

Capital, fictions, and ecology

Capital, ficciones y ecología

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

Co-Director at the International Center for
Humanities, Birkbeck College, University of London.
Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4672-6942>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15366/bp2023.32.001>
Bajo Palabra. II Época. N°32. Pgs: 19-36



Recibido: 18/11/2021
Aprobado: 20/06/2022

Abstract

Marx's critique of political economy describes the expanded reproduction of the capital as the basic reality of our societies, and it may seem that Marx ignores two main externalities of the social reproduction of capital, the domain of symbolic fictions and nature, the presupposed habitat of every social activity. This impression is wrong. Marx's *Capital* discovers fiction in the very heart of the circulation of capital: what he calls "commodity fetishism" is a symbolic fiction which is not just an ideology - it structures the very social reality of the capitalist process. Plus ecology was in the very center of Marx's preoccupation in the last decade of his life: he clearly saw how the expanded capitalist production leads to a rift between society and nature, a rift which threatens the very survival of human species. For Marx already, socialism was eco-socialism.

Keywords: Political Economy; Marx; Capital; Ecology; Ideology.

Resumen

La crítica de la economía política de Marx describe la reproducción ampliada del capital como la realidad básica de nuestras sociedades, y puede parecer que Marx ignora dos externalidades principales de la reproducción social del capital, el dominio de las ficciones simbólicas y la naturaleza, el hábitat supuesto de toda actividad social. Esta impresión es errónea. El *Capital* de Marx descubre la ficción en el corazón mismo de la circulación del capital: lo que él llama "fetichismo de la mercancía" es una ficción simbólica que no es sólo una ideología, sino que estructura la propia realidad social del proceso capitalista. Además, la ecología estuvo en el centro de las preocupaciones de Marx en la última década de su vida: vio claramente cómo la expansión de la producción capitalista conduce a una ruptura entre la sociedad y la naturaleza, una ruptura que amenaza la propia supervivencia de la especie humana. Para Marx, el socialismo era ya un ecosocialismo.

Palabras clave: Economía política; Marx; Capital; Ecología; Ideología..

The basic implicit premise of Marx's *Capital* is that Hegel is paradoxically *not idealist enough*. What Marx demonstrated in his *Capital* is how the self-reproduction of capital obeys the logic of the Hegelian dialectical process of a substance-subject which retroactively posits its own presuppositions. However, Hegel himself missed this dimension—his notion of industrial revolution was the Adam Smith-type manufacture where the work process is still that of combined individuals using tools, not yet the factory in which the machinery sets the rhythm and individual workers are de facto reduced to organs serving the machinery, to its appendices. This is why Hegel could not yet imagine the way abstraction rules in developed capitalism: this abstraction is not only in our (financial speculator's) misperception of social reality, it is "real" in the precise sense of determining the structure of the very material social processes: the fate of whole strata of population and sometimes of whole countries can be decided by the "solipsistic" speculative dance of capital, which pursues its goal of profitability in a blessed indifference to how its movement will affect social reality. Therein resides the fundamental systemic violence of capitalism, much more uncanny than the direct precapitalist socio-ideological violence: this violence is no longer attributable to concrete individuals and their "evil" intentions, but purely "objective," systemic, anonymous.

But does this mean that Marx *was* able to discern the abstraction that mediates the self-movement of the capital? Things are here much more ambiguous than it may appear. While he clearly saw that capital self-reproduces itself like a Hegelian notion, i.e., that Hegel's dialectical self-mediation of a notion is a speculative-mystified expression of the self-reproduction of the capital, he ultimately tends to reduce this speculative movement to the ideological inversion of the actual life. The symptom of this reduction is the rhetorical figure "instead of" to which Marx regularly resorts, especially in his youthful texts. His implicit (and sometimes explicit) line of reasoning begins with "instead of..." (which stands for the alleged "normal" state of things), and then they goes on to describe the alienated inversion of this "normal" state: instead of being the realization of the worker, labor appears as the loss of his realization; instead of appearing as what it is, the appropriation of the object in through labor appears as its estrangement; instead of possessing what he produces, the more the worker produces the less he possesses; instead of civilizing himself through producing civilized objects, the more civilized his object, the more barbarous becomes the worker; etc., etc. The implication of this figure is

that the revolution should somehow return things to normal: labour should be the realization of the worker who should civilize himself through work, etc. – and we should question precisely this restoration of normality, as does Marx himself in his late work. Even when the mature Marx returns to this figure from time to time, he gives it a specific spin, as in the following passage from *Capital*:

