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Editorial Perspective



'The Mute Compulsion of Economic Relations': Towards a Marxist Theory of the Abstract and Impersonal Power of Capital

Søren Mau

Visiting Postdoctoral Fellow, Department for Arts and Cultural Studies,
University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark

benmau89@hotmail.com

Abstract

According to Marx's unfinished critique of political economy, capitalist relations of production rely on what Marx refers to in *Capital* as 'the mute compulsion of economic relations'. The aim of this article is to demonstrate that this constitutes a distinct form of economic power which cannot be reduced to either ideology or violence, and to provide the conceptual groundwork for a systematic theory of capital's mute compulsion.

Keywords

power – domination – compulsion – capitalism – capital – Marx – Marxism

In a certain sense, the existence of capitalism is a mystery, or at least paradoxical.¹ As generations of Marxists have demonstrated time and again, it is not difficult

¹ I would like to thank the editors of *Historical Materialism* as well as Dominique Routhier, Nicolai von Eggers and Mikkel Flohr for their generous and useful comments, criticisms and suggestions.

to point out the deeply contradictory nature of the capitalist mode of production and the utter impossibility of securing anything like a stable foundation for social life on its basis. Perhaps the difficulty rather lies in explaining why capitalism has not collapsed long ago. It makes perfect sense that socialists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century should have felt so certain about the impending collapse of the capitalist system. Already in the 1930s, however, following a turbulent era marked by the Long Depression of the late nineteenth century, the First World War, the Russian and German revolutions and the Great Depression, Walter Benjamin concluded that '[t]he experience of our generation is that capitalism will not die a natural death'.² Today, almost a century of capitalist barbarism later, we know that the capitalist mode of production has not only survived, but *thrived and expanded* during, across and through crises, revolutions, uprisings, wars and pandemics.

Violence and Ideology

How does the logic of capital manage not only to hold on to, but expand and fortify its grip on social life? How do we account for the power of capital? Most attempts to do so rely (implicitly or explicitly) on the assumption that power assumes two fundamental forms: *violence* and *ideology*, or, in other versions of this common pairing: coercion and consent, dominance and hegemony, repression and discourse.³ The reproduction of capitalist social relations is accordingly understood as the result of a combination of the ability of the ruling classes to employ violence and their ability to shape the way in which we (consciously or unconsciously) perceive and understand ourselves and our world, with varying views on the relationship between and relative importance of these two forms of power. Althusser's influential theory of ideology is a good example of this; according to Althusser, the reproduction of capitalist relations of production '*is ensured by the superstructure, by the legal-political superstructure and the ideological superstructure*'. In this familiar scheme, the relations of production are reproduced by the ideological and the repressive state-apparatuses, which rely on *ideology* and *violence*, respectively.⁴

The classical Marxists of the Second International era tended to regard the state and its capacity to employ direct, physical coercion as the primary locus

² Benjamin 1999, p. 667.

³ Poulantzas 2014, p. 78.

⁴ Althusser 2014, pp. 140, 244.

and form of capitalist power – and certainly not without reason. In a context shaped by violent repression of workers' movements, imperialist expansion and rivalry, war, lack of democratic institutions and a tendency to monopolisation, it made sense to emphasise the centrality of violence in the reproduction of capitalist class rule. This comes out very clearly in Lenin's analysis of the 'personal union' in the top levels of banks, monopolies and the state, resulting in a 'sort of division of labour amongst some hundreds of kings of finance who reign over modern capitalist society'.⁵

The support for nationalism and fascism among sections of the proletariat in the interwar period led to a preoccupation with the question of why proletarians act against their own 'objective interests'. This question was an important factor in the establishment of what became the long and proud tradition of Marxist theories of ideology. 'Anyone who underestimates the material power of ideology will never achieve anything', Wilhelm Reich warned in 1934: '[i]n our historical period, it has shown itself to be stronger than the power of material distress: otherwise, the workers and the peasants, and not Hitler and Thyssen, would be in power'.⁶ In contrast to those who emphasised the centrality of the coercive power of the state, Reich insisted that '[i]t is only seldom that the owners of the social means of production resort to the means of brute violence in the domination of the oppressed classes; its main weapon is its ideological power'.⁷ This emphasis on ideology became a mainstay of Western Marxism. Notwithstanding their important differences, thinkers such as Lukács, Gramsci, Adorno and Althusser shared one basic idea, which underpins all theories of ideology: namely that capitalism reproduces itself not only by means of violence, but also by affecting the concepts, imageries, myths and narratives through which we (consciously or unconsciously) represent, interpret and understand ourselves and our surroundings.

Economic Power

Capitalism is certainly unthinkable without the constant presence of ideology and violence. But there is more to the power of capital than that. Towards the end of the first volume of *Capital*, Marx examines the historical emergence of capitalism and concludes that in 'actual history, it is a notorious fact that

⁵ Lenin 2010, p. 47; see also Hilferding 1981.

⁶ Reich 1934, p. 28.

⁷ Reich 1970, p. 25.

conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, *violence*, play the greatest part'.⁸ However, he then goes on to point out that the forms of power required in order to *bring about* a certain state of affairs are not necessarily identical to the forms of power involved in its *reproduction*. On the contrary: when violence has done its job, another form of power can partially take over. In a well-known passage, Marx describes how, once capitalist relations of production have been established,

the mute compulsion of economic relations seals the domination of the capitalist over the worker. Extra-economic, immediate violence is still of course used, but only in exceptional cases. In the ordinary run of things, the worker can be left to the 'natural laws of production,' i.e., it is possible to rely on his dependence on capital, which springs from the conditions of production themselves, and is guaranteed in perpetuity by them.⁹

Violence is thus partially replaced by and supplemented with a form of power which is not immediately visible or audible, but which is nevertheless just as brutal, unremitting and ruthless as violence; an impersonal and abstract form of domination which is immediately embedded *in* the economic processes themselves rather than tacked onto them in an external manner. Marx's analysis of this 'mute compulsion' – usually but erroneously translated as 'silent' or 'dull' compulsion – and its centrality for maintaining the capitalist status quo was more or less forgotten or ignored for about a century following his death. It was only with the Marxist renaissance of the 1970s and its repercussions that Marx's unfinished and fragmentary analysis of the impersonal and abstract power of capital was rediscovered and refined by several different Marxist tendencies and currents. Building on the rediscovery of Marx's theory of value among students of Adorno in the 1960s and 1970s, value-form theorists such as Michael Heinrich, Ingo Elbe, Robert Kurz and Moishe Postone have stressed the impersonal and abstract domination of everyone – regardless of their class position – by the value form.¹⁰ Several participants in the closely-related German 'state derivation debate' of the 1970s also succeeded in throwing light on this historically unique form of abstract domination, with a particular interest in the specific division of labour between this form of power and the equally necessary violence of the state.¹¹ A similar focus on the uniquely capi-

8 Marx 1990, p. 874; emphasis added.

9 Marx 1990, p. 899; translation amended.

10 Heinrich 2012b; Elbe 2008; Kurz and Lohoff 1989; Postone 2003.

11 Holloway and Picciotto (eds.) 1978; Clarke (ed.) 1991; Elbe 2008, Chapter 2.

talist separation of the economic and the political, and the different forms of power associated with this separation, characterises the Political Marxism of Ellen Meiksins Wood, with its distinctive attention to the difference between capitalist and pre-capitalist relations of exploitation.¹² Another important current that has contributed to the dismantling of bourgeois as well as traditional Marxist notions of 'the economy' as an ontologically separate sphere governed by a transhistorical 'economic' rationality is the Marxist Feminist discussions about the reproduction of labour power. These debates have seldom revolved explicitly around the concept of economic power, but they have nevertheless laid the foundation for a theory of capital's mute compulsion by stressing the importance of seeing 'the "economic" as a social relation [...] that involves domination and coercion', as Tithi Bhattacharya puts it.¹³ Finally, the eco-Marxism of Andreas Malm and others has also made important contributions to the uncovering of the workings of mute compulsion by highlighting how the real subsumption of nature strengthens the subjection of the social totality to the logic of valorisation.¹⁴

This literature has generated a lot of immensely important insights into the nature of the abstract and anonymous power of capital, with some authors proceeding from historical and empirical analyses, while others start out from the dialectical examination of concepts. All of this is, however, restricted to a focus on certain aspects or expressions of the mute compulsion of economic relations, and one looks in vain for a systematic and well-defined concept of this form of power and its relationship to other forms of power. This is not necessarily a deficiency of this literature, as most of the authors mentioned are simply preoccupied with other issues. It means, however, that we still lack a systematic and comprehensive theory of the mute compulsion of capital, which in turns means that we still do not have an adequate understanding of how the logic of valorisation manages to sustain its grip on the life of society, despite its chaotic and destructive consequences. In this article, I will draw on the work of the aforementioned authors as well as a critical and systematic reading of Marx's analysis of the mechanisms of capitalist domination in an attempt to sketch out the conceptual foundation for a theory of the mute compulsion of economic relations, or, as I will also call it, *economic power*.¹⁵ I will argue that economic power is a distinctive form of power which cannot

12 Wood 2016.

13 Bhattacharya 2017, p. 71.

14 Malm 2016.

15 This article is based on a book which has recently been published in German and Danish and will be out in English in 2022. See Mau 2021a; 2021b; 2022.

be reduced to either ideology or violence, and that it forms a part of what Marx calls the 'core structure' of capitalism, i.e. that it is at work in all variants of the capitalist mode of production.¹⁶

On its most fundamental level, power is an ability to make people do certain things, for example to sell their labour power or perform surplus labour. The power of capital thus refers to capital's ability to impose its logic of valorisation on social life.¹⁷ The exercise of this capacity can take on different forms. One such form is violence; a form of power which is rooted in the capacity to inflict pain and death on the bodies of its targets. Most people generally prefer to avoid pain, injury and death, and for that reason, violence – and the threat thereof – is an effective motivating force. Ideology is a form of power which is rooted in the capacity to affect the ways in which people consciously or unconsciously understand themselves and the world they inhabit, and what they take to be just and unjust, necessary and contingent, natural and artificial, divine and human, inevitable and changeable, and so on. Such ideas and intuitions function as coordinates for action, and for this reason, ideology is an important source of power.

Violence and ideology both address the subjugated subject *directly*, either by immediately forcing bodies to do certain things, or by shaping the way in which these bodies think. Economic power, on the other hand, addresses the subject only *indirectly*, by remoulding its social and material environment in a manner that forces it to act in accordance with the logic of valorisation. Economic power or mute compulsion is thus a form of power which is rooted *the ability to reconfigure the material conditions of social reproduction*. The concept of 'social reproduction' should here be taken in the broadest sense of all the processes and activities needed in order to secure the continuous existence of social life. Economic power is thus a concept that captures how social logics reproduce themselves by being inscribed in the environment of those who are subjected to it.

With this general concept of economic power in mind, let us take a closer look at its specific mechanisms, before returning towards the end of the article to the question of the relationship between economic power, ideology and violence, as well as the question of precisely what it means to describe this form of domination as 'abstract' and 'impersonal'. The sources of capital's mute compulsion can be divided into two broad categories: first, a specific set of social *relations*, and second, a set of *dynamics* which are simultaneously results

16 Marx 2017, p. 376; translation amended.

17 For a discussion of the concept of power and the question of whether or not it makes sense to speak of 'capital' as something that can have or exercise power, see Chapter 1 in Mau 2022.

and causes of those very same relations. We will begin by examining the social relations that give rise to the specifically economic power of capital; first, we will take a look at the vertical class relations underlying the capitalist mode of production, before moving on to consider the horizontal relations of value and competition and the thorny and important but highly ignored question of the precise relationship between the vertical and the horizontal relations. We will then move on to scrutinise some of the dynamics set in motion by these relations: first, capital's constant remoulding of the material conditions of the production process – real subsumption, in Marx's terminology – and second, the cyclical dynamics of relative surplus populations and economic crises. Taken together, these relations and dynamics explain why the power of capital takes the form of a 'mute compulsion of economic relations'.

Impersonal Class Domination

Capitalist production presupposes the availability of labour power as a commodity, which in turn presupposes that a sufficiently large part of the workforce is denied access to the conditions of social reproduction outside of the mediations of the market. In other words: capitalism necessarily relies on class domination, or more specifically, on the creation and reproduction of a class of proletarians who are forced to perform surplus labour for those who control the conditions of social reproduction. One of the specific characteristics of capitalist class domination is that it is based on the 'complete separation between the workers and the ownership of the conditions for the realization of their labour', as Marx puts it.¹⁸ In pre-capitalist modes of production, by contrast, class hierarchies and exploitation were based on the *unity* of producers and means of production. In modes of production based on slavery, the producer and the means of production were unified in the sense that both were the property of the slave-owner. The power of feudal lords was likewise based on the unity of peasants and their means of production.¹⁹ For this reason, (the threat of) direct, physical coercion was necessary in order to make peasants perform surplus labour. In contrast to these pre-capitalist modes of domination, the power of the capitalist class is based on the permanent *separation* of the producers from the means of production and subsistence (as well as from each other), with the consequence that the ruling class can force workers to perform surplus labour without having to employ violence; instead, they can simply deny them access to the means of their survival. As Marx explains:

¹⁸ Marx 1990, p. 874.

¹⁹ Brenner 2007, p. 64.

the slave only works under the impulse of external fear, but not for *his own existence*, which does not belong to him, and yet it is *guaranteed*. The free worker, in contrast, is driven by his wants [...] The *continuity of the relation* between slave and slave holder is preserved by the direct compulsion exerted upon the slave. The free worker, on the other hand, must preserve it himself, since his existence and that of his family depend upon his constantly renewing the sale of his labour capacity to the capitalist.²⁰

So, whereas the ‘Roman slave was held by chains’, the ‘wage-labourer is bound to his owner by invisible threads’.²¹ By creating the ‘naked life’ of the proletarian as a ‘mere possibility’ cut off from the conditions of its realisation, capital manages to establish a mode of domination in which the worker can ‘only satisfy his vital needs to the extent that he sells his labour [power]; hence is forced into this by his own interest, not by external compulsion’.²² Workers are thus ‘compelled to sell themselves voluntarily’, as Marx puts it in a formula which nicely captures the paradoxical and deceptive nature of capitalist power.²³ This is the distinctive ‘economic’ aspect of capitalist class domination: the valorisation of value inserts itself as a mediating moment in the human metabolism with the rest of nature, whereby workers are driven by their own needs to subject themselves to the demands of capital.²⁴

It is important to note that this class domination is not just a relationship between *workers* and *capitalists*. It might very well be that capital is first and foremost concerned with securing a steady supply of exploitable labour power, but it is important – theoretically as well as politically – to grasp how this relationship of exploitation presupposes a wider and much more encompassing form of class domination. In order to force those needed by capitalists as wage-labourers to sell their labour power, it is not sufficient to proletarianise only that particular group of people – capital also has to make sure that everyone who could potentially support and provide means of subsistence for them are proletarianised, that is, cut off from immediate access to the conditions of their reproduction. And what is even more important: given that certain tasks connected with the reproduction of labour power cannot be immediately integrated into the immediate circuits of capital, but are nevertheless absolutely necessary for capitalist production, capital also has to make sure that someone

20 Marx and Engels 1994, pp. 98f.

21 Marx 1990, p. 719; see also Marx and Engels 1988, p. 197.

22 Marx and Engels 1976b, p. 499; Marx 1993, p. 454; Marx and Engels 1988, p. 198.

23 Marx 1990, p. 899.

24 See also Marx and Engels 1988, p. 204; Wood 2016, pp. 28f.

is forced to perform this labour.²⁵ In other words, capitalism presupposes not only the proletarianisation of those needed as wage labourers, but of virtually everyone who does not belong to or live off the ruling classes. Capital needs proletarians who offer their labour-power up for sale, but it equally needs proletarians who perform the necessary reproductive labour – such as child-birth, childcare, cooking, cleaning, etc. – outside of the wage relation, that is, proletarians whose dependence on capital is mediated by their dependence on other proletarians. As Marxist Feminists have demonstrated, this uniquely capitalist split between the production of commodities and the reproduction of labour power is the material basis of the oppression of women under capitalism. By organising this split along gendered lines, capital has historically subjected women to what Federici calls a 'double dependence' on capital mediated by the male wage-earner.²⁶

In order to grasp the fundamental class domination underlying the capitalist mode of production, we therefore have to avoid defining class in terms of *exploitation*. The relation of exploitation is premised on a broader class domination rooted not in the extraction of surplus labour but in the relationship to the means of production. Put differently: the domination of *wage labourers* by capitalists presupposes the domination of *proletarians* by capital. Capitalism relies on a relationship of domination between the 'possessors of the conditions of production, who rule, and on the other side the propertyless', and the ruling class rules because it is the class 'whose conditions are the conditions of the whole society'.²⁷ Defining class in terms of exploitation is not only inadequate for developing an understanding of the class domination presupposed by capitalism; it also risks reinforcing narrow conceptions of class struggle. Understanding class as a shared relation to the conditions of social reproduction, on the contrary, allows us to broaden our notion of class struggle and explore how the struggle for wrenching the conditions of life free from the grip of capital takes place on all levels and across the entire social totality.²⁸

Another unique feature of capitalist class domination is its *impersonal* nature, in contrast to the *personal* relations of dependence characteristic of pre-capitalist modes of production. Proletarians are tied to *capital as such*, not to a particular capitalist. As Marx explains in *Wage Labour and Capital*:

25 Vogel 2014; Endnotes 2013; Bhattacharya 2017; Ferguson 2019; Brenner and Ramas 2000.

26 Federici 2004, p. 97.

27 Marx and Engels 1988, p. 196; Marx and Engels 1976a, p. 413.

28 This is not to say that such an objective and structural concept of class is the only relevant or possible concept of class, but only that this is what we need insofar as we are trying to grasp the fundamental class relation underlying the economic power of capital. In other contexts, other concepts of class might be more appropriate and relevant.

The worker leaves the capitalist to whom he hires himself whenever he likes, and the capitalist discharges him whenever he thinks fit, as soon as he no longer gets any utility out of him, or not the anticipated utility. But the worker, whose sole source of livelihood is the sale of his labour [power] cannot leave the *whole class of purchasers*, that is, the *capitalist class*, without renouncing his existence. *He belongs not to this or that bourgeois, but to the bourgeoisie, the bourgeois class*, and it is his business to dispose of himself, that is to find a purchaser within this bourgeois class.²⁹

As this quote makes clear, it is absolutely central to understand how the *vertical* relationship between exploiters and exploited is mediated by the *horizontal* relationships among exploiters (to use Robert Brenner's helpful distinction): since the ruling class is split into autonomous and competing units, workers can choose who they want to sell their labour-power to.³⁰

The Universal Power of Value and Competition

The horizontal relationship between units of production is the starting point of Marx's critique of political economy. In his theory of value, Marx demonstrates how the peculiar unity of social and private labour in capitalism transforms social relations among producers into a quasi-autonomous system of real abstractions imposing themselves on *everyone*. When social relations among producers are mediated by the exchange of products of labour as commodities, their access to their conditions of existence is mediated by a market system in which the circulation of commodities and money generate compulsory standards and demands that these producers must meet in order to survive.

This reading of the theory of value as a theory of abstract social domination is particularly well developed in the work of value-form theorists such as Heinrich, Elbe, Postone and Kurz.³¹ Scholars in this tradition often downplay the significance of *class domination* in favour of an emphasis on what Adorno called 'the universal domination of mankind by exchange value'.³² For these

29 Marx and Engels 1977, p. 203; see also Marx 1990, p. 1032; Marx and Engels 1976b, p. 499.

30 Brenner 2007.

31 Heinrich 2012b; Elbe, Ellmers and Eufinger 2012; Postone 2003; Kurz 2012.

32 Adorno 2017, p. 178; see also Adorno 1972, p. 14; Postone 2003; Kurz 2012; Kurz and Lohoff 1989; Jappe 2005; Grigat 2007; Heinrich 2012b; Elbe, Ellmers and Eufinger 2012; Heinrich 2004.

thinkers, the domination of proletarians by capitalists is a *derived* or *secondary* form of the more fundamental domination of everyone by value.

While it is important to recognise the class-transcending nature of the power of value – this is one of the reasons why we should avoid reducing the power of *capital* to the power of the *capitalists* – it is equally essential to understand the intimate connection between value and class. As Marx demonstrates in his meticulous dialectical analysis of the necessary relationship between value, money, capital and the commodification of labour power, value actually presupposes class domination; 'only where wage-labour is its basis does commodity production impose itself on society as a whole', as he puts it.³³ In other words; the universal domination of everyone by the value form can only exist on the basis of the domination of proletarians by capitalists. This does not mean, however, that the horizontal relationships among producers can be reduced to a result of the vertical class relations; the latter is a necessary yet not sufficient condition for the former, or put differently: the separation between the producers and the means of production does not in itself necessitate that social production is coordinated by means of the exchange of products of labour as commodities. For this reason, we have to understand the horizontal and the vertical relations as two sets of distinct yet interrelated relations of domination, which are both essential to the capitalist mode of production. In order to fully understand how capital reproduces its stranglehold on social reproduction, we need to be attentive to how these two dimensions mediate each other. *Proletarians* are subjected to *capitalists* by means of mechanisms of domination which simultaneously subject *everyone* to the imperatives of *capital*. At the same time, the 'subjection [*Unterordnung*] of the worker to the product of labour, the [subjection of the] value-creating power to value' is, as Marx explains in one of the drafts for the second book of *Capital*, 'mediated through (appears in) the *relation of compulsion and domination* between the capitalist (the personification of capital) and the worker'.³⁴ This is what gives capitalist class-domination its distinctively *impersonal* character.

There is more to the horizontal relations than what the analysis of value uncovers, however. The dialectical progression of categories in *Capital* reveals that what initially appear simply as private and independent producers are in fact capitalist companies exploiting wage labour. On the basis of this insight, it is possible to re-examine the horizontal relations on a lower level of abstraction, where they appear as *competition*. Competition is an *intra-class* relation,

33 Marx 1990, p. 733; Mau 2018; Ellmers 2009; Elbe 2008, pp. 514ff.; Hanloser and Reitter 2008; Bonefeld 2004; Brentel 1989, p. 270; Heinrich 2012a, pp. 91f.

34 Marx 2008, pp. 21f., 572.

or to be more precise, a relationship between sellers, regardless of what kind of commodity they sell (labour power, for example). By competing, capitals set in motion a set of universalising mechanisms which generate social averages that individual capitals are forced to live up to. The market thus acts as a transmitter not of information, but of compulsory commands; as Marx explains, competition 'executes the inner laws of capital' by means of the 'reciprocal compulsion' of individual capitals.³⁵ Furthermore, the 'competition among workers is', Marx notes, 'only another form of competition among capitals', as it divides workers and makes it easier to discipline them and lower their wages.³⁶ Competition pits capitalists against each other, but it also *unifies* them by distributing the total surplus value among various branches and sectors of the ruling classes. Competing capitalists thus act as 'hostile brothers, [who] divide among themselves the loot of other people's labour'.³⁷ Capital is 'a social power', as Marx and Engels write in the *Communist Manifesto*, and competition is the mechanism which brings about this unity; here 'the individual has an effect only as a part of a social power, as an atom in the mass, and it is in this form that competition brings into play the social character of production and consumption', as Marx puts it in the manuscript for the third book of *Capital*.³⁸

This unifying dynamic tells us something important about how the vertical and horizontal dimensions of capitalist relations of production mediate each other. Competition is a class-transcending form of power, an abstract and impersonal form of domination which *everyone* is subjected to, but at the same time, it strengthens the *class* character of the power of capital because it unifies competing capitalists. The ideological nature of bourgeois notions of free competition, free trade and free market thereby becomes clear. The market has nothing to do with freedom, unless the freedom in question is that of capital; 'It is not individuals who are set free by free competition; it is, rather, capital which is set free'.³⁹

The Real Subsumption of Labour, Nature and Space

So far I have presented a somewhat synchronic and static picture of the capitalist mode of production. In order to fully understand what mute compulsion is, however, we also need to take into account the *dynamics* of capitalist

35 Marx 1993, pp. 752, 651.

36 Marx 1993, p. 651

37 Marx and Engels 1989a, p. 264.

38 Marx and Engels 1976b, p. 499; Marx 2017, p. 303.

39 Marx 1993, pp. 649f.

production. One such dynamic is *real subsumption*, a term which in Marx's writings refers to capital's continuous remoulding of the technical and organisational aspects of the labour process.

Separated from the conditions of their reproduction, proletarians are forced to sell their labour power to capitalists. After the act of exchange, the 'buyer takes command of the seller' in the production process, and yet another 'relation of domination and servitude' comes into existence: the 'anarchy' of the market is replaced with the 'despotism' of the workplace.⁴⁰ The relationship between the (representatives of the) capitalist and the worker is not a result of a personal relation of dependence but of a market transaction: 'What brings the seller into a relationship of dependency is', as Marx explains, '*solely* the fact that the buyer is the owner of the conditions of labour. There is no fixed political and social relationship of supremacy and subordination'.⁴¹ The 'authority that the capitalist assumes in the immediate production process' is therefore 'essentially different from the forms assumed by authority on the basis of production with slaves, serfs etc.', since the 'capitalist only holds power as the *personification of capital*'.⁴²

Competitive pressures force capitalists to use their power over workers to organise production in a manner that increases profitability as much as possible. This is the driving force behind real subsumption. Subsumption is *formal* when it 'does not imply a fundamental change in the real nature of the labour process', i.e., when capital takes over a labour process whose technical and organisational structure is a result of *non-capitalist* logics.⁴³ Since the labour process 'remains unchanged' under formal subsumption, its capitalist form 'may', as Marx notes, 'be easily dissolved'.⁴⁴ This changes when subsumption becomes *real*, i.e. when capital 'radically remoulds' the 'social and technological conditions' of the labour process.⁴⁵

Real subsumption can target all aspects of the production process: technologies, organisational structures, energy sources, divisions of labour, specialisations, rhythms, scales, systems of surveillance, work procedures, and so on.⁴⁶ It works by means of what is perhaps the most fundamental dynamic of capital's material restructuring of social reproduction: separate in order to

40 Marx and Engels 1988, pp. 106, 310; Marx 1990, p. 477; Marx 2017, p. 943.

41 Marx 1990, pp. 1025f.

42 Marx 2017, p. 943; Marx and Engels 1994, p. 122; see also Marx and Engels 1988, p. 94; Marx 1990, pp. 450, 989, 1053f.; Marx and Engels 1994, p. 123; Roberts 2017, p. 167.

43 Marx 1990, p. 1021; see also Marx 1993, pp. 586f.; Marx and Engels 1988, pp. 64, 92, 262, 279; Marx 1990, p. 425.

44 Marx and Engels 1988, p. 279.

45 Marx and Engels 1994, p. 30.

46 Braverman 1974; Endnotes 2010.

reconnect, fracture in order to reassemble, atomise in order to integrate. This happens on multiple levels of the capitalist totality. Life is separated from its conditions in order to be reconnected in the production process; social production is split into private and independent units of production in order to be reconnected by means of market transactions; and in a similar manner, capital 'seizes labour-power by its roots' within the production process and transforms the latter into a *potential whose condition of actualisation is the mediation of valorising value*:

If, in the first place, the worker sold his labour-power to capital because he lacked the material means of producing a commodity, now his own individual labour-power withholds its services unless it has been sold to capital. It will continue to function only in an environment which first comes into existence after its sale, namely the capitalist's workshop. Unfitted by nature to make anything independently, the manufacturing worker develops his productive activity only as an appendage of that workshop. As the chosen people bore in their features the sign that they were the property of Jehovah, so the division of labour brands the manufacturing worker as the property of capital.⁴⁷

The valorisation of value thus becomes 'a real condition of production'.⁴⁸ In the 1861–3 *Manuscript*, Marx describes this dimension of capital's power by means of a useful distinction between the *objective* and the *social* conditions of labour, which corresponds to the double nature of production as a social and a natural process.⁴⁹ Capital not only appropriates the *objective* conditions of labour, i.e. the means of production; through real subsumption it also appropriates the *social* conditions. Workers become 'one-sided, abstract, partial', 'disconnected [and] isolated', with the consequence that their labour-power 'becomes powerless when it stands alone'.⁵⁰ The unification of these partial and disconnected workers into a single *Gesamtkörper* takes place under the command of capital, which becomes 'as indispensable as that a general should command on the field of battle'.⁵¹ The cooperation of workers is thus no longer

47 Marx 1990, p. 481.

48 Marx 1990, p. 448.

49 Marx and Engels 1988, pp. 279f.; Marx and Engels 1976a, p. 43.

50 Marx and Engels 1988, p. 279; Marx 1990, p. 357; Marx and Engels 1994, pp. 123f.; see also Marx and Engels 1989b, p. 402; Marx and Engels 1991, p. 479; Marx 1990, p. 1055.

51 Marx 1990, pp. 448f.

'*their* being, but the *being* of capital'.⁵² Real subsumption is an *effect* of the power of capital in that it is premised upon the power granted to capitalists by the relations of production. But the very exercise of this power tends to reproduce it, and for that reason, the capitalist production process is not only the production of commodities endowed with surplus value – it is at the same time *the production of power*.

Marx only uses the concept of subsumption to refer to changes in the *labour* process, but as Andreas Malm has convincingly demonstrated, these categories can also throw light on capital's relationship with *nature*.⁵³ Real subsumption of nature takes place when capital actively reorganises natural processes in order to achieve its aims. This can take on endlessly many forms and involve such processes as shifting to new forms of energy, selective breeding and various forms of biotechnological manipulation of plants and animals in order to increase yield, reduce turnover times, adjust natural processes to the abstract temporality of capital and calibrate the rhythms of nature to capital's machinery. Some of the most extreme examples of this real subsumption of nature can be found in the epoch-making transformation of agricultural production in the twentieth century, where artificial fertilisers, pesticides, growth hormones, antibiotics and hybrid seeds have revolutionised agriculture and effectively turned it into a branch of industry.⁵⁴ This real subsumption of nature not only has catastrophic ecological consequences, it also tends to fortify the power of capital, for exactly the same reason that the real subsumption of *labour* strengthens that very same power: it reorganises the material conditions of production in a manner that gradually turns the valorisation of value into a condition of social reproduction.

A similar process of material restructuring takes place in the geography of production, that is, when capital actively reorganises the spatial relations between producers in order to achieve its aims. Real subsumption takes place not only *within* individual production processes, but also *between* all the different moments of the productive totality. For capital, spatial flexibility and increasing mobility are a source of power, and accordingly, we should follow Marx in understanding means of transportation and communication as *weapons*.⁵⁵ Capitalism reduces spatiality to 'a merely *temporal* moment' in the sense that for capital, distance matters only because it takes time to traverse

52 Marx 1993, p. 585; see also Marx and Engels 1988, p. 261; Marx 1993, pp. 470f., 587; Marx and Engels 1988, pp. 262, 269; Marx and Engels 1994, p. 30.

53 Malm 2018; Malm 2016; see also Burkett 2014, p. 67; Boyd, Prudham and Schurman 2001.

54 See Benanav 2015; Weis 2007; Kloppenborg 2004; Lewontin and Berlan 1986; Mazoyer and Roudart 2006.

55 Marx 1990, p. 579.

it, so that '[t]he spatial determination itself here appears as a *temporal determination* [*Zeitbestimmung*]', as Marx writes in a draft for the second book of *Capital*.⁵⁶ Capital's tendency to reduce turnover time therefore takes the form of an 'annihilation of space through time', as Marx famously puts it in the *Grundrisse*.⁵⁷ The constant pressure to develop new and improved means of transportation and communication has been an integral part of the capitalist mode of production from its beginning, but the so-called 'logistics revolution' in the second half of the twentieth century made it particularly clear to everyone just how much capital is able to re-organise the global geography of production.⁵⁸ By means of canals, ports, highways, railways, containers, trucks, trains and ships, capital has shrouded the planet in a vast web of versatile supply chains, thereby making it possible to swiftly relocate and adapt should anything – rebellious proletarians, foot-dragging governments, unruly nature – get in the way of profitability.

Logistics is an apparatus for carving the logic of valorisation into the crust of the earth. It enhances the power of capital over workers by increasing the capacity of individual capitals to relocate production or change subcontractors. Capitalism is founded upon the insertion of the logic of valorisation into the gap between life and its conditions, and what the spatial flexibility bestowed upon capital by global supply chains does is to enhance capital's ability to master this vital link. In addition to this, spatial flexibility equals merging and expanding markets, and thereby also intensifies competition among capitals as well as among workers.⁵⁹ Logistics thus *intensifies* the forms of domination which spring from the horizontal relations of production; in other words, it not only enhances the power of capitalists over workers, but also the power of capital over everyone. Furthermore, the restructuring of the international division of labour made possible by the development of infrastructure and logistics allows capital to dig deeper into the most elementary levels of social reproduction. Similar to the way in which capital 'seizes labour-power by its roots' within the workplace, it seizes local, regional or national economies by their roots and subjects them to the familiar process of fracturing and reassembling: it breaks up production processes and sectors into pieces and spreads their fragments all over the globe in order to reunite them through planetary supply chains. The conditions necessary for social reproduction to take place

56 Marx 1988, p. 203.

57 Marx 1993, p. 524.

58 Cowen 2014; Chua, Danyluk, Cowen and Khalili 2018; Khalili 2020; Bernes 2013; Bernes 2018; Danyluk 2018; Bonacich and Wilson 2008.

59 Marx and Engels 1976b, p. 423.

on a local or regional level might thus be scattered all over the world, with their mediation under the control of capital. In this way, logistics allows capital to supplement its appropriation of the *objective* and *social* conditions of labour with the appropriation of the *spatial* or *geographical* conditions. This amounts to a kind of *real subsumption*, yet on the level of the global totality rather than that of the workplace. Increasing geographical integration of networks of production makes it tremendously difficult to break with capitalism, since it increases the scale on which such a transformation would have to take place. As Jasper Bernes notes, the logistics revolution tends to create a situation in which 'any attempt to seize the means of production would require an *immediately global seizure*'.⁶⁰

Real subsumption in all of its different forms – of labour, nature and the geography of production – reveals a peculiar feature of the power of capital. These dynamics are the *results* of the mute compulsion set in motion by the underlying capitalist relations of production. At the same time, however, they also strengthen this very same power, and are thus one of its *sources*. The power of capital thus exhibits a paradoxical *circularity*; it is partly the *result of its own exercise*, or, as Marx (showing himself to be a true student of Hegel) puts it in the *Grundrisse*: the 'presuppositions, which originally appeared as conditions of its becoming – and hence could not spring from its *action as capital* – now appear as results of its own realization, reality, as *posited by it* – *not as conditions of its arising, but as results of its existence*'.⁶¹

Surplus Populations and Crises as Power Mechanisms

Real subsumption is a more or less constant dynamic. It might be stronger in periods with rising proletarian militancy or intense competition, but it is always there. However, capitalist relations of production also set in motion dynamics which exhibit a different pattern: the reproduction of a relative surplus population and recurring economic crises. In contrast to the dynamics of real subsumption, both of these tendencies follow a *cyclical* pattern. They are similar to real subsumption, however, in that they are simultaneously *results* and *sources* of the impersonal and abstract power of capital.

Much has been written about the validity of Marx's theory of 'the general law of capitalist accumulation', and I will not go into details with this here. In my view, Marx convincingly argues that capitalism necessarily tends to generate a

60 Bernes 2013, p. 197.

61 Marx 1993, p. 460.

certain level of unemployment. Reduced to its essentials, the argument is fairly simple: as accumulation proceeds, an increasing demand for labour eventually leads to rising wages. However, this will also cause accumulation to slow down and hence cause a drop in the demand for labour-power, leading to a decline in wages. In other words: the ‘mechanism of the capitalist production process removes the very obstacles it temporarily creates.’⁶² Marx also claims, however, that the relative surplus population will necessarily grow in the long run – and in this regard I agree with Heinrich and others who have pointed out that Marx here relies on questionable assumptions whose validity cannot be determined on the basis of an analysis of the ‘ideal cross-section’ of capitalism (irrespective of whether or not Marx’s predictions have been empirically verified).⁶³

According to Marx, the creation and reproduction of a relative surplus population ‘greatly increases the power of capital.’⁶⁴ It does so first of all by intensifying competition among workers, which has several advantages for capital; ‘the pressure of the unemployed compels those who are employed to furnish more labour’ – in other words: the easier it is for employers to replace workers, the easier it is to discipline them.⁶⁵ Capital’s reproduction of a relative surplus population demonstrates that it ‘acts on both sides at once’ in the supply and demand for labour. This does not, however, prevent ‘capital and its sycophants, political economy’ from condemning trade unions as ‘the infringement of the “eternal” and so to speak “sacred” law of supply and demand’.⁶⁶ Neither does capital hesitate to employ *violence* in order to *establish* the mechanism of supply and demand:

as soon as (in the colonies, for example) adverse circumstances prevent the creation of an industrial reserve army, and with it the absolute dependence of the working class upon the capitalist class, capital, along with its platitudinous Sancho Panza, rebels against the ‘sacred’ law of supply and demand, and tries to make up for its inadequacy.⁶⁷

What Marx suggests here is that violent dispossession and the existence of a surplus population should be regarded as two different methods for regulating the supply of labour-power. Once the producers have been violently separated

62 Marx 1990, p. 770.

63 Heinrich 1999, pp. 323f.; Heinrich 2012a, p. 126; Harvey 2006, pp. 160ff.; Endnotes and Benanav 2010; Benanav and Clegg 2018.

64 Marx and Engels 1989b, p. 180.

65 Marx 1990, p. 793; Marx and Engels 1989b, p. 441.

66 Marx 1990, pp. 792f.

67 Marx 1990, p. 794.

from access to means of subsistence outside of the circuits of capital, the mechanisms of accumulation take over; *mute compulsion replaces violence*. The dynamics through which a relative surplus population is created and reproduced thereby 'rivets the worker to capital more firmly than the wedges of Hephaestus held Prometheus to the rock'.⁶⁸

Something similar can be said about crises. Marx's analysis of the 1848 revolutions led him to believe that a '*new revolution is possible only in consequence of a new crisis*', as he and Engels put it in 1850.⁶⁹ In the following years, Marx constantly looked for signs of the impending crisis and anticipated it several times in the *New York Tribune*. He and Engels were euphoric when the global financial crisis of 1857 broke out, but they were soon disappointed, and this experience led Marx to rethink the relationship between crises and the power of capital; what Geert Reuten and Peter D. Thomas call the 'eschatological theory of crisis' in the *Grundrisse* gave way to a new conception of crisis as a normal phase of accumulation cycles.⁷⁰ Marx moved from a conception of crisis as a *crisis of* the power of capital to an understanding of crisis as a *part of* the power of capital. In this view, a crisis is 'a necessary violent means for the cure of the plethora of capital', a mechanism by means of which capital *avoids* breakdown.⁷¹

Faced with the risk of falling prey to a frothing market in times of crisis, capitalists have to step up their competitive game by all means available, and for this reason a crisis tends to intensify the pressure of competition. Not all of them survive, however. Bankruptcies and downsizing – and the gloomy investment prospects in general – lead to a 'violent annihilation of capital not by circumstances external to it, but rather as a condition of its self-preservation'.⁷² Those capitalists that make it through the crisis are often able to buy means of production from downsized or bankrupted companies at a bargain price, thereby lowering the value-composition of capital and increasing the rate of profit.⁷³ The annihilation of capital is especially hard on branches where overproduction is particularly acute, and for this reason crises also tend to reduce

68 Marx 1990, p. 799.

69 Marx and Engels 1978, pp. 52, 135; see also pp. 497, 510.

70 Thomas and Reuten 2014; Marx and Engels 1984, pp. 191, 199, 203; see also Clarke 1994, chapters 3–7; Heinrich 1999, pp. 345ff.; Heinrich 2014; Reuten 2004.

71 Marx and Engels 1991, p. 105.

72 Marx 1993, pp. 749f.; Marx and Engels 1989b, p. 127.

73 Harvey 2006, pp. 200ff.

disproportionalities.⁷⁴ '[T]he crisis itself may' thus, in Marx's words, 'be a form of equalisation'.⁷⁵

A crisis also intensifies competition among *workers*; as accumulation slows down, the relative surplus population grows and creates a downward pressure on wages. Those workers who still have their job 'have to accept a fall in wages, even beneath the average; an operation that has exactly the same effect for capital as if relative or absolute surplus-value had been increased'.⁷⁶ In addition to this, intensification of competition makes it more risky for workers to resist real subsumption, which tends to lead to an increase in the rate of surplus value.

By means of these mechanisms, crises remove their own (proximate) causes and prepare the way for a new round of accumulation.⁷⁷ It is thus a 'method of resolution', a moment of what Marx refers to in the French edition of *Capital* as *les cycles renaissants*, 'rejuvenating cycles' of capital accumulation.⁷⁸ As an outcome of anarchic yet patterned myriads of individual actions, a crisis is the systemic effect par excellence. When the crisis hits, it becomes clear to everyone just how much a society in which social reproduction is governed by the valorisation of value is a society that has lost control over itself. No one is in control, and there is no centre from where power radiates; capitalist society is ruled by social relations which morph into real abstractions whose opaque movements we call 'the economy' – just 'like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells', to quote the *Manifesto*.⁷⁹ A crisis is capital's attempt to flee its own shadow, to survive by internalising its own partial negation: it sacrifices a part of itself in order to let the valorisation of value continue. The logic of valorisation thus includes within itself its own negation, 'not by circumstances external to it', as Marx puts it, 'but rather as a condition of its self-preservation'.⁸⁰

Three Forms of Power

The relations and dynamics examined in this article demonstrate that the logic of valorisation forces itself upon society by means of an abstract and

74 Heinrich 1999, p. 354; Hirsch 1978, p. 74.

75 Marx and Engels 1989b, p. 151.

76 Marx 2017, p. 363.

77 Marx 1978, p. 264.

78 Marx 2017, pp. 362, 358; Marx 1989, p. 557.

79 Marx and Engels 1976b, p. 489.

80 Marx 1993, pp. 749f.

impersonal form of power that cannot be grasped through the categories of violence and ideology. But precisely what is meant by 'abstract' and 'impersonal' here?

The economic power of capital is impersonal in several different senses. First, in the sense that it is the power *of* a social logic rather than a person or a group of persons. Second, it is impersonal in the sense that proletarians are not subjected *to* a particular personification of this social logic. Third, it is impersonal in the sense that in some of its expressions – such as the movement of prices on the market – its exercise cannot be *attributed* to a particular person. Finally, it is also impersonal in the sense that, properly speaking, it does not *address* persons, but rather their environment. The economic power of capital is abstract in two different senses. First, in the sense that capitalist society is *ruled by* the obscure metamorphoses and movements of real abstractions. Second, it is abstract in the sense that it is often difficult or outright impossible to identify its expressions as an exercise of power and to locate it in time and space. A military intervention, a lynching or a police raid are all tangible and concrete exercises of power, which are experienced as such and can be located in time and space, in contrast to, for example, how decreasing shipping costs and cheap fertilisers gradually increase the international division of labour in a manner that entangles the agricultural production of an entire region or country tightly in the global webs of value.

This tripartition of the power of capital raises the question of the precise relationship between the three forms of power. The first thing to say about this is that they are *irreducible* to each other, as they spring from three distinct capacities. The second thing to say is that although it is possible to distinguish quite clearly between these forms of power, in reality they are completely entangled in each other in many different ways. Consider, for example, how the reproduction of a relative surplus population and the competition it generates among workers provide a fertile ground for racist ideology and racist violence, which in turn helps to reproduce capitalist relations of production by undermining collective proletarian action – a dynamic which is very much at play in contemporary Europe and the USA.⁸¹ Or consider how the generalisation of the commodity-form forms the basis of the bourgeois ideology of the market as a neutral mechanism of coordination between free and equal economic actors. Both are examples of how economic and ideological power mutually reinforce each other.

81 Gilmore 2006; Rehmann 2015; Clover 2016, Chapter 8; Endnotes 2015; Farris 2012; Farris 2019.

The third thing I want to emphasise is that all three forms of power are equally *necessary* for the capitalist mode of production. Reich, Gramsci, Althusser and other theorists of ideology have argued convincingly that capitalism could not exist without the support of ideological domination, and Marxist state theorists – particularly those who contributed to the state-derivation debate of the 1970s and 1980s – have similarly demonstrated that capitalist production presupposes a social institution endowed with what Marx calls the ‘the will and privilege to force the totality’ by means of (the threat of) violence in order to guarantee the general conditions of production.⁸² As far as the economic power goes, I hope to have shown in the preceding pages that this is a form of power which springs from social relations and dynamics that belong to what Marx calls the ‘core structure’ of the capitalist mode of production, i.e. that mute compulsion operates in *all* capitalist societies.⁸³

That obviously does not mean, however, that the three forms of power are always equally significant or play the same role in all contexts. On the contrary, it seems intuitively clear that the precise configuration and relative importance of the different forms of power have varied throughout the history of capitalism. Perhaps there is even a historical pattern to be discovered here? Extensive historical research would be required to conclude anything about this, so I will leave this suggestion hanging and refrain from making any substantial claims. However, it is worth briefly mentioning two perspectives on this question which can be found in Marx’s writings.

Marx’s analysis seems to suggest that there is a historical tendency in capitalism for violence to be gradually replaced by economic power. In the *Grundrisse*, he notes – in the sketchy form of an incomplete sentence so typical of these manuscripts – that in ‘the prehistory of capital, state coercion to transform the propertyless into *workers* at conditions advantageous for capital, which are not yet here enforced upon the workers by competition among one another’.⁸⁴ The same perspective can be found in the passage about ‘the mute compulsion of economic relations’ in Chapter 28 of *Capital*, Volume 1. After having examined the bloody birth of capitalism, Marx goes on to note that the ‘advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws’ – in other words, that violence is supplemented

82 Marx 1993, p. 531, translation amended; Elbe 2008, Part 2.

83 Marx 2017, p. 376; translation amended.

84 Marx 1993, p. 736.

with *ideology*.⁸⁵ He then adds that in addition to this, there is also the 'mute compulsion of economic relations'.

In recent years there has been a renewed interest in the continuation of Marx's dismantling of the ideological fantasies about the birth of capitalism as an outcome of peaceful and voluntary market transactions, in contrast to pre-capitalist barbarism.⁸⁶ As Ingo Stütze recently put it: 'the "mute compulsion of economic relations" can only establish itself when the state provides social validity to the social logics which materialise themselves in property and money. As an extra-economic coercive power [*Zwangsgewalt*], the state guarantees and establishes property by means of the form of law [*Rechtsform*], and money in the form of a central bank'.⁸⁷ This is true not only of the historical birth of capitalism, but of all historical phases of capitalism, including the present. And as Christian Frings has recently pointed out, Marx does not claim that there is an unequivocal and linear historical tendency for violence to be replaced with ideological and economic power. On the contrary, Marx emphasises that capital can only rely on mute compulsion in 'the ordinary run of things', and that 'immediate, extra-economic violence is of course still used, but only in exceptional cases'.⁸⁸ While it is far from clear what counts as 'exceptional' here, these comments seem to suggest that violence is always in the background, ready to step in if the mechanisms of economic power break down or turn out to be insufficient. There is certainly something intuitively true about this idea of violence as the last resort, which it is preferable for the ruling classes to avoid. Violence is incredibly effective, but it is also a risky form of power to rely on because of its loud and visible nature. It is precisely the muteness and the invisibility of economic power that makes it so attractive for the existing state of affairs and provides a fertile ground for ideological representation of the market economy as a neutral method for 'co-ordinating the economic activities of millions [...] without coercion', as Milton Friedman once put it – which is why it is crucial to develop a conceptual apparatus that enables us to see how the absence of violence is not a sign of the absence of domination, but merely a change in its form.⁸⁹

85 Marx 1990, p. 899.

86 Frings 2019; Stütze 2020; Gerstenberger 2018b; Gerstenberger 2018a; McNally 2020; Beckert 2015.

87 Stütze 2020, p. 221.

88 Frings 2019, p. 428; Marx 1990, p. 899, translation amended.

89 Friedman 2002, p. 13.

Communist Resilience

As a method for forcing people to do certain things by manipulating their material environment, economic power is an example of what Andreas Malm calls the ‘unique propensity’ of humans ‘to *actively order matter so that it solidifies their social relations*’.⁹⁰ Rather than being functionally adapted to an ecological niche, the human body is fitted to the use of tools which can be replaced, developed, modified and adapted to various settings. Because of their necessity in human reproduction, Marx regards tools as ‘organs’ and approvingly quotes Benjamin Franklin’s definition of the human being as a tool-making animal.⁹¹ The human body thus partially consists of organs which can be uncoupled from the rest of the body, circulate among fellow members of the species and end up as the property of someone else.⁹² Because of the structure and fluid boundaries of the human body, its metabolism with the rest of nature possesses a unique degree of flexibility; the human being is, in Kate Soper’s words, ‘biologically under-determined’.⁹³ Human life ‘cannot flow in a ready-made channel’, as Piotr Hoffmann puts it, which means that there is no such thing as a *natural* mode of production, no immediately given way of organising the reproduction of the human species. This is how we should understand Marx’s intriguing claim in the margins of one of the manuscripts known as *The German Ideology* that ‘humans have history because they must *produce* their life, and indeed must do so in a specific way; this is given by their corporeal organisation’.⁹⁴ Human historicity is immediately rooted in the peculiar structure of the human body.

The phenomenon of economic power bears witness to the historicity of the human being, to its unique capacity to externalise social relations in its material surroundings, to govern and reproduce these relations by inscribing them in the material infrastructure of the world they inhabit. Never in the history of humanity has this capacity been exploited as much as under capitalism; a fateful set of entanglements which threatens to undermine the conditions of human life on this planet. The social relations externalised in this manner need not be *relations of domination*, however. Here we reach one of the crucial political questions posed by the analysis of capital’s mute compulsion: can we imagine what it would look like to put these capacities to use in the service

90 Malm 2018, p. 143; see also Hornborg 2016, pp. 93, 104, 162.

91 Marx 1990, pp. 285f., 493, 508; Marx and Engels 1988, pp. 58, 98; see also McNally 2001.

92 Malm 2016, p. 280.

93 Soper 1995, p. 126; see also Hoffmann 1982.

94 Marx and Engels 1976a, p. 43, translation amended; see also Fracchia 2021; Mau 2021c.

not of a tiny minority of rich people, but of *everyone*? What would it mean to inscribe *communist* social relations in our material surroundings? Can we conceive of a kind of *communist resilience*, a way of organising the conditions of social reproduction in such a manner that once capitalism has been abolished, we insure ourselves against any possible future attempt to re-erect class society? Can communist social relations be materialised in a way that makes sure that the establishment of a communist mode of production will indeed mark the end of history?

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