the changing landscape of power-relations in capitalism, it also multiplies the points of resistance beyond what are traditionally recognized as sites of production.

The arguments of Hardt and Negri flesh out the definition of social force and societal subsumption or territorialization by directly linking it to the struggle of the multitude that is exploited and dominated by capitalism. Their analyses reveal that there is no simple determinate dialectical logic guiding the development of society. Rather, societal innovations represent tactical shifts made by the apparatuses of control in limiting the revolutionary potential of the multitude. In Marx’s day, this was done through economic control of the productive capability of the industrial proletariat. As capitalism developed, however, it subsumed more and more of sociality. The significance of this extensive and intensive development of societal control is that the space of societal exploitation and domination and the scope of social reality are increasingly homologous. This is not to say, however, that they are the same. At the same time as each social relation is increasingly becoming a relation of exploitation and domination, it is also a site of resistance—a point of potentially revolutionary cooperation. This understanding of the exploitation of sociality defies traditional Marxist understandings of the value form of capital which rely on the sharp distinction between a determinate economic base and a larger societal superstructure. The fact that these forms of exploitation are nonetheless real demands that Marxism

adapt and incorporate other modes of analysis in order for it to be a comprehensive critical theory opposed to all forms of unjust power relations. In order to be able to adapt to the diffusion of capitalist exploitation into all of sociality, Marxism must recognize that classes defined with reference to an autonomous economic base do not exist and that the real revolutionary force is the diversity of the multitude that escapes classification.

### *VIII. The New Proletariat*

Because the revolutionary social force is not a class, but rather the social mass that precedes classification, Marxism must attempt to expand the scope of its political efforts beyond the narrow conception of the economic-struggle. It is no longer even fair to say that the economic-struggle needs to be made into a political struggle, since increasingly all of social reality is subsumed under capital. Thus, I would argue that, rather than recognizing an economic class as the political agent of revolution, Marxism must understand the real revolutionary power not in the political representation of an economic agent, but in the power of social constitution that transgresses and subverts dominant societal relations. Because capital's extensive and intensive subsumption of social reality extends far beyond a definite sphere of economic activity, anticapitalist struggle cannot be restricted to classes so long as they are conceived of as exclusively economic entities. The productive power of the multitude must not be restricted by societal territorializations that attempt to divide it and restrict it. This means that the boundaries of the revolutionary mass can never be fixed in any final sense. The

revolutionary mass cannot be directed from commanding heights; it must be produced through constitutive social action.

# 6. Conclusion

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## And Implications for Further Research

The preceding two chapters have made the case that there is no already-constituted class identity located in an autonomous sphere of economic reality. The theory of the social whole that is divided between a determinate economic base and a societal superstructure is not consistent with Marx's own economic theory, which ascribes so much importance to fetishism in securing the conditions of possibility for the functioning of the economic base. The last chapter attempted to construct a different social theory from Marxism by analyzing a discursive distinction present in the writings of Marx and Engels between society and sociality. The discovery of sociality amounts to a discovery of an outside to the "social whole" described by Althusser. It reveals that there is not a closed system of capitalism; capitalism is rather a dynamic societal form securing its pattern of regularity by subsuming social power that is constituted in a space outside of societal control. This social force is both the source of wealth for society and a source of revolutionary power for the social forces that resist subsumption. To summarize this distinction between sociality and society, I would say that the societal pattern of regularity is produced through the construction of transcendent apparatuses of control; these apparatuses manage and exploit sociality, territorializing social forces immanent in social reality by giving them a

representative form in order to alienate their actual constitutive power that poses a threat to the established societal order.

The development of a new social theory was made necessary by the fact that the ontological rootedness of class had been destroyed in the dissolution of the rigid division between an economic base and a societal superstructure that functioned as the model for understanding social reality in traditional Marxism. We saw, in chapter 3, how the various concepts of class that appear in Marx and Engels were fixed to a plane of consistency that was the economic sphere. If class relations can be understood and defined exclusively with recourse to the economic mode of production, then we could understand the specific intentions and goals of every class simply by studying the conditions of economic reality. But when social forces that are irreducible to an economic base determine the character of society, then the nature of class-identity becomes a much more complex and troubling question. When the social reality is not hierarchized between an economic base and societal superstructure, but instead all relations exist in a more complex web in which apparatuses of control attempt to exploit and dominate nearly every social relation, then the issue of class-identity is not simply one of the development of class-consciousness at the political level of reality; rather the question becomes one of class-constitution—the very being of a class is secured through complex processes of association and production that are not exclusively economic.

This is not to say that economic stratification does not exist or that classes are false productions of 19th century economic theory. Clearly there are differentiated



levels of wealth and productivity for given populations. Clearly there are exploitative systemic trends that oppress the poor and benefit the rich. But, what I would say with regard to economic stratification is that this phenomenon alone does not produce revolutionary subjects; economic stratification is intertwined with networks of exploitative and dominative societal power relations that are irreducible to economic activity. For this reason, “classes” cannot be the exclusive subjects of political struggle, at least not as they have been represented in Marxist theory. This necessity to understand the proletariat beyond traditional classification is compounded by the fact that “labor” no longer refers to the same practices as it did in the 19th and early 20th century; when the space of capitalist exploitation is increasingly homologous with sociality itself, it becomes difficult to ascribe to the exploited masses one class identity. The extensive and intensive subsumption of sociality by capitalism forces us to recognize that the value-form of capital itself has changed; surplus labor can no longer be measured in labor-time when exploitation is not limited to a specific site and schedule. But this does not mean that labor has ceased to be the root of value. I agree with Negri when he argues that

the immeasurability of the figures of value does not deny the fact that labour is at the basis of any constitution of society. In fact, it is not possible to imagine (let alone describe) production, wealth and civilisation if they cannot be traced back to an accumulation of labour. That this accumulation has no measure, nor (perhaps) rationality, does not diminish the fact that its content, its foundation, its functioning is labour.<sup>140</sup>

The omnipresence of labor’s valorization reveals that the distinction between public and private is utterly false and allows the proletariat—that great mass that

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<sup>140</sup> Negri, “Interpretation of the Class Situation Today,” 73.

resists classification and exploitation—to struggle to secure economic rights of life, such as a universal basic income. This demand is only one of a series of steps toward a post-capitalist system that does not build itself off of false notions of class-interest, but rather is developed from the material conditions of the present.

The argument of this thesis amounts to a rebellion against theories of representative revolution—i.e., political practices and theories that presuppose that the agential mass of the revolution can be entirely directed and plotted anterior to the actual constitutive practice of the revolution. The vanguard party cannot hope to lead a true proletarian revolution if it seeks to establish a new transcendent societal order built on the presupposition of the legitimacy of its theory of class rooted in economic relations. Political theories of this kind fail to recognize classes as movements (conditioned by resistance and domination) that are always in the process of becoming. They are not ultimately determined by economic laws, but by living and breathing beings and the relations into which they enter. The totality of these social relations, beyond those that are immediately tied up in economics, must therefore be recognized as “productive.” This new theory of mass movement over class-identity is then a radical expansion of the horizons of materialism that follows the spirit of Marx’s “Theses on Feuerbach,” in which he wrote that “[t]he chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism... is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived of only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as human sensuous activity, practice, not subjectively.”<sup>141</sup> In this case, my demand is that all of social movement be considered the material basis for a revolutionary project, and not just those social movements that have

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<sup>141</sup> Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 143.

been traditionally classified as “economic.” Given the distinction derived between societal and natural, this would include the forces of nature that are subsumed by capitalism and that we, ourselves, are.

Despite the fact that the new image of the “social whole” presented here is preferable to the base/superstructure division insofar as the former is not logically incompatible with Marx’s theory of exploitation, this new topography does contain a number of other issues. For instance, it raises a question about the nature of capital and the transcendent apparatuses that territorialize social life: if these societal forces exert power on sociality, then where do these societal forces come from? This is a reformulation of the question posed in chapter 4—namely, “what is capital?” In order to be consistent with the idea that sociality is the ground of emergence for society, I must assert that capital is a specific coordination of social forces, and not an essentially anti-social force that is imposed on social reality without first emerging from it. Capital is, then, a specific form of social reality; it is a coordination of social activity built on the exploitation of other aspects of social reality. The aspect of social reality that is primarily by capitalism is the productive potential of the proletariat, conceived of as a multitude and made into a class only at the moment of exploitation.

As we saw in chapter 5, in *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels envision the character of social reality in communism as a *society*, and not as immediate *sociality*, while they also assert that in this *societal* form, people will be free to engage in a multiplicity of *social* activities.<sup>142</sup> This continuity of the formation of

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<sup>142</sup> See above, pgs 65-66. Halewood, *Rethinking the Social...*, 74. Marx and Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 160.

gesellschaft, society, maintains the critically important position of sociality *outside* of society—that is, sociality remains an exterior to which society must always be open. This could imply that social power can only exist when it is channeled through specific societal structures. The goal of revolution, therefore, is not to stop producing normative societal relations, but instead to ensure that these relations are as free from domination and exploitation as possible. Revolution is, then, the irruption of transformative social movements that redefine the societal pattern of regularity. This would mean that all bodies that regulate social reality would need to be recognized as social products themselves. The immanent sociality of every institution reveals that societal structures are temporary and mutable patterns of a larger social movement. This means that the goal of revolution is not destruction but redirection of the macro-social movement that is the societal form.

The revolution of sociality against society is eternal and its subject is always being reconstituted. This raises a second imposing question about the social/societal distinction: what does this allow us to say about our revolutionary subject? The proletariat, which is now conceived of as a multitude or a mass and not as a class, becomes difficult to understand when its interests and revolutionary program cannot be localized in one antagonistic source understood as the late capitalist economy. But this is not a weakness when we realize that there is a plurality of modes of production intersecting in global capitalism today:

There does not need to be an orderly historical progression of these [economic] forms, but rather they must mix and coexist... Various regions will evolve to have peasant elements mixed with partial industrialization and partial informatization. The economic stages

are thus all present at once, merged into a hybrid, composite economy that varies not in kind but in degree across the globe.<sup>143</sup>

If we recognize the existence of global capitalism that incorporates various mixed regional and local economic stages, then we must recognize exploited populations in industries and regions that escape the economic theory Marx developed in response to the functioning of capitalism in 19<sup>th</sup> century Western Europe. Being exploited by global capitalism, these masses would have to be recognized as proletarians and not simply be dismissed from that revolutionary movement on the grounds that they cannot be conscious of capitalist exploitation and the power of the exploited. Global capitalism is reproduced in fundamentally different forms in different regions; the proletariat will necessarily be determined by and determine these relations and must itself be unique to each historical reality.

There is, therefore, no logic or theory that can represent the multitude of the proletariat, since its identity is not limited to class-interests produced in one specific form of the capitalist mode of production. Instead, there are a series of societal forces of control that attempt to territorialize the multitude in various ways that will subdue or repress its revolutionary force: these are not restricted to economic reality, but must necessarily be societal before being economic or political. The societal itself must be an interiority of a territory carved from the smooth space of sociality. This smooth space is the social reality that precedes the process of territorialization, and the sub-processes of domination and exploitation, from which the pattern of regularity for societies develop.<sup>144</sup> Revolutionary forces

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<sup>143</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 288-289.

<sup>144</sup> This smooth space is a limit of deterritorialization. It is the space of liberation and its realization is the goal of the proletarian revolution.

that emerge from this smooth space, therefore, cannot be submitted to representative dialectical logic.

It may be worth pondering whether this theory leaves room for the development of a political logic capable of representing the functioning of societal structures apart from the masses they manage and territorialize. That is, when a structure, such as the state, successfully reproduces a societal order according to capitalist logic, can a dialectical contradiction immanent in the functioning of societal structures bring about a moment of crisis that makes the revolutionary action of the proletariat possible? Let me return to the example of the onset of the Great Depression. This crisis immediately followed a decade of unprecedented opulence and societal stability.<sup>145</sup> The Depression was not brought on by a revolutionary mass movement, but by the incoherent logic of laissez faire capitalism.<sup>146</sup> This presents us with the idea that societal apparatuses develop according to a dialectical logic when they have minimized the influence of social forces, which operate according to fundamentally different principles. This restriction of dialectical logic to the domain of societal apparatuses would, however, only be useful for understanding how instability is a natural way in which society must remain open to sociality. Social forces would be different in kind from societal apparatuses; the latter may move dialectically, but the former is not set on a determined path. It moves *a milieu* or *an assemblage*; it is developed through unexpected conjunctions of forces that multiply the revolutionary and

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<sup>145</sup> See David J. Goldberg, "Capital Triumphant: The Postwar Decline of the American Labor Movement," in *Discontented America: The United States in the 1920s* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 66-88.

<sup>146</sup> Goldberg, *Discontented America*, 177-183

productive potential of masses in ways that dialectical logic, built around negation, is incapable of representing.

Many Marxists may want to reject the impossibility of establishing a complete and closed logical system through which we could understand the interests of the proletariat. Those who resist this impossibility should remember that my proposal is not a dismissal of revolution or of the proletariat as the agent of revolution. Instead, I am arguing that the proletarian revolution simply cannot be *directed* by a representative body. Such a vanguard party would attempt to educate the proletariat through the party's representative image. The result would be that "the People always support the Party because any member of the People who opposes Party rule automatically excludes himself from the People."<sup>147</sup> If the class is understood as a unity capable of being represented in a party, then opponents of that party would necessarily be opponents of the class. Thusly all Stalinist purges and the entire gulag apparatus would be justified as defenses of the true interest of the proletariat.

Understanding the class as a product of economic apparatuses of control that are imposed on the multitude may make it harder to theoretically pinpoint and direct class-interests, but it also allows us to save Marxism from the authoritarianism of the vanguard party. This conception of the proletariat as multitude thus allows us to revitalize the radical democratic impulse at the heart of the Marxist project. This more fluid understanding of a revolutionary body and a corresponding tactical logic of revolution, which is incapable of being represented, multiplies the possible forms of resistance to societal power from

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<sup>147</sup> Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 165.

which capital derives its specificity. It demands that the proletarian struggle be carried out in all of social life. The resistance of the proletariat must be produced locally at the same time as it is globally communicable through a play of differences. To attempt to categorize the various forms of resistance that these different social struggles would develop is far too large a task for this thesis. My goal has been to return to Marx in order to rethink the nature and revolutionary potential of classes in a way that would revitalize the democratic spirit of Marxism.



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### Reading List

- *The Brothers Karamazov*—Fyodor Dostoevsky. I began reading *the Brothers* late in the fall of my sophomore year and finally set the book down just before the spring of my junior year. I was introduced to this text by my good friend Kjell Nordstrom, who studied Ivan’s tale about the Grand Inquisitor with Nico Jenkins in his “Existentialism and Literature” course. The few passages Kjell read to me grabbed my attention immediately. I was captivated by the image of a silent Christ being condemned to death by the church and of the idea of humanity’s psycho-social need to find the divine (or at least an order to the universe) even if that requires its invention. However, I did not begin to read the book when Kjell brought it to my attention for two reasons: 1) It was big and scary and 2) I did not want Kjell to see that I was doing something he recommended. Our friendship is defined by a spirit of playful stubbornness that is analogous to the relationship I have with my youngest brother. My love of this book is inextricably linked to my fond friendship with Kjell.

Early in Dostoevsky’s novel, there is a chapter titled “A Lady of Little Faith” that has remained with me as it serves as a warning to those too entrenched in theory. After hearing the confession of faithlessness from Madame Khokhlakov, the Elder Zosima recounts a similar confession given to him by a doctor. This doctor presents the paradox of his love for humanity by stating that in his dreams he often went “so far as to think passionately of serving mankind,” while in his life he begins to detest people when he has to deal with them in the flesh. Zosima characterizes these two loves of humanity as love in dreams and active love.

According to Zosima, fetishizing love in dreams is a particularly thorny issue: while admiring Madame Khokhlakov's understanding of love, he states that she has not properly started to solve the problem if the motivation for her confession of not loving her neighbor was her desire to be praised by the Elder and not a desire to actually love her neighbor. At this, she recognizes her vanity rather than a desire to love flesh and blood human beings as her true motivation. Zosima then states that the first thing she must do in order to grapple with the problem is to examine her narratives and motives—to avoid and examine her lies in order to reveal the truth that they mask. At the same time, he emphasizes her need to act as she contemplates—to practice active love even before escaping her dreams of love.

The doctor in the story has an intimate yet abstract understanding of the movements of flesh and blood as well as an intimate love of abstract humanity. It's the in-between that he detests—the material reality in-between the conceptual micro and macro realities. We must remember that the roots of our abstractions are founded in the material world. We must recognize antagonism in the relation between our thoughts and our actions, but without being paralyzed by strong feelings of guilt or shame. These reactions can entrench us in our dreams, throwing us into an introspective spiral that attempts to conceptually understand the discontinuity between thought and action without practically changing ourselves. The antagonism needs to be looked at not as a break or a gap between thought and action existing within us as individuals, but as an actually existing social relation cloaked in negativity and individualism. The social lie, the fantasy, manifests individually, but must be separated from the individual conscience and

examined as a real product of social relations, and *at the same time* we must act before we have a definitive answer to the question of the meaning of the social fantasy. Motivations must be examined not as our own, but as products of an ensemble of social relations. This is the only way to understand and deconstruct the apparent contradiction in the maxim to avoid *and* examine our lies.

- *The German Ideology* and “Theses on Feuerbach”—Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. I was introduced to *The German Ideology* in my second semester at UMaine via Michael Howard’s “Social and Political Philosophy” course. Most of the course to that point had focused on the works of social contract theorists—Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. While I enjoyed the arguments of these thinkers, I was unfulfilled by the way that they each built their theoretical systems on the presupposition of some ahistorical state of nature in which individual humans existed outside of political and social formations. My discomfort with the abstract primordial foundations of liberal political thought primed me to fall in love with Marx’s critical method, which so forcefully takes historical irresponsibility to task in *The German Ideology*. With his own conception of materialist history, Marx wants to examine our abstract lies against an objective empirical truth located in the material relations of economic activity

Though it is primarily a work concerned with the legitimacy of historical narratives, *The German Ideology* is also a fascinating doorway into potential theories of language and consciousness. I have returned to this text nearly every semester to dive into ideas like the labor as life-activity, language as a material

force (with powers beyond communication), the birth of consciousness, and the base/superstructure dichotomy. These possible readings of *The German Ideology* fascinate me because they save Marx from being an exclusively economic or political thinker. The discussion of these themes within *The German Ideology* reveals how one can move from history and politics to epistemology and metaphysics, and vice versa. This writing of young Marx traverses traditional disciplinary boundaries of theory, revealing the smooth space of thought and rebelling against the disciplined division of mental labor.

These deeper readings of *The German Ideology* were opened to me by the three pages of the *Marx-Engels Reader* that precede *The German Ideology*, which are dedicated to the “Theses on Feuerbach.” Comprised of 11 relatively discontinuous paragraphs, this work is a series of critical notes on German materialism that asserts the need to include movement, including human agency or freedom, within the scope of materialism. The *Theses* problematize the relationship between thought and action, between life and consciousness, in ways that laid the conceptual groundwork for the theory of history presented in *The German Ideology*. In this sense, the two works allow the reader to glimpse the movement of Marx’s thought. It would be wrong, however, to see these theses merely as a preface to *The German Ideology*; these brief notes open up a series of ruptures that multiply possible approaches to understanding human existence.

I think it’s worth noting that both *The German Ideology* and the “Theses on Feuerbach” were, ironically, nearly lost to history. Engels discovered the *Theses* over 40 years after they were written while he was digging through some old



notebooks that came into his possession after Marx died. He published them as an appendix to an essay he wrote in 1888. *The German Ideology* wasn't published until 1932 by the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow. By that time, the movement of material history had taken a toll on the original manuscript: water damage and the gnawing criticism of mice rendered certain passages illegible. Perhaps this history of isolation and deterioration opens up an ontological problem for a text that proclaims that "language *is* practical consciousness that exists also for other men, and for that reason alone it really exists for me as well." Thankfully these works were saved from nonexistence and have been the most formative of my thought of all of the works I have encountered.

- *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*—Michel Foucault. This work was one of the forces that inspired a profound shift in my study of philosophy and history. Before 2014, I was entrenched in the Marxist tradition. I accepted many of the central concepts in Marxism—the theory of alienation, dialectical materialism, the division of the economic base and the social superstructure, etc.—as objective truths. When I encountered a theory that didn't seem to line up well with some Marxist concept I would criticize it as an expression of false-consciousness. This approach was theoretically justified with recourse to Marx's theory of history, which focused its analysis on material relations of production as changing, but nonetheless objective sources of truth. Foucault ruined the certainty of this theory for me. I've heard the guiding methodological question for Foucault's work formulated as: "if truth has its history, then how can history have

its truth?” History cannot have an objective truth outside of the context of the economy of power in which it was produced. Once we recognize this, we can also recognize histories not as a transcendent narrative about the value and trajectory of human civilization, but as a tool we can use to deconstruct the effects of problematic power relations.

I still see in Foucault’s project the continuation of a vital strategy guiding Marx’s theory of materialist history. What Marx is primarily rebelling against in the *German Ideology* is the notion that we are at the end of history, that the present and its specific forms of social consciousness are eternal. Political economy’s primary justification for capitalism is the argument that it is simply a reflection of the essence of human nature. History is useful for Marx as a means to demonstrating the fact that human nature has fundamentally changed as its economic reality changed. Marx used history to deconstruct concepts of static eternal human essence and linked the production of these concepts with an economy of material relations.

What I see as the central theoretical departure of Foucault’s critical historical method from that of Marx is that Foucault also wants to deconstruct our motivations for writing histories. It is not enough to deconstruct conceptual static unities: we must also explore the way in which our deconstructions or positive historical narratives are themselves products of problematic power relations. *Discipline and Punish* can only be a critique of power in general after being a critique of humanist history. It is not enough to say that European societies stopped torturing and began imprisoning individuals they called criminals out of

respect for their humanity. The fact is that this love in dreams—the naïve optimism of this narrative—does not match up with the history of penal action that has been haunted by recidivism since its inception. In other words, Foucault’s historico-philosophy does not explain the historical antagonism between ideological dreams and actions as a movement of false-consciousness (as Marx does with his formulation of the problem of ideology), but instead examines what material power-relations are at work in the antagonism beyond economic relations of production. Foucault sparked a violent rupture in my thought, opening me up to a micropolitical plane that is, in my view, consistent with but critical of Marx’s location of the macropolitical Real in the economic sphere of social reality.

- *Destiny Disrupted*—Tamim Ansary. My godfather came to visit my family’s home in New Hampshire during the winter break of my final year at UMaine. He took me and my brother to a bookstore for Christmas and it was there that *Destiny Disrupted* caught my eye. As a history major studying in the U.S., I’ve found it difficult, if not impossible, to find a work of history focused on a region or epoch outside of the Western canon that is not filtered through a lens colored by American Exceptionalism or Eurocentrism and, for this reason, the idea of “a history of the world through Islamic eyes” that was written by a native Afghan peaked my interest. The fact that my neocon godfather was footing the bill concretized my decision to pick up this book, as I thought it would be amusing to have him furrow his brow as he looked this gift over and set it on the clerk’s counter, putting his funds toward what he called “a work of fake history.”

*Destiny Disrupted* is not a detailed scholarly challenge to our Western world-historical narratives, but a welcoming and fascinating introduction to the historical experience of another world. Ansary argues that this dismissal of Islam in “world history” produced in the West is to some extent responsible for the “clash of civilizations” we are experiencing today. Treating history as a teleological account of the realization of Enlightenment values “renders us vulnerable to the supposition that all people are moving in the same direction, though some are not quite so far along.” In my reading of this text, it seemed that Ansary was trying to exorcise the Hegelian spirit haunting Western approaches to history by breaking from the premise that world history is an absolute unity. He points out that the qualitatively different event marking the parabolic limit “year 0” in Islam is not the birth of Christ, the individual savior, but the migration of Mohammed from Mecca to Medina “which gave birth to the Muslim community”—an already collective identity. If Western “civilization” is the embodiment of divine virtue (the imitation of Christ), Muslim “civilization” is the growth and life of the actually existing community of believers. Ansary asserts that, looking at history through these Islamic eyes,

[w]e would know that the community had stopped expanding, had grown confused, had found itself permeated by a disruptive crosscurrent, a competing historical direction. As heirs to the Muslim tradition, we would be forced to look for the meaning of history in defeat instead of triumph. We would feel conflicted between two impulses: changing our notion of “civilized” to align with the flow of history or fighting the flow of history to realign it with our notion of “civilized.”

Yes, this passage reasserts the master-slave dialectic; but it does not reaffirm it.

Ansary is asserting that we need to write and read multiple world histories in

order to break the cycle of bondage built on recognizing one's self through the violent encounter with the other.

To me, Ansary's work uses history as a tool in the same sense as Marx and Foucault used it. He accepts a basic formulation of the "Clash of Civilizations" thesis in that he agrees that there are qualitatively different "civilizations." But these distinct "civilizations" are not given to us by nature. These different normative understandings of "civilization" have been produced by specific and heterogeneous histories. Implicit in Ansary's writing is a demand that we limit the scope of "world history" to the age of globalization (roughly after 1870) in order to recognize and confront the various and distinct narratives being played out on the new stage of globality.

If the truth of "civilization" has its history, then this history can be changed, or at least recast, in the historical present. Ansary sets the identities of civilizations into variation. He is addressing Western readers with an account of the experience of Islamic history. In this space between civilizations, *Destiny Disrupted's* project does not delimit bound beings but rather recognizes borders to be broken in the empathetic movement of becoming-other.

- *The Monitor*–Titus Andronicus. This New Jersey based indie-punk group released their second album in March 2010, during the spring of my junior year of high school. The group's catchy guitar riffs and shredding vocal chords have never been far from my ears ever since. This album, which once fueled my adolescent angst, became an object of contemplation for me since embarking on my

undergraduate education. When I was a sophomore here at UMaine, I even went so far as to write an extracurricular essay on the first track of the album, “A More Perfect Union.”

Named after the USS Monitor, the first ironclad ship commissioned by the Union Navy, this band’s second album departs from the airy rage of its predecessor and roots itself in the history of the American Civil War. The first track of the album begins with an excerpt from Lincoln’s Lyceum Address: “If destruction be our lot, we ourselves must be its author and finisher. As a nation of free men, we will live forever, or die by suicide.” This forms the opening pronouncement of the album and the central problem explored by the next ten tracks. This problem is then dragged into the present as the fuzzy humming of electric guitars and the band’s reformulation of Bruce Springsteen’s iconic single “Born to Run”—“tramps like us, baby we were born to die!”—immediately follows the final words Lincoln’s address. In the conjunction of these lines, it is not hard to hear the echo of Camus’ declaration in the first sentence of the *Myth of Sisyphus* that “[t]here is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide.”

The final track, “The Battle of Hampton Roads” is somewhat of a conclusion only in that it is the most personal meditation on the struggle against meaninglessness. Its namesake is a climactic naval conflict between two ironclad ships of the Civil War, the USS *Monitor* and the CSS *Virginia*. The two ships engaged each other in a close-range exchange of cannon fire for four-hours, each failing to inflict any terminal damage on the other. The battle ended in a stalemate

that redefined naval combat around the globe. The album's final track uses this violent stalemate as a metaphor for the ongoing struggle for authenticity: "I think the wrong people got a hold of your brain when it was nothing but a piece of putty./So try as you may but you will always be a tourist, little buddy./And half the time I open my mouth to speak/it's to repeat something that I've heard on tv/and I've destroyed everything that would've make me more like Bruce Springsteen." To my ear, these frustrated eruptions coalesce into an inchoate critique of the self-centeredness and the lack of consciousness that plague subjects of (post-industrial) consumer capitalism. In the end, *The Monitor's* critique is aimed at the conditions of, what Camus called, "a whole generation intoxicated by nihilism, and yet lost in loneliness, with weapons in our hands and a lump in our throats." This strange mix of philosophy, history, and indie-punk may very well be partially responsible for the direction my intellectual development took.

- *The Shadow of What We Were*—Luis Sepúlveda. Mid-way through the fall of 2014, I found myself wandering the ornate marble halls of Rome's fascist-inspired central train station with no one to talk to and nothing to read. I popped into the third floor of the station's bookstore, which I was delighted to find that it had been devoted to English language publications. I almost decided then and there that the Anglo culture's hegemonic global presence isn't such a bad thing after all; but then I found *The Shadow of What We Were*, a short novel about communists and anarchists, memory and exile, and laughter after atrocity that was brought about through a CIA-sponsored coup.

Set in present day Santiago, Chile, the story opens on an old anarchist who declares: “I am the shadow of what we were, and while there is light we will exist.” When Nolasco next appears in the story, he is accidentally killed by a record player flung in a fit of rage from an apartment window while he was en route to a meeting of old revolutionaries. The dark joke of a man who in this story planned to die intentionally being killed by contingency is perhaps Sepúlveda’s humorous argument for the importance of a Marxist understanding of material reality beyond the solipsism of anarchistic revolutionary practice.

Through the rest of the novel, the four communists with whom Nolasco was to meet contemplate how to accomplish a mission without the Shadow to cast them. While the heroes reminisce about their youth, the narrator takes over to discuss the stifling atmosphere of repression under the Pinochet regime:

Life became riddled with black holes. They were everywhere, you went into a subway station and never came out, you got into a taxi and never reached home, you talked of light and were swallowed up by shadows.

Many friends and acquaintances denied knowing one another, in an epidemic of amnesia that was essential for self-preservation... Forgetting became a pressing need, everything that had been pregnant with the future suddenly became poisoned with the past.

Most of the characters went into exile and carried Santiago with them in their memories. By returning to find that that the ones they love no longer exist, that the city of their memories no longer exists and perhaps never did, we discover that they’ve all in some sense been “disappeared by” the Pinochet regime, along with the truth.

The Marxists, guided by the specter of the Shadow haunting their memoirs of resistance, decide to dig up Nolasco’s treasure, which contains a small black



book, “a book that contained some well-known names and some quite alarming figures.” In the end the revolutionaries—Leninist, Maoist, and Anarchist—enter into an alliance to reclaim the truth of the past in order to restore the hope of the future.

*The Shadow of What We Were* presents such troubling subject matter in a light that is equal parts tragicomic and optimistic. I experienced this text as a literally breathtaking work of art that could suddenly pull fits of laughter from moments of tight-throated sobbing. In this way Sepúlveda championed the spirit of his friends laid out in his lyrical dedication: "To my comrades, male and female/who fell, and picked themselves up,/licked their wounds, cultivated their laughter,/preserved their gaiety, and carried on regardless." I cannot help hearing in these lines the echo of Bobby Sands, the Irish Republican who died on hunger strike and foretold that “the laughter of our children will be our revenge.”

- *Field Work*—Seamus Heaney. Heaney was a Catholic from county Derry, in the north of Ireland; my father fits this same description. The beginning of my leave of absence from UMaine, a couple of months before I found this book, was spent with my family in Derry. My father did not come along for that trip, which allowed me the freedom to do some digging into the family history without him pulling me off of the subject. Dad rarely talked to me and my brothers about his experiences in Ireland after childhood. Those early years of his life were set in a world colored by bitter sectarianism and restricted by the systemic oppression of Irish Catholics. In 1969, when my father was 18, that history of structured

inequality irrupted with the furious violence of masses against the loyalist state. The Battle of the Bogside, a four day clash of petrol bombs and gunfire, kept police and unionists out of “free Derry,” and brought the British Army in to the north, marking the onset of “the Troubles.”

The event that every relative recounted from this period occurred on January 30<sup>th</sup>, 1972–Bloody Sunday. On that day, the whole Coyle family participated in a civil rights march protesting the internment without trial of suspected IRA members. Protestors, frustrated by British paratroopers who were erecting barricades to block the march, began throwing stones. The soldiers responded with gunfire and the crowd dispersed in a panic.

In the chaos that ensued, my uncle was beaten and detained by British soldiers until after curfew; my aunt, a nurse, threw herself over wounded protestors as she attempted to care for them; bullets collided with the low brick wall that sheltered my father from the approaching British soldiers. On the other side of that barrier, Alexander Nash was shot down as he ran to his teenage son, William, who lay wounded in the street and then died of gunshot wounds in front of his father. After the ten minute “incident,” thirteen other corpses were recovered from the Bogside.

Following the massacre, the ranks of the IRA swelled as volunteers flocked to Bogside “safe-houses” where they would learn to carry a gun, or to build a bomb like the one that would kill a friend of Heaney’s in retaliation for the attack.

He was blown to bits  
Out drinking in a curfew  
Others obeyed, three nights  
After they shot dead

The thirteen men in Derry.  
PARAS THIRTEEN, the walls said,  
BOGSIDE NIL. That Wednesday  
Everybody held  
His breath and trembled.

Field Work was written when Heaney temporarily fled Belfast, during the four years that he lived in county Wicklow, in the southeast of Ireland. It is a deeply personal work, reflective of this history in the north through elegies dedicated to dead friends and dead family. But my favorite poems in this volume concern the material relationship between people and their environment, particularly the sea and the bogs of rural Ireland. Remembering the industrial past of the coastal town of Carrickfergus, Heaney writes:

When they said *Carrickfergus* I could hear  
the frosty echo of saltminers' picks.  
I imagined it, chambered and glinting,  
a township built of light...

People here used to believe  
that drowned souls lived in the seals.  
At spring tides they might change shape.  
They loved music and swam in for a singer

who might stand at the edge of summer  
in the mouth of a whitewashed turf-shed,  
his shoulder to the jamb, his song  
a rowboat far out in evening.

When I came here first you were always singing,  
a hint of the clip of the pick  
in your winnowing climb and attack.  
Raise it again, man. We still believe what we hear.

One of my favorite stories that my dad used to tell when I was a child was the myth of the Selkie—seals that could become humans. These tales are almost always tragic romances; a Selkie and a human will fall in love only to be torn apart by the Selkie's longing for its eternal home, the sea.

As miners, the people of Carrickfergus would dig into the earth for crystals to be kept. Now that this relation between the people and the land has ended, they are only left with the constant changes of the sea. The people of Heaney's poem have reversed the old Irish myth and become Selkies that long to return to land. The singer who stands in the turf-shed, a building that would be stuffed with peat-bricks, used to be the link between earth and ocean; his labor produced his song, which would propel him out to sea to find love. Through these lines, which describe how his friend's singing captured the spirit of the town's life-activity, Heaney expresses the materiality of language: "A hint of the clip of the pick..." There is no direct rhyme in this line. There is a repetitive striking of the tongue that never quite produces the same sound, just as the saltminers' picks never struck the same stone. Maybe the recognition of this material power of language could reawaken productive forces that once seemed to make life whole.

My father loves to speak with me about these material and cultural histories of Ireland, but he doesn't sing anymore. In his youth, he was "all-Ireland" for banjo and mandolin and played and sang in a number of bands. But his psyche was injured in the Troubles as he watched the land he knew violently disappear to the point that he felt the need to flee across the Atlantic. Maybe the songs he knew are oversaturated with sorrow, or maybe they simply feel as if they have no place in this new world. Nearly landlocked in New Hampshire, he will sometimes speak to me of his longing to return to his eternal home. I am indebted to Heaney for his work, which expresses and develops my own understanding of my father's life.

- *20 Poems of Love and a Song of Despair*—Pablo Neruda. I discovered this work of poetry in a Spanish class I took during my junior year of high school (2010). I had no profound appreciation for poetry before that moment. Since then, hardly a week has gone by without some words from Neruda’s verses passing through my mind. Over the years, I must have owned at least 15 copies of this book, though I don’t think I lost a single one. I made a habit of distributing this text to dear friends and loved ones in their times of sorrow and joy. In my own personal experience, the poems from this selection have intensified my passion and desire in love. (*En ti los ríos cantan y mi alma en ellos huye/como tú lo deseas y hacia donde tú quieras./Márcame mi camino en tu arco de esperanza/y soltaré en delirio mi bandada de flechas.*) They’ve also occasionally intensified my sorrow at losing love, while also reminding me that the painful (re)discovery of romantic solitude is a common human experience; solidarity is to be found in the aftermath of having loved in action as well as in dreams. (*Ya no la quiero, es cierto, pero cuánto la quise./Mi voz buscaba el viento para tocar su oído./... Ya no la quiero, es cierto, pero tal vez la quiero./Es tan corto el amor, y es tan largo el olvido.*)

Beyond their romantic significance, this series of poems functions as a lasting connection to my love for the Spanish language. I declared a Spanish major during my sophomore year here but quickly became frustrated with the structure of the department and left. To some extent, I still regret the decision to depart from a language I spent 7 years studying. Works like this one remind me that though to a great extent I closed my academic connection to Spanish, it remains an interest of mine and a minor part of my identity. I read the poems in the

original Spanish and reference the English versions in order to understand what limitations are imposed on poetic language in translation and to compare the interpreter's reading of the poem with my own.

- *Don Quixote*—Miguel de Cervantes. I began reading *Don Quixote* immediately after finishing *The Brothers Karamazov* and was shocked when I finished it in two weeks. I actually had some trouble staying focused on my course load as I became obsessed with this fictional history about a man who becomes a knight errant after becoming obsessed with fictional histories about knight errants. Quixano the Good studied tales of justice and virtue and reinvented himself as Don Quixote in order to fight for his literary ideals. His quest for justice, however does not take root in the social world of Early Modern Spain. Drawing on this example, I began to worry about whether burying myself in books had given me any real understanding of the world that could be substituted for experience.

*Don Quixote* was the work that finally threw me into a spiral of dissatisfaction with my academic track. After reading this novel, I decided to leave for a semester. I saw in *Don Quixote* a challenge to reinvent myself outside of the text, to not let consciousness shape my life in a commanding way, but instead to attempt to let life shape my consciousness. Reflecting on my travels now, I am aware of how very solipsistic the whole ordeal was—my nose in books, my pen in a journal, and my heart closed to travelers who could have been more than just acquaintances. This failure seems to mirror a misreading of the subject in *Don Quixote*: I saw Don Quixote as the sole subject of the story without paying much

attention to Sancho Panza. Sancho was a problem to me; he is an unreflective hedonist who seems to blindly believe in Quixote's outdated ideological dream. What I missed is the real development of the central characters in this novel occurs in the development of their friendship as they challenge and accept one another.

- *Autobiography of Red*—Anne Carson. Kirsten Jacobson assigned this novel in verse for her “Existentialism and Literature” course, where phrases of Carson’s like “There is no person without a world” and “Up against another human being one’s own procedures take on definition” paired nicely with Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* and *Nausea*. This performative treatise on how poetic language can reimagine and produce life quickly became my favorite text from my first semester at UMaine.

*Autobiography of Red* is a modern retelling of an ancient retelling of the mythical 10<sup>th</sup> labor of Herakles—his slaughter of a red monster named Geryon and theft of his red cattle. The ancient retelling of the tale was done by Stesichoros, the post-Homeric lyric poet. Fragments are all that remain of Stesichoros’ poem *Geryoneis*, in which he imagined and invented the life of Geryon from childhood to his death in a way that treats Geryon as a full being, deserving of our sympathy for suffering brutality at the hands of a less than heroic Herakles. Carson includes 16 creatively translated fragments of the original Stesichoros poem as a preface to her own reinvention of the tale:

XII. WINGS  
Steps off a scraped March sky and sinks

Up into the blind Atlantic morning One small  
Red dog jumping across the beach miles below  
Like a freed shadow

XIII. HERAKLES' KILLING CLUB  
Little red dog did not see it he felt it All  
Events carry but one

XIV. HERAKLES' ARROW  
Arrow means kill It parted Geryon's skull like a comb Made  
The boy neck lean At odd slow angle sideways as when a  
Poppy shames itself in a whip of nude breeze

XV. TOTAL THINGS KNOWN ABOUT GERYON  
He loved lightning He lived on an island His mother was a  
Nymph of a river that ran to the sea His father was a gold  
Cutting tool Old scholia say that Stesichoros says that  
Geryon had six hands and six feet and wings He was red and  
His strange red cattle excited envy Herakles came and  
Killed him for his cattle

The dog too

XVI. GERYON'S END  
The red world And corresponding red breezes  
Went on Geryon did not

Carson opens this text on the question “what difference did Stesichoros make?,” which is really a larger question about what difference poetic language can make. Her answer to this first question locates Stesichoros’ importance in his inventive use of adjectives: “These small imported mechanisms are in charge of attaching everything in the world to its place in particularity. They are the latches of being... Stesichoros released being. All the substances of the world went floating up. Suddenly there was nothing to interfere with horses being *hollow hooved*... Or an insomniac *outside the joy*.” In the poetic language of the Greek epic-oral tradition, adjectives are structurally fixed reminders that maintain the stability of the word and the world. Homer’s Athena is always “*grey-eyed Pallas*



Athena” and his dawn’s fingers are always “*rose-red*.” Stesichoros, Carson argues, saw beyond the world coded by the epic word to find other possible substances, other possible worlds, and brought them into existence through new codings.

Geryon’s life was one of these possible worlds and was rescued by Stesichoros when he took an empathetic look at the underside of Greek “civilization’s” conquest of monstrosity. By making Geryon into a being valid of poetic consideration, Stesichoros expanded the horizons of meaning. After delivering this message in the first 10 pages of her work, Carson sets out to do a very similar action by bringing Geryon to life in modern America where readers see his newly-envisioned life as a troubled and anxious person unfold from grade school to adulthood in 47 poems.

In the seventh poem, Carson fleshes out the movement between Stesichoros’ 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> fragments. She has Geryon write the “total facts known about Geryon” himself as a part of an autobiography project in elementary school. It ends on a note similar to Stesichoros’ fragment: “Geryon had a little red dog Herakles killed that too.” During Parent-Teacher Day, Geryon’s mother asks if Geryon ever writes anything with a happy ending. Hearing this, Geryon takes the autobiography from his teacher’s hand and writes: “*New Ending./All over the world the beautiful red breezes went on blowing hand/in hand.*” By including the two fragments in one poem, and by crediting Geryon as their author, Carson reinvents the passage between them. No longer are they pronouncements from an authoritative voice giving an objective account of the truth of the world. Now the

two are the emotionally charged self-judgements of a sad little boy who writes a new ending, which ultimately does not change the preceding events in the story, to comfort his mother. In this passage, Carson opens up a new understanding of Stesichoros as an author by questioning his motivation for writing fragment 16. She also makes the modern reader see and feel the long-suffering life of Geryon—a red winged monster of a boy outside of the normative bounds of masculinity and sexuality. The other 46 poems in *Autobiography of Red* similarly invent and unearth new possibilities of life for the reader and for its subject matter. Carson’s writing and thinking stayed with me as evidence of the validity of a discursive reality that ought to be considered a part of material reality.

- *A Thousand Plateaus*—Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. If Miguel de Cervantes provided the affective inspiration for my break from UMaine, Deleuze and Guattari made me realize its necessity conceptually. With *A Thousand Plateaus*, these two thinkers set out to unearth and celebrate a different mode of thinking. In the translator’s introduction to the work, Brian Massumi argues that this mode of thinking is not directed toward the consolidation of ever more knowledge, but is guided by a desire to open new possibilities of life. “The question is not: is it true? But: does it work? What new thoughts does it make possible to think? What new emotions does it make possible to feel? What new sensations and perceptions does it open in the body?” Massumi admits that this presentation of thought may have no effect on many readers who are happy with the tradition of “arborescent” philosophy—philosophy that first lists its premises and follows the argument

linearly through to its conclusion. There is nothing inherently wrong with thought that traces the movement from root to trunk to branches, but Deleuze and Guattari want to demonstrate that this is not the only life of the concept. Their demonstration deeply affected me and I found that every “free moment” I had was spent contemplating their writing.

These thinkers draw on the structure of the rhizome to form a new image of thought. Rhizomes are subterranean stem-structures of plants which sprout roots laterally (perpendicular to the force of gravity). They are made of nodal points connected by lines spanning “nondecomposable variable distances” (distances that cannot be divided without the points and the whole changing in nature). Rhizomes are never fully-closed interiorities, “any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be.” The rhizome develops and lives by entering into assemblages with other unities that are multiple in themselves—multiplicities. Building on this image of thought, Deleuze and Guattari seek a new geography for thought in the smooth-space of the steppe rather than the striations and static unities comprising the forest. They structure this text according to that rhizome-structure for which they advocate: it is composed of 15 “plateaus” which can be read in any order and that constantly make reference (draw lines of flight) to each other. Their writing covers linguistics, zoology, history, military science, political theory, quilting, psychoanalysis, geology, botany, music, painting, literature, mathematics, architecture and a hoard of other subjects as they deterritorialize the boundaries that separate them in an attempt to reconstitute the smooth space of thought.

After reading this book for a semester, I began to go stir-crazy. How much had I allowed myself to grow and change in my time as an undergrad? Had I simply been following a ready-made path of social mobility and expectation? In high school, I was a mediocre student at best. What drove me to attend college? It was the next logical step in the preservation of my life as a member of the “middle class.” Why did I move to Maine? No one from my social milieu in New Hampshire would be there. But a jump from central New Hampshire to central Maine is hardly any change at all—from college town to college town surrounded by different trees in the same forest. What had I planned for a future? 7 more years of schooling. It seemed like I was standing on a ready-made academic escalator and minimally working to define myself. In my waking dreams, I’d often go so far as to think passionately about leaving for another life: rolling hills of Irish grass and the hard dusty surface of the Spanish desert beckoned to me. But after reading D+G I wanted to move further outside of my familiar territory and travel new roads cherishing encounters with strangers for the brief but significant events that they were.

Deleuze and Guattari challenged me to pursue nomadic thought by taking to the road. I don’t know if I could call my trip a success. I don’t know that I took the risks necessary to say that I strayed too far from that path. But I rested my head and discovered that there was indeed an outside to the academy. I realized that I wanted to write and read even in that outside. To some extent, the question as to whether or not in my travels I met their challenge has been left aside as a truth I’ll never grasp. What is important is that because of their challenge to

rethink change and movement as concepts, I feel more complete as a being by continually trying to be open to anything other—to rupture my self. As they state, the goal of becoming-... is to “reach, not the point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance whether one says I. We are no longer ourselves. Each will know his own. We have been aided, inspired, multiplied.”

### Author's Biography

Ciarán Coyle was born in Lebanon, New Hampshire on September 21<sup>st</sup>, 1993. He graduated from Lebanon High School in 2011. Majoring in Philosophy and History, Ciarán has minors in International Affairs and Marxist and Socialist Studies. He is a member of Phi Beta Kappa, Phi Sigma Tau, and Phi Alpha Theta.

Upon graduating from the University of Maine in 2016, Ciarán plans to move to Derry, Ireland, where he hopes to work in the shirt industry that is referenced in Karl Marx's *Capital*. After spending a year or two as an industrial proletariat, he plans to return to academia by working towards an advanced degree in social and political philosophy.