“This *inversion* (*Verkehrung*) by which the sensibly-concrete counts only as the form of appearance of the abstractly general and not, on the contrary, the abstractly general as property of the concrete, characterizes the expression of value. At the same time, it makes understanding it difficult. If I say: Roman Law and German Law are both laws, that is obvious. But if I say: Law (*Das Recht*), this abstraction (*Abstraktum*) *realizes itself* in Roman Law and in German Law, in these concrete laws, the interconnection becoming mystical.”¹

In this case, however, one should be very careful: Marx is not simply criticizing the “inversion” that characterizes Hegelian idealism (in the style of his youthful writings, especially *German Ideology*) – his point is not that, while “effectively” Roman Law and German Law are two kinds of law, in the idealist dialectics, the Law itself is the active agent – the subject of the entire process – which “realizes itself” in Roman Law and German Law; Marx’s thesis is not only that this “inversion” characterizes capitalist social reality itself but above all that *both positions - the alienated inversion as well as the presupposed “normal” state of things - belong to the space of ideological mystification*. That is to say, the “normal” character of the state of things in which Roman Law and German Law are both laws (i.e., in which a worker possesses what he produces, in which the more powerful labor becomes, the more powerful becomes the worker, in which the more civilized his object, the more civilized becomes the worker, etc.) is effectively the everyday form of appearance of the alienated society, the «normal» form of appearance of its speculative truth. The desire to fully actualize this «normal» state is therefore ideology at its purest and cannot but end in a catastrophe.

What makes this figure of «instead of» really interesting is that it should be put into a series with two other similar figures. When the mature Marx analyzes the figure of hoarder, he resorts to a similar rhetorical reversal, but with an added castrative dimension:

“Our hoarder is a martyr to exchange-value, a holy ascetic seated at the top of a metal column. He cares for wealth only in its social form, and accordingly he hides it away from society. He wants commodities in a form in which they can always circulate and he therefore withdraws them from circulation. He adores exchange-value and he consequently refrains

¹ Quoted from <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch04.htm>.

from exchange. The liquid form of wealth and its petrification, the elixir of life and the philosophers' stone are wildly mixed together like an alchemist's apparitions. His imaginary boundless thirst for enjoyment causes him to renounce all enjoyment. Because he desires to satisfy all social requirements, he scarcely satisfies the most urgent physical wants."²

Or, as Marx puts it in *Theories of Surplus-Value*, "the industrial capitalist becomes more or less unable to fulfill his function as soon as he personifies the enjoyment of wealth, as soon as he wants the accumulation of pleasures instead of the pleasure of accumulation."³ Here Marx enacts a Hegelian reversal: when, instead of accumulation of pleasures, we get the pleasure of accumulation, this second pleasure becomes jouissance on behalf of its castrative dimension described by Marx (the capitalist's "imaginary boundless thirst for enjoyment causes him to renounce all enjoyment") – it is not just a symmetrical reversal since Marx brings out the castrative dimension of this reversal. (Freud similarly talks about repression of desire turns into a desire of repression, talking about pleasure turning into pleasure of talking...) So if the first "instead of" reversal is imaginary (the second "abnormal" version the symmetrical reversal, the mirror-image, of the first "normal" one), the second reversal is symbolic due to the castration implied by universalization. Recall also Marx's analysis of the Party of Order which took power when the 1848 revolutionary élan in France dwindled: the secret of its existence was

"the coalition of Orléanists and Legitimists into one party, disclosed. The bourgeois class fell apart into two big factions which alternately — the big landed proprietors under the restored monarchy and the finance aristocracy and the industrial bourgeoisie under the July Monarchy — had maintained a monopoly of power. Bourbon was the royal name for the predominant influence of the interests of the one faction, Orléans the royal name for the predominant influence of the interests of the other faction — the nameless realm of the republic was the only one in which both factions could maintain with equal power the common class interest without giving up their mutual rivalry."⁴

The parliamentary deputies of the Party of Order perceived their republicanism as a mockery: in parliamentary debates, they all the time generated royalist slips of tongue and ridiculed the Republic to let it be known that their true aim was to restore the kingdom. What they were not aware of is that they themselves were duped as to the true social impact of their rule. What they were effectively doing

² Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, New York: International Publishers 1970, p. 134.

³ Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus-Value*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1963 pg. 282-283.

⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Selected Works*, Volume 1, Moscow: Progress Publishers 1969, p. 83.

was to establish the conditions of bourgeois republican order that they despised so much (by for instance guaranteeing the safety of private property). So it is not that they were royalists who were just wearing a republican mask: although they experienced themselves as such, it was their very “inner” royalist conviction which was the deceptive front masking their true social role. In short, far from being the hidden truth of their public republicanism, their sincere royalism was the fantastic support of their actual republicanism – it was what provided the passion to their activity. Is it not the case, then, that the deputies of the Party of Order were also *feigning to feign* to be republicans, to be what they really were? Such double feigning is for Lacan what characterizes the symbolic dimension.

There is yet another, third, figure of “instead of” which is found in Marx’s *Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), his critical analysis of Proudhon’s “philosophy of poverty” (so a reversal is already in the title itself): “Instead of the ordinary individual with his ordinary manner of speaking and thinking we have nothing but this ordinary manner in itself – without the individual.”⁵ Although this passage is a rather cheap stab at (Proudhon and) Hegel, it fits Pippin’s description of what Hegel is doing in his logic: Hegel deploys the basic forms of argumentative thinking in its independence of who is thinking – whenever and wherever there is thinking, these forms are operative:

“if someone simply persists in asking what we were asking above: ‘But where is all this thinking and explaining happening?’ all one can reply is ‘wherever there is thinking.’ This is not to say that there is not always a thinker or subject of thought; it is to say that thought that can be truth-bearing is constituted by what is necessary for truth-bearing, by any being of whatever sort capable of objective (possible true or false) judgment.”⁶

In this sense, Hegel’s logic is *the logic of the Real*: precisely where it appears to be at its most idealist (analyzing pure thinking in its independence of any positive bearer of thinking, i.e., ignoring the material and psychic conditions of thinking, ignoring what Marx always adds: “But thinking is actually always an activity performed by individuals who live, interact and produce in a material social reality, it is as aspect of human social practice!”), Hegel’s logic touches the Real. And, as Johnston amply demonstrates, does Marx not do the same in his analysis of the capital’s drive? Capitalism’s

“fundamental driving force, the unshakable thirst for surplus-value (i.e., $M-C-M'$ as the core logic of capital), is a strange selfless greed. This motivating structural dynamic is an cephalous and anonymous prosthetic drive, an impersonal template implanted into those

⁵ Quoted from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Poverty-Philosophy.pdf.d>

⁶ https://iai.tv/articles/the-return-of-metaphysics-hegel-vs-kant-auid-2032?_auid=2020.

subjected to capitalism. /.../ This *Wiederholungszwang* of capital's self-valorization through the boundless accumulation of quantified surplus-value is an acephalous kinetic configuration disregarding and overriding any and every other interest. The latter include even the (self-) interests of those human beings who, as capitalists, are this drive's personifications/bearers."⁷

So if "the only subject who truly enjoys capitalism is anonymous Capital itself as the idiotic, acephalous repetition of M-C-M', as a drive without a driver," does this description not directly echo Lacan's description of drive as idiotic acephalous push? Lacan is, of course, well aware that drive is always related to individual human and social bodies – the same as Hegel who is well aware that thinking appears, comes to exist "for itself," only in bodily human beings (he develops how this happens in his "Anthropology" at the beginning of the philosophy of Spirit, the third part of *Encyclopaedia*). But what Marx also knows is that, in order to grasp how capitalism functions, one has to describe it "counterfactually" as the Real of an acephalous mechanism. This Real is, of course, purely virtual, with no actual existence in itself – but it has to be presupposed by individuals as an In-itself if capitalism is to function.

No wonder, then, that there are in Marx's *Capital* long passages which deal with the necessary role of fiction in capitalist reproduction, from commodity fetishism as a fiction which is part of social reality itself to the topic of fictitious capital introduced in *Capital* II and elaborated in *Capital* III. The three volumes of *Capital* reproduce the triad of the universal, the particular, and the individual: *Capital* I articulates the abstract-universal matrix (concept) of capital; *Capital* II shifts to particularity, to the actual life of capital in all its contingent complexity; *Capital* III deploys the individuality of the total process of capital. In the last years, the most productive studies of Marx's critique of political economy focused on *Capital* II – why? In a letter sent to Engels on 30 April 1868 Marx wrote:

"In Book 1 [...] we content ourselves with the assumption that if in the self-expansion process £100 becomes £110, the latter will find *already in existence in the market* the elements into which it will change once more. But now we investigate the conditions under which these elements are found at hand, namely the social intertwining of the different capitals, of the component parts of capital and of revenue (= s)".⁸

Two features are crucial here, which are the two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, Marx passes from the pure notional structure of capital's reproduction (described in volume I) to reality in which the capital's reproduction involves

⁷ Quoted from Adrian Johnston's monumental *Infinite Greed* (manuscript).

⁸ Quoted from Letter to Friedrich Engels, April 30, 1868 - Marxists-en (wikirouge.net).

temporal gaps, dead time, etc. There are dead times that interrupt smooth reproduction, and the ultimate cause of these dead times is that we are not dealing with a single reproductive cycle but with an intertwinement of multiple circles of reproduction which are never fully coordinated. These dead periods are not just an empirical complication but an immanent necessity, they are necessary for the reproduction, they complicate the actual life of capital.⁹ On the other hand, fiction intervenes here (in the guise of fictitious capital whose notion is further elaborated in volume III of *Capital*); fiction is needed to overcome the destructive potential of complications, delays, dead periods, so that when we pass from pure logical matrix to actual life, to reality, fiction has to intervene.

The volume II of *Capital* focuses on the problem of realising surplus value, disrupted first and foremost by time and distance. As Marx put it, during its circulation time, capital does not function as productive capital, and therefore produces neither commodities nor surplus-value: capital's circulation generally restricts its production time, and hence its valorisation process. This is why industry is increasingly clustered outside of urban centres close to motorways and airports in order to streamline circulation.

Another implication is the growing role for a credit system that enables production to continue throughout the circulation process. Credit can be used to bridge the gap in situations where surplus value has not yet been realised and under conditions where capitalists expect future consumption of their goods and services. This may seem like rather a banal point, but it has real consequences for how the economy functions, illuminating a systemic reliance on fictitious capital (although Marx introduced this term later, in *Capital*, Volume III). Money values backed by yet unproduced or sold goods and services are thus the essential lifeblood of capitalism, rather than an eccentric or irregular consequence of an otherwise self-reliant system: in order to function as capital, money must circulate, it must again employ labour-power and again realise itself in expanded value. Let's take an industrialist who has enough money in his bank account so that he can retire and live of interests: the bank must *loan* his capital to another industrialist. The industrialist who has borrowed the money must service the loan, i.e., pay interest, out of the profits he makes. The sum of money on the market is thus redoubled: the retired capitalist still owns his money, and the other capitalist also disposed with the money he borrowed. But as the class of speculators, bankers, brokers, financiers, and so on,

⁹ Incidentally, the same holds for market competition: a participant in it never disposes of complete data about supply and demand which would enable him/her to make the optimal decision, and this incompleteness (the fact that individuals are compelled to decide without full information) is not just an empirical complication, it is (to put it in Hegelese) part of the very notion of market competition.

grows, as is inevitably the case wherever the mass of capital in a country reaches a sufficient scale, the bank finds that it is able to loan out *far more* than it has deposited in its vaults; speculators can sell products that they do not possess, “the right kind of person” is good for credit even when they have nothing. Note how trust, i.e., interpersonal relations, re-enters the scene here, at the level of what appear to be the utmost impersonal financial speculations: the ability of the bank to make unsecured loans is dependent on “confidence”:

“In this way, the money form produces not only impersonal relations of domination but at the same time produces interpersonal forms of domination as fictitious capital exists as a form of appearance of value not on the basis of the substance of abstract labour that produces the subject-object inversion, but through interpersonal forms of domination that promise future production of value as substance. / Therefore, there is a different kind of subjection working on the bearers of fictitious capital which is on the basis of an interpersonal relation forged through a contract.”¹⁰

Thus one and the same unit of productive capital may have to support not just the one retired industrialist who deposited his savings with the bank, but *multiple* claims on one and the same capital. If the bank accepts one million from our retiree, but loans out ten millions, each of those ten millions has *equal* claim to that same value - this is how *fictitious capital* comes about. At times of expansion and boom, the mass of *fictitious capital* grows rapidly; when the period of contraction arrives, the bank finds itself under pressure and calls in its loans, defaults occur, bankruptcies, closures, share prices fall, and things fall back to reality - fictitious value is wiped out. This brings us to a formal definition of fictitious capital: it is *that proportion of capital which cannot be simultaneously converted into existing use-values*. It is an *invention* which is absolutely necessary for the growth of real capital, it is a fiction which constitutes the symbol of confidence in the future. Or, as Rebecca Carson resumes this entire movement:

“non-capitalist variables become formally subsumed through circulation, making them necessary for the reproduction of capital, yet they are variables nonetheless necessarily exterior, described by Marx as ‘interruptions’ within the movement of capital.”¹¹

What this means in socio-economic terms is that we should unconditionally avoid any notion of Communism as an order in which fictions no longer reign over

¹⁰ https://www.academia.edu/38109734/The_Logic_of_Capital_Interview_with_Chris_Arthur

¹¹ Rebecca Carson, “Time and Schemas of Reproduction” (manuscript).

actual life, i.e., in which we return to actual life: as Hardt and Negri repeatedly insisted, there is an unexpected emancipatory potential in the craziest speculations with fictive capital. Since valorization of the working force is the key aspect of capitalist reproduction, we should never forget that in the sphere of fictitious capital there is no valorization, no market exchange of commodities and no labour that produces new value – and because in a capitalist society personal freedom is grounded in the “free” exchange of commodities, inclusive of the labour power as a commodity, the sphere of fictitious capital no longer demands personal freedom and autonomy: direct interpersonal relations of subordination and domination return in it. It may appear that this reasoning is too formal, but one can elaborate this in a more precise way: fictitious capital involves debt, and being indebted limits personal freedom; for the workers, debt is involved in the (re)production of their work force itself, and this debt limits their freedom to bargain for a work contract.

So where is here any emancipatory potential? Elon Musk proposed a mega-algorithm program that would manage our investments better than any stockbroker company, allowing ordinary people to invest small sums under equal conditions as billionaires – the idea is that, when this program is freely available, it will lead to a more fair distribution of wealth... Although the idea is problematic and ambiguous, it does indicate the ultimate nonsense of stock exchange games: if a mega-algorithm can do the work better than humans, stock exchanges could become an automatic machine – and if this works, private ownership of stocks will also become useless since all we’ll need will be a gigantic AI machine for the optimal allocation of resources... this is how the extreme of financial capitalism can open up an unexpected path to Communism.

However, fictions operate in the space of what Lacan called the big Other, the symbolic order, and there is a fundamental difference between subject’s alienation in the symbolic order and the worker’s alienation in capitalist social relation. We have to avoid the two symmetrical traps which open up if we insist on the homology between the two alienations: the idea that capitalist social alienation is irreducible since the signifying alienation is constitutive of subjectivity, as well as the opposite idea that the signifying alienation could be abolished in the same way Marx imagined the overcoming of capitalist alienation. The point is not just that the signifying alienation is more fundamental and will persist even if we abolish the capitalist alienation – it is a more refined one. The very figure of a subject that would overcome the signifying alienation and become a free agent who is master of the symbolic universe, i.e., who is no longer embedded in a symbolic substance, can only arise within the space of capitalist alienation, the space in which free individuals interact. Let’s indicate the domain of this symbolic alienation with regard to

Robert Brandom's attempt to elaborate "the way to a postmodern form of recognition that overcomes ironic alienation. This is the recollective-recognitive structure of trust."¹² For Brandom, this

"may be the part of /Hegel's/ thought that is of the most contemporary philosophical interest and value. That is partly because he attributes deep political significance to the replacement of a semantic model of atomistic representation by one of holistic expression. /.../ It is to lead to a new form of mutual recognition and usher in the third stage in the development of Geist: the age of trust."¹³

"Trust" is here trust in the ethical substance (the "big Other," the set of established norms) which doesn't limit but sustains the space of our freedom. Referring to Chomsky, Brandom gives his own reading to the classic distinction between negative freedom and positive freedom: negative freedom is the freedom from predominant norms and obligations which can lead only to universalized ironic distance towards all positive regulations (we shouldn't trust them, they are illusions masking particular interests), while positive freedom is the freedom whose space is opened up and sustained by our adherence to a set of norms. As Chomsky pointed out, language enables an individual who inhabits it to generate an infinite number of sentences – this the positive freedom of expression provided by our acceptance of the rules of language, while negative freedom can only lead to ironic alienation...

But is the freedom of irony, of ironic distance, also not a form of positive freedom grounded in a deep acquaintance with the rules? Is something like ironic alienation not inherent to those who really inhabit a language? Let's take patriotism: a true patriot is not a fanatical zealot but somebody who can quite often practice ironic remarks about his nation, and this irony paradoxically vouches for his true love of his country (when things get serious, he is ready to fight for it). To be able to practice this kind of irony, I have to master the rules of my language much more deeply than those who speak it in a flawless non-ironic way. One can even say that to really inhabit a language implies not just to know the rules but to know the meta-rules which tell me how to violate the explicit rules: it doesn't imply to make no mistakes but to make the right kind of mistakes. And the same goes for manners that held together a given closed community – this is why, in the old times when there were still schools to teach ordinary people how to behave in a high class society were as a rule an abominable failure: no matter how much they did teach you the rules of behavior, they were not able to teach you the meta-rules that regulate

¹² Robert Brandom, *The Spirit of Trust*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2019, p. 501.

¹³ Op.cit., p. 506.

the subtle transgressions of the rulers. And, speaking about expressive subjectivity, one can also say that subjectivity appears in a speech only through such regulated violations – without them, we get a flat impersonal speech.

And what if we imagine Communism in a similar way: as a new ethical substance (a frame of rules) that enables positive freedom? Maybe this is how we should reread Marx's opposition of the kingdom of necessity and kingdom of freedom: Communism is not freedom itself but the structure of a kingdom of necessity that sustains freedom, the principal commitment to a Cause which makes all my transgressive pleasures possible. In other words, we shouldn't imagine Communism as a self-transparent order with no alienation but as an order of "good" alienation, of our reliance on thick invisible cobweb of regulations which sustains the space of our freedom. In Communism, I should be led to "trust" this cobweb and ignore it, focusing on what makes my life meaningful. This constitutive alienation in the symbolic substance is missing in Kohei Saito's *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism*¹⁴, the latest most consistent attempt to think humanity's embeddedness in nature without regressing into dialectical-materialist general ontology.

In his search of a pre-capitalist foundation of human life, he posits the process of metabolism between nature and humans as the ground on which the process of Capital is based. This metabolism was distorted by Capital which parasitizes on it, so that the basic "contradiction" of capitalism is the one between natural metabolism and capital - nature resists capital, it poses a limit to capital's self-valorization. The task of Communists is thus to invent a new form of social metabolism which will no longer be not market-mediated but organized in a human (rationally planned) way. That's why Saito is profoundly anti-Hegelian: his axiom is that Hegelian dialectics cannot think the natural limits of Capital, that the self-movement of Capital cannot ever fully "sublate"/integrate its presupposed natural base:

"Marx's ecology deals with the synthesis of the historical and transhistorical aspects of social metabolism in explaining how the physical and material dimensions of the 'universal metabolism of nature' and the 'metabolism between humans and nature' are modified and eventually disrupted by the valorization of capital. Marx's analysis aims at revealing the limits of the appropriation of nature through its subsumption by capital."(68)

Marx does not talk about subsumption under capital in abstract formal terms, he is interested in how this subsumption is not just a formal one but gradually transforms the material base itself: air gets polluted, deforestation, land is exhausted and rendered less fertile, etc. Saito is right to see in this rift the basic "contradiction"

¹⁴ Kohei Saito, *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism*, New York: Monthly Review Press 2017. Numbers in brackets refer to the pages of this book.

of capitalism: once social production is subsumed under the form of the self-valorization process of the Capital, the goal of the process becomes capital's extended self-reproduction, the growth of accumulated value, and since environment ultimately counts just as an externality, destructive environmental consequences are ignored, they don't count:

“capital contradicts the fundamental limitedness of natural forces and resources because of its drive toward infinite self-valorization. This is the central contradiction of the capitalist mode of production, and Marx's analysis aims at discerning the limits to this measureless drive for capital accumulation within a material world.”(259)

Ecology is thus for Saito in the very centre of Marx's critique of political economy, and this is why, in the last decades of his life, Marx was extensively reading books on chemistry and physiology of agriculture. (The reason why Marx turned to physiology and chemistry of agriculture is clear: he wanted to study the life process of metabolism without falling into the trap of conceiving life that precedes capital in the terms of a Romantic “vital force.”) Saito's central premise is that THIS “contradiction” cannot be grasped in the Hegelian terms – this is why he mockingly mentions that Western Marxism “primarily deals with social forms (sometimes with an extreme fetishism of Hegel's *Science of Logic*)”(262). But we cannot get rid of Hegel in such an easy way. When Marx wrote that the ultimate barrier of capital is capital itself (in *Capital*, Vol III, Chapter 15 entitled “Exposition of the Internal Contradictions of the Law”) – “The *real barrier* of capitalist production is *capital itself*” (“*Die wahre Schranke der kapitalistischen Produktion ist das Kapital selbst*”) - we should be precise in the Hegelian sense and clearly distinguish *Schranke* from *Grenze*: *Grenze* designates an external limitation while *Schranke* stands for the immanent barrier of an entity, for its internal contradiction. Say, in the classic case of freedom, the external limitation of my freedom is the freedom of others, but its true “barrier” is the insufficiency of this notion of freedom which opposes my freedom to the freedom of others – as Hegel would have put it, this freedom is not yet true freedom. And the whole point of Marx is that capital is not just externally limited (by nature which cannot be exploited indefinitely) but immanently limited, limited in its very concept.

Which mode of relating to Hegel should then an ecologically-oriented Marxism assume today? When Chris Arthur says that “it is precisely the applicability of Hegel's logic that condemns the object as an inverted reality systematically alienated from its bearers,”¹⁵ he thereby provides the most concise formulation of the

¹⁵ https://www.academia.edu/38109734/The_Logic_of_Capital_Interview_with_Chris_Arthur.

“Hegel’s logic as the logic of the capital”: the very fact that Hegel’s logic can be applied to capitalism means that capitalism is an perverted order of alienation... Or, as John Rosenthal put it, “Marx made the curious discovery of an object domain in which the inverted relation between the universal and the particular which constitutes the distinctive principle of Hegelian metaphysics *in fact* obtains”: “The whole riddle of the ‘Marx-Hegel relation’ consists in nothing other than this: /.../ it is precisely and paradoxically the *mystical* formulae of Hegelian ‘logic’ for which Marx finds a rational scientific application.”¹⁶ In short, while, in his early critique of Hegel, Marx rejected Hegel’s thought as a crazy speculative reversal of actual state of things, he was then struck by the realization that there is a domain which behaves in a Hegelian way, namely the domain of the circulation of Capital.

Recall the classic Marxian motive of the speculative inversion of the relationship between the Universal and the Particular. The Universal is just a property of particular objects which really exist, but when we are victims of commodity fetishism it appears as if the concrete content of a commodity (its use-value) is an expression of its abstract universality (its exchange-value) - the abstract Universal, the Value, appears as a real Substance which successively incarnates itself in a series of concrete objects. That is the basic Marxian thesis: it is already the effective world of commodities which behaves like a Hegelian subject-substance, like a Universal going through a series of particular embodiments.

In Marx’s reading, the self-engendering speculative movement of the Capital also indicates a fateful limitation of the Hegelian dialectical process, something that eludes Hegel’s grasp. It is in this sense that Lebrun mentions the “fascinating image” of the Capital presented by Marx (especially in his *Grundrisse*): “a monstrous mixture of the good infinity and the bad infinity, the good infinity which creates its presuppositions and the conditions of its growth, the bad infinity which never ceases to surmount its crises, and which finds its limit in its own nature.”¹⁷ This, perhaps, is also the reason why Marx’s reference to Hegel’s dialectics in his “critique of political economy” is ambiguