

Capitalism: Some Disassembly Required
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Marx aims to present an immanent critique of the reproduction of capital. He aims, in other words, to show how the process by which capital is reproduced necessarily also reproduces the potential for the emancipatory transformation of capitalist society. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx uses the metaphor of mines that are ready to explode capitalist production from within, suggesting that emancipatory social movements mobilize an arsenal that has been inadvertently built by the very social practices they seek to transform:

[W]ithin bourgeois society, the society that rests on *exchange value*, there arise relations of circulation as well as of production which are so many mines to explode it. (A mass of antithetical forms of the social unity, whose antithetical character can never be abolished through quiet metamorphosis. On the other hand, if we did not find concealed in society as it is the material conditions of production and the corresponding relations of exchange prerequisite for a classless society, then all attempts to explode it would be quixotic.)⁶¹

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But how does Marx understand the generation of such explosive possibilities? By what means does the reproduction of capital necessarily reproduce the potential for alternative forms of collective life? Different answers have been proposed by the Marxist tradition.

Three approaches to understanding emancipatory potential

Two of these answers can be positioned on opposing sides of a dichotomy. On one side are approaches that emphasize how capitalism generates *objective* potentials for transformation – through the development of the forces of production, whose technical and social character drives a progression toward socialized forms of ownership and democratic forms of self-government. On the other side are approaches that focus more on how capitalism generates *subjective* potentials for transformation – through its dependence on an ever-expanding proletarian class whose material interests oppose the social relations on which capitalist production is based, and whose centrality to material production provides both emancipatory insight and transformative power.

Both of these approaches came under fire in the 20th century, as fascist mass movements and the development of totalitarian planned economies were interpreted as evidence that neither subjective nor objective conditions suffice to drive social transformation to emancipatory ends. One response to this historical experience was a turn to theories of ‘social forms’ – structured patterns of social practice that are understood to determine both objective and subjective dimensions of capitalist societies. Contemporary social form theories generally point back to Lukács’ seminal ‘Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat’, which portrays capitalist society as a ‘totality’ whose structures of subjectivity and objectivity are determined by the commodity form:

... at this stage in the history of mankind there is no problem that does not ultimately lead back to that question and there is no

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solution that could not be found in the solution to the riddle of the commodity-*structure*... the problem of commodities must not be considered in isolation or even regarded as the central problem in economics, but as the central structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects. Only in this case can the structure of commodity-relations be made to yield a model of all the objective forms of bourgeois society together with all the subjective forms corresponding to them.⁶²

At first glance, theories of social form appear greatly to increase the depth and sophistication of Marx's work. They reposition *Capital* as a general theory of modernity, rather than a narrow 'economic' analysis, and they apply this theory to culture, psychological structure, governmental forms, and many other dimensions of social life. They also appear to account better for the difficulties facing transformative social movements, suggesting that such movements must wrestle with an internal battle against their members' psyches, a symbolic battle against their cultures, and an institutional battle against forms of production and government that are all fundamentally shaped by the same core social forms.

Yet the very strength of such approaches in accounting for the failure of revolutionary expectations has arguably handicapped them in the search for emancipatory possibilities. Since Lukács, theories of social form have tended to look *through* the diversity of social practice in order to pick out an underlying formal pattern. Such theories are thus tacitly reductive – granting a privileged status to formal patterns visible beneath the flux of everyday social practice, while implicitly treating the diversity of social practice as epiphenomenal. This problem is related to the tendency for theories of social form to remain untethered from an analysis of how the formal pattern is *produced*. This both presumes that it is possible to define the form without a concrete analysis of its production – an assumption with which Marx would have strongly disagreed – and also tends to propel the analysis into idealist forms.

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In the versions of social form theory dominant today, this latent idealism is expressed in several different forms: as pessimism;⁶³ as a claim that capital genuinely exhibits ‘idealist’ properties;⁶⁴ or as the claim that the forms are ‘quasi-autonomous’ from the social actors who create them.⁶⁵ While theories of social form often assert the possibility for emancipatory transformation – and even argue that this potential should be associated with dimensions of social life that cannot be fully characterized by formal structures – the failure to theorize the determinate properties of these other dimensions of social life, or to analyze how the social forms are generated, tends to render theories of social form essentially exhortative. Their relative sophistication does not extend to the theorization of concrete emancipatory possibilities.

So was the turn to social form theories a dead end? Would a return to theories of objective or subjective potential provide a better starting point for grasping concrete possibilities for social transformation? I argue below that Marx’s work suggests another alternative: a non-reductive theory of how concrete social practices operate in tandem to generate overarching patterns of historical change (social forms), while also and simultaneously generating a diverse array of determinate possibilities for alternative forms of collective life.

Political Economy as Intelligent Design

In the opening chapter of *Capital*, in a rare explicit methodological discussion, Marx credits the political economists precisely for their insight into the social forms that characterize capitalist production:

Political economy has indeed analyzed value and its magnitude, however incompletely, and has uncovered the content concealed within these forms. But it has never once asked the question why this content has assumed that particular form, that is to say, why labor is expressed in value, and why the measurement of labor

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by its duration is expressed in the magnitude of the value of the product. These formulas, which bear the unmistakable stamp of belonging to a social formation in which the process of production has mastery over man, instead of the opposite, appear to the political economists' bourgeois consciousness to be as much a self-evident and nature-imposed necessity as productive labor itself.⁶⁶

This passage suggests that Marx does not regard the discovery of social forms to be his distinctive contribution to the critique of political economy. Instead, he singles out the question of how content comes to assume a specific form – which is to say, how a specific set of social forms themselves are produced.

He argues that, by contrast, the political economists stop short, evidently awestruck by the presence of structured patterns that appear to them to emerge 'spontaneously' from a chaotic array of social practices, none of which is intentionally undertaken with the goal of producing this specific aggregate result. Apologetically, the political economists take the emergence of this unexpected, unplanned order to imply that an underlying rationality governs capitalist production. How else could order arise in the absence of conscious design, unless current forms of production were somehow tapping into the underlying natural order that latently governs material production?

For this reason, the political economists are able to declare capitalist production 'natural', and all previous forms of production 'artificial' – in spite of their knowledge that capitalist institutions are recent historical developments. The emergence of an unplanned order – the apparent 'intelligibility' of capitalist production, demonstrated by the political economists' ability to discover non-random trends beneath the chaotic flux of everyday social practice – is taken as a sign that this historically specific mode of production has been ratified by Nature and Reason.

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Marx is scathing towards this apologist conclusion. He compares the political economists to the Church fathers, and accuses them of treating their own historically contingent social institutions as an ‘emanation of God’:

The economists have a singular way of proceeding. For them, there are only two kinds of institutions, artificial and natural. The institutions of feudalism are artificial institutions, those of the bourgeoisie are natural institutions. In this they resemble the theologians, who likewise establish two kinds of religion. Every religion which is not [t]heirs is an invention of men, while their own is an emanation of God... Thus there has been history, but there is no longer any.⁶⁷

With this passage, Marx declares that his project – much like Darwin’s – is driven by the desire to explain the emergence of a particular kind of order, without falling back on mystical concepts of an intelligent designer, a *Geist*, or an invariant Natural Law.

From Marx’s perspective, political economy is only nominally secular. It may invoke the mantle of science and enlightened self-understanding, but it responds with a distinctly uncritical amazement when confronted by structured patterns of historical change that arise independently from conscious human will. This amazement is expressed in the unwarranted conclusion that the presence of unintentional order is evidence of the rationality or goodness of the system within which this order becomes manifest.

In *Capital*, Marx presents an alternative analysis of the process of ‘spontaneous self-organization’ that reproduces capital. Marx portrays the reproduction of capital as a blind and oppressive juggernaut, accidentally generated as an unintentional side effect of a wide array of different social practices, none of which is directly oriented to achieving this aggregate

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result. This juggernaut may not be *random* – it may be characterized by theorizable trends and demonstrable forms of orderly historical change – and this non-random character may make it *intelligible* – it may be subject to systematic theorization. This intelligibility, however, does not make the process *rational* in the sense of reflecting a desirable outcome from our collective social practice. The non-random character of the process cannot be taken as evidence that something beneficial will result if we allow this process to operate free of human interference. Marx attempts to show that a number of non-beneficial consequences will predictably be generated, so long as capital continues to be reproduced. At the same time, he tries to demystify the process of capital's reproduction by cataloguing the makeshift assemblage of contingent social practices that must operate in tandem to generate this 'spontaneous, self-organizing' process.

Through this analysis Marx seeks to invert the conventional 'enlightened' narrative of political economy in two ways. First, Marx severs the enlightenment connection between law and reason, by demonstrating how a blind and accidental process could arise from purely contingent human behaviours and yet still manifest lawlike qualities. Second, Marx contests the political desirability of grounding normative standards in the 'spontaneous' trends of capitalist production. He argues that the reproduction of capital does generate emancipatory possibilities – but he insists that these are hindered by capitalism's spontaneous trends: deliberate political action is required to wrest emancipatory potentials from the process by which capital is reproduced.

Marx pursues these goals by cataloguing what he calls the 'microscopic anatomy' of capitalist production.⁶⁸ This catalogue is intended to produce a systematic theory of the forms of internal social variability that must necessarily be generated, if capital is to continue to be reproduced. This necessary internal variability then becomes key to Marx's argument that it is possible to speculate a new, more emancipatory, form of collective life by selectively inheriting already existing social potentials, in order to

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produce new institutions that are better adapted to emancipatory ends. To understand how this analysis plays out in *Capital*, we must take a brief detour through Marx's idiosyncratic presentational style.

'The Higher Realms of Nonsense'

In an often-quoted passage from the postface to the second German edition of *Capital*, Marx famously distinguishes between his own method of inquiry – the forms of analysis he used to arrive at his conclusions – and his method of presentation – the way he displays his argument in *Capital*:

Of course the method of presentation must differ in form from that of inquiry. The latter has to appropriate the material in detail, to analyze its different forms of development and to track down their inner connection. Only after this work has been done can the real movement be appropriately presented. If this is done successfully, if the life of the subject-matter is now reflected back in the ideas, then it may appear as if we have before us an *a priori* construction.⁶⁹

While the passage is well-known, its implications for reading *Capital* are generally not fully appreciated. *Capital* does not give us – immediately and on the surface – an account of Marx's own analytical procedure. Instead, what the text presents most immediately is a 'method of presentation'. But what does this mean?

When we open the first chapter of *Capital* and begin reading what we see first is a sort of arm-chair empiricist sociological analysis. This analysis invites us to take a look at the 'elementary form' of the wealth of capitalist societies, and proceeds to break down the characteristics of this form, dividing it into use-value and exchange-value.⁷⁰ We do not know at this point what Marx is presenting, what function this analysis might serve. What we do know is that this analysis does not reflect Marx's own personal

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method of inquiry. The form of reasoning and analysis displayed in these opening passages – whatever it is for – is not intended to illustrate a recommended means of arriving at critical sociological insights. It is, instead, part of Marx's method of presentation. We need to keep this in mind, bracket the question of what is being presented for the moment, and move on.

In a couple of pages, the text invites us to 'consider the matter more closely'⁷¹ – by contrast, that is, to the sort of analysis with which the text started. We still do not know why we are being asked to do this – but we do know, now, that the analysis with which we were initially presented must somehow be too superficial. Otherwise, why would we need to consider the matter more closely?

The text now presents a new analysis of the wealth of capitalist societies – one that moves beyond the text's empiricist beginnings to present a very strange sort of transcendental argument, which purports to logically deduce the necessity for a 'supersensible' category beyond use-value and exchange-value: the category of value. It builds on this deduction to infer the need for the category of abstract labor, and then to analyze some of the properties of these new categories.⁷²

Many of the claims made in this section seem quite counter-intuitive, and the form of argument seems profoundly problematic. Both critics and supporters of Marx have expressed incredulity at these passages, baffled at why Marx is putting forward this analysis.⁷³ This bafflement arises because readers take these passages to exemplify Marx's own method of inquiry.

At the beginning of the third section of the chapter, Marx uses a quick reference to Shakespeare to mock the forms of analysis that have just been on display. He compares political economy unfavorably to Dame Quickly, asserting that political economy does not know 'where to have' its categories: "The objectivity of commodities as values differs from Dame Quickly in the sense that "a man knows not where to have it."⁷⁴ The

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reference here is a crude sexual innuendo – Marx is impugning the analytical virility of the political economists by implying that they are unable to bed down their categories properly. The previous sections have left the ontological status of the wealth of capitalist society unclear: is it the straightforward, empirical object with which we started the chapter? Or the immaterial transcendental essence to which we later moved? If we had found ourselves identifying with either of these forms of analysis, the Dame Quickly joke breaks the spell. Both of these positions – and now we begin to get some small hint of what Marx is presenting – are associated here with political economy. They do not reflect Marx's own analyses, but analyses he has set out to criticize.

Marx now launches into a convoluted and implausible series of dialectical analyses of the commodity form. At first glance, it could appear that we have now reached Marx's method of inquiry: Marx may begin with taunting parodies of empiricist and transcendental analyses, but now that the dialectics has begun, surely we have reached his analysis proper.

If so, we should hold some severe reservations about Marx's materialist *bona fides*. The third section of *Capital's* opening chapter presents us with an idealist dialectic: it identifies a series of 'defects' in categories derived from the commodity form; each defect drives toward a more adequate category, until finally the argument announces that we now understand the origins of money.⁷⁵ Read at face value, the passage strongly implies that the logical deficiencies of a set of conceptual categories resolve themselves by compelling the manifestation of a real sociological phenomenon: money exists, according to the logic of this section, because without it the concept of the commodity would be defective.

This section is shot through with gestures that suggest that Marx is deeply amused by this presentation. Sarcastic footnotes, ludicrous analogies, and sardonic asides strongly suggest that these passages are not meant to be taken literally. Francis Wheen has memorably described this sec-

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tion as a 'picaresque journey through the higher realms of nonsense', in which the reader is confronted with increasingly surreal meditations on the interactions of the linen and the coat, until finally driven to realize that the whole presentation is, in Wheen's words, 'a shaggy dog story'.⁷⁶ More analytically, Dominic LaCapra has argued that this section is best read as a series of dominant and counter-voices, with the effect of undermining the reader's identification with the overt argument:

Bizarre footnotes on Benjamin Franklin and on the problem of human identity appear to cast an ironic light on the concept of abstract labor power as the essence or 'quiddity' of exchange values. An ironic countervoice even surfaces in the principal text to strike dissonant notes with respect to the seemingly dominant positivistic voice. ('The fact that [linen] is [exchange] value, is made manifest by its equality with the coat, just as the sheep's nature of a Christian is shown in his resemblance to the Lamb of God.') The reader begins to wonder whether he should take the concepts of abstract labor power and exchange value altogether at face value.⁷⁷

The sarcastic tone of much of the section operates to distance the reader from the dialectical analysis of the wealth of capitalist societies, differentiating this presentation from Marx's own method of inquiry.

Even for Marx, however, sarcasm eventually reaches its limits. This section of *Capital* also includes a moment where Marx finally breaks the fourth wall and provides some more explicit guidance on his own analytical approach. He does this in the form of a mischievous digression on Aristotle.⁷⁸

Prior to this digression, the text has displayed a series of analyses of the wealth of capitalist society, each of which operates as though decontextualized thought were sufficient to achieve sociological insight. The initial, empiricist, analysis of the wealth of capitalist societies suggested

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that one had only to observe the self-evident properties of the commodity, understood as a straightforward given – as data. The second, transcendental, analysis suggested that empirical observation might not be enough: the commodity also possesses properties that are not immediately perceptible by the senses. Fortunately, these properties can be logically intuited by reason. The third, dialectical, analysis suggested that commodities could not be understood in their static isolation – that a dynamic dialectical analysis is required to grasp how commodities develop in interaction with other commodities. For all their differences, these approaches share the presupposition that the mind's brute force can penetrate all obstacles to arrive at a clear sense of the wealth of capitalist societies.

This presupposition is playfully destabilized when Marx suddenly asks why Aristotle was not able to deduce the existence of value.

This seemingly innocent question carries devastating implications. If the brute force of thought were all that were required to deduce value and to analyze its properties, then surely Aristotle would have been bright enough to deduce it. Indeed Aristotle is bright enough – Marx helpfully points out – to consider the possibility that something like value might exist. Nevertheless, he rejects it out of hand. But why?

What Aristotle lacked, Marx goes on to argue, was not intellect or brute logical force. It was a particular kind of practical experience:

Aristotle was unable to extract this fact, that, in the form of commodity-values, all labor is expressed as equal human labor and therefore as labor of equal quality, by inspection from the form of value, because Greek society was founded on the labor of slaves, hence had as its natural basis the inequality of men and of their labor-powers. The secret of the expression of value, namely the equality and equivalence of all kinds of labor because and in so far as they are human labor in general, could not be deciphered until

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the concept of human equality had already acquired the permanence of a fixed popular opinion. This however becomes possible only in a society where the commodity-form is the universal form of the product of labor, hence the dominant social relation is the relation between men as possessors of commodities. Aristotle's genius is displayed precisely by his discovery of a relation of equality in the value-expression of commodities. Only the historical limitation inherent in the society in which he lived prevented him from finding out what 'in reality' this relation of equality consisted of.⁷⁹

This explanation ricochets back on everything that came before. If a specific kind of practical experience is required, in order for certain 'logical' conclusions to be drawn, or observations made, then the forms of analysis prominently displayed so far in this chapter have not grasped why they are able to arrive at the conclusions they do. An adequate analysis would expose the relationship between practice and thought. Nothing that we have seen thus far in *Capital's* opening chapter attempts this feat. We have instead been reading an exemplary presentation of several competing forms of analysis that Marx has caricatured in this chapter as the opening volley of his critique.

We have been given our first clear hint about Marx's actual method of inquiry: that he seeks to explain the practical experiences that prime specific sorts of perception and cognition. We have also been given our first clear hint about what is being presented here: competing forms of theory that fail to recognize their own entanglement in determinate sorts of practical experience. Over the course of *Capital*, Marx will develop these hints, recurrently putting on display competing forms of theory, gradually connecting each one with the sort of practical experience that renders that theory socially valid – but only for a bounded slice of social experience. To the extent that a particular kind of theory remains unaware of its current sphere of social validity, and thus over-extrapolates and hypostatizes a

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narrow slice of social experience to the exclusion of others, that theory can be convicted for expressing a partial and one-sided conception of capitalist society.

One of Marx's goals, then, is to demonstrate the partial and one-sided character of competing theories of capitalist production. His analysis operates by demonstrating the narrow boundaries within which specific theoretical claims can be said to be valid, and then by panning back from those boundaries to show other dimensions of capitalist production, which render valid very different sorts of claims. In this way, Marx gradually explores the internal variability of capitalist production, and mines a much wider array of social experience than do competing forms of theory.

The breadth of his analysis is related to its critical power: by grasping the reproduction of capital as a much more internally diverse and multifaceted phenomenon than competing theories, he renders capitalist history citable in more of its moments. He is positioned to grasp, not simply the end result – the replication of a set of aggregate historical trends characteristic of capitalist production – but also the contradictory countercurrents that imply possibilities for the development of new forms of collective life. By systematically cataloguing each aspect of the complex process by which capital is reproduced – by refusing to reductively equate capitalist production with a small set of aggregate results of this process as a whole – Marx seeks to bring the internal variability of capitalist production squarely into view.

Post Festum Knowledge

Why not declare that this is the intent? Why not explain the presentational strategy and state the actual analytical method overtly?

In part, no doubt, the explanation is that Marx did not anticipate how obscure his readers would find his presentational strategy. Marx

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viewed the discourse of political economy as self-evidently absurd – its categories as ‘deranged’ – and he expected his readers to share his sense that these categories could be socially valid only for an irrational form of production. More problematically, he seems to have taken for granted that his readers would then understand that a burlesque style of presentation would be required to adequately express the absurdity of this system. He did not foresee how many readers would approach the text ‘straight’.

In part, however, Marx attempted to write the text in a way that exemplified his own understanding of the interdependence of thought and everyday social practice. In the fourth section of *Capital's* opening chapter, in a passage that is seemingly specific to political economy's discovery of the lawlike patterns generated by capitalist production, Marx describes how knowledge arises after the fact, as we are confronted with the consequences and implications of what we collectively do:

Reflection on the forms of human life, hence also scientific analysis of those forms, takes a course directly opposite to their real development. Reflection begins *post festum*, and therefore with the results of the process of development already to hand.⁸⁰

This passage is neither an offhand description of the method of political economy, nor a general claim about human knowledge as such: instead, it represents an accidental historical insight that lies ready to hand due to the peculiar characteristics of capitalist production.⁸¹ Once constituted by this accident of history, however, this insight is available to be appropriated and redeployed in a new form – in this case, as one of the cornerstones of *Capital's* presentational strategy.

Consistently through the text, Marx will mobilize this *post festum* structure. The text will first enact a phenomenon and then – sometimes many chapters later – Marx will make explicit what that phenomenon implied, and explore how it can be appropriated. The text embodies its own

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claim that first we act, blindly and without a clear sense of the full implications and consequences of our actions – generating possibilities in a state of distraction. Once we have acted, we can then reflect consciously on our actions, tease out their implications – and become able to re-enact and creatively adapt our insights to novel ends.

Marx thus treats *Capital* as a *production* – and flags this in the opening chapter by treating the main text as a stage, onto which he casts actors who represent common approaches to theorizing the wealth of capitalist societies. Only after actually staging this play does he then – in chapter 2 – explicitly tell his readers that his investigation proceeds by exploring a series of ‘characters who appear on the economic stage’.⁸² The explicit articulation takes place only *after* the practical enactment – first we act, then we appropriate insights from that enactment – and, in the process, we can transform our relationship to the original act, innovating around and adapting the original performance.

In much later chapters, Marx attaches explicit identities to the original actors. The empiricist figure who opens the chapter is associated with vulgar political economy,⁸³ while the transcendental figure is associated with classical political economy.⁸⁴ The ‘social forms’ introduced in the original play are gradually revealed to be, not ‘elementary forms’ from which other aspects of capitalist society can be derived, but rather aggregate results of a vast array of concrete practices that Marx systematically catalogues through the remainder of the volume.⁸⁵

In each successive chapter, Marx makes explicit further implications of the practices and forms of theory articulated in previous chapters. Readers who do not recognize that this strategy is in play will commonly miss the strategic point of long passages of text – particularly early in the work, when less has been enacted, and little can be stated explicitly.

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Many important implications of the social practices that reproduce capital are simply not visible from the standpoint of a single practice, or even a collection of several dozen practices. This is precisely why so many forms of theory derive such inadequate conceptions of capitalist production: they are focusing on too narrow a slice of social experience. Thus, for example, when Marx first introduces the category of capital in chapter 4, he has already explored dozens of different social practices. This exploration enables him to *introduce* the category – but only as it appears from the standpoint of those social practices associated with the circulation of goods on the market.

As it happens, when viewed from the standpoint of circulation, capital appears to be a self-organizing, autonomous entity, unbounded by material constraints. It appears, in other words, rather like it does to the political economists: as a spontaneously self-organizing system.

Marx distances himself from this interpretation with a heavy dose of sarcasm. He deploys Hegelian vocabulary to draw out the idealist mystification of this perspective, describing capital as a self-moving subject that is also substance – attributing to capital, in other words, the qualities of Hegel's *Geist*.⁸⁶ Marx expects his readers to regard this image as self-evidently absurd but, just in case the reference is too obscure, he also compares this image of capital to the Christian Trinity⁸⁷ and to the fairy tale of the goose that lays the golden eggs.⁸⁸ This chapter presents, in other words, an infantile fantasy conception of capital as a *sui generis* phenomenon that spontaneously brings forth wealth from itself, unbounded and unrestrained. It does not outline Marx's own conception of capital, but his mocking, sardonic critique of a set of blinkered economic theories and philosophies that mobilize only the smallest fraction of the insights that could be mined from the analysis of capitalist production, and thus remain awestruck by a phenomenon they only dimly understand. This is the description of capital as it appears from the standpoint of circulation.

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The phenomenon will appear very different once Marx can mobilize the insights available in other dimensions of social experience.

To articulate a more adequate understanding of capital, Marx must move past the sphere of circulation – into analyses of the sphere of production, the state, and the world system. He will only explicitly articulate his own conclusions, however, once he has explored *all* of the practical actions required to generate a particular social insight. Until then, sarcasm is his principal tool for flagging his personal distance from the perspectives explored in his main text.

Since text is necessarily linear, and not every practice can be explored simultaneously, the result is often that Marx must string together many chapters before he has assembled the insights needed to articulate important conclusions. By the time he can render the analysis explicit, the reader has often forgotten the many earlier passages in which he painstakingly assembled the diverse building blocks on which specific conclusions rely. Marx's conclusions can thus seem ungrounded and obscure – dogmatic assertions, instead of carefully substantiated arguments. By the same token, long sections of text can appear not to make any substantive contributions to the overarching argument – and are thus often not discussed, or even edited out!, by interpreters keen to zero in on what they take to be the heart of the argument.⁸⁹ But these long, detailed passages are where Marx carries out the heart of his analysis – where he outlines capital's 'microscopic anatomy'.

Microscopic Anatomy

In this short piece I cannot adequately explore how this microscopic anatomy plays out. I can, however, indicate what *sort* of analysis Marx is making – and explain how this analysis overcomes the subject/object divide in a very different way to that assumed by contemporary theories of social form.

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In chapters 2 and 3 of *Capital*, Marx starts to explore a series of micrological social practices. He does this in excruciating detail, and with no explicit indication of what strategic purpose the analysis serves. He begins with practices associated with a petty bourgeois experience of capitalist production – practices that could all conceivably be undertaken by persons who produce goods using their own personal labor, bring these goods to market, and exchange them for other goods that they personally need.

Along the way, Marx highlights the material result of this process – the exchange of material good for material good. This material result is a real aspect of contemporary capitalist production: we really do move goods from one place to another, engaging in what Marx calls a process of ‘social metabolism’.⁹⁰ This real result, however, tells us nothing about the process through which the result has been achieved. The same material result would arise from direct barter, or from a customary process of the exchange of goods. If we focus entirely on the result, we will arrive at a very partial and one-sided understanding of the process.

At the same time, the material result cannot be disregarded. It generates real effects, which form part of the real internal variability of capitalist production. These real effects suggest specific possibilities for future social development – including some possibilities that would carry social development in directions that are not compatible with the continued reproduction of capital. In this sense, these real effects enable practical experiences that can be mobilized critically, to advocate alternative forms of collective life.

Some contemporary theorists have picked up on one possible emancipatory implication of this particular real effect, and have argued that Marx intends to advocate for a form of collective life in which social wealth is based on material wealth, rather than on value.⁹¹ While this may indeed be an important potential, Marx’s actual understanding of

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emancipatory possibilities is much more complex, mining many different dimensions of the internal variability in the practices that reproduce capital. The end result is a rich and complex network of emancipatory resources that Marx catalogues throughout his text.

Having explored the implications of the material result, Marx pans back to look at the same phenomenon from a broader perspective – that of the process by which this material result has been achieved.⁹² By panning back in this way, Marx can criticize as one-sided and partial any forms of theory that over-extrapolate from this small aspect of capitalist production. He can also begin assembling the resources to make a *prima facie* case that capitalist production itself suggests the possibility for alternative means to achieve this same result – thus refuting charges that his critique is utopian or impractical given current levels of technological sophistication or complexity of the division of labor.

This basic process will continue through the whole length of *Capital*. In each new section, Marx will systematically catalogue dimensions of social experience, point out which competing forms of theory fixate on the dimension just analyzed, ask what other social purposes could be pursued when deploying the same sorts of social actions, and then pan back to look at capitalist production from a different perspective.

But what does all this have to do with the subject/object divide?

When carrying out his microscopic anatomy, Marx stages a series of miniature plays. He is analyzing micrological social practices, and to do so he seeks to capture, not just what sorts of impacts people create in the external world, or what sorts of interactions they carry out with other people, but what sorts of bodily comportments, strategic orientations, forms of perception and thought, and other subjective states are part and parcel of a specific social performance. The narrative form of the play allows Marx to capture the subjective, intersubjective and objective elements of each

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social practice that he explores. It also allows him to thematize how what is superficially the 'same' act, carried out with the same prop and on the same stage, might nevertheless be part of a very different performance, depending on the subjective orientations, intersubjective relations, or objective impacts enacted.

Thus, for example, the common prop we call 'money' can be variously used by buyers and sellers, debtors and creditors, thieves and heirs, bankers and governments, and a wide cast of other characters who enact different sorts of performances facilitated by this same basic prop. These performances, however, constitute different sorts of subjective stances, intersubjective relations, and objective consequences – they generate different immediate consequences, and different potentials for current and future social development. Unless this diversity is recognized, theorists may conflate fundamentally different kinds of social performance, overlook contradictory social trends, and fail to grasp important potentials for alternative forms of collective life. The theatrical narrative style of Marx's work is designed to maximize his ability to keep track of the performative diversity that can differentiate superficially similar kinds of social practices. It enables Marx to map several different dimensions of social practices simultaneously, in a way that clearly demarcates and preserves social diversity.

This approach allows Marx to relate social forms of subjectivity and objectivity to one another, not because these forms all share the same fractal structure, but because determinate subjective stances, intersubjective relations, and objective consequences are always part and parcel of any given social practice. For this reason, Marx does not end up pointing all social performances back to a small number of social forms that purportedly permeate social interaction. Instead, he ends up cataloguing dozens and dozens of differentiated types of performances, each integral to the reproduction of capital, but each also generating their own distinctive consequences and potentials when considered in isolation or when grouped

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together with a subset of the other practices required for capitalist production.

Many of the performances Marx traces are fleeting and ephemeral moments embedded in longer chains of related practices. We enact many of these performances in a state of distraction, while focusing on more overarching goals. And yet these fleeting practical experiences, which may fly beneath the radar of ordinary awareness, nevertheless provide a reservoir of experience that can be mined and rendered explicit for emancipatory ends. The experience of human equality figures as one of these fleeting moments – contradicted by many more prominent aspects of social experience, so that the conviction that humans are equal emerges initially, in Marx's words, as a 'fixed popular opinion'⁹³ – something we intuitively feel is correct, but whose origins we have difficulty tracing, because we enact a peculiar kind of equality accidentally, in the course of a performance that has very different overt goals. Once enacted, however, human equality becomes a particularly important component of the reservoir of practical experience that can be wielded for emancipatory ends.

Selective Inheritance

How does all this relate to the question with which I opened – the question of how Marx understands the immanent generation of emancipatory potential? A seemingly throwaway line in *Capital's* opening chapter provides an important hint. Ostensibly speaking about 'production' in a narrow economic sense, Marx argues: 'When man engages in production, he can only proceed as nature does herself, i.e. he can only change the form of the materials.'⁹⁴ I suggest that Marx understands this principle also to apply to our production of human history. For Marx, emancipatory potentials are not created *ex nihilo*, through some sort of abstract leap outside history. Instead, they are appropriated – seized from the circumstances in which they originated, repurposed, and institutionalized anew. Once again, the spirit of the argument is Darwinian: although there is no *telos* driving historical

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development in a particular direction, later forms of social life are descended, with modification, from earlier forms. Moreover, the development of new forms of social life does not take place in a completely random way. It is mediated by an opportunistic process of selective inheritance that draws upon the pre-existing variability present in the original society in adapting to a changing historical environment.

Within this framework, Marx's microscopic anatomy serves two crucial purposes. First, it shows how an extremely diverse array of micrological social practices could unintentionally generate the sorts of social forms described in *Capital's* opening chapter – how order could arise without the need for a mystical designer. Second, it demonstrates how inadequate it would be, to reduce our social experience to the set of aggregate patterns that are captured by these social forms. These patterns are *part* of the internal variability of capitalist production – a particularly striking and, for political economy at least, awe-inducing part, which requires for its generation the tandem operation of all of the social practices Marx catalogues in *Capital*. Yet the same practices that operate together to generate such aggregate effects, also generate effects at much more local scales, which do not require the continued operation of the system as a whole, and which suggest alternative ways of institutionalizing the aspects of capitalist production we might want to preserve.

Capital's critical standpoint relies on keeping firmly in view this vast reservoir of internal social variability. It refuses to look *through* this complex, chaotic content, in order to reductively grasp capitalism as a system defined only by the reproduction of a small set of social forms. Instead, it sees the reproduction of capital as dependent on a vast assemblage of social practices that possesses high internal variability. Through a process of selective inheritance, it is possible to mobilize this internal variability, adaptively improvising new forms of collective life. Communism would be capitalism, some disassembly required: a speciation from our existing form of social life, which would creatively adapt existing social potentials to emancipatory ends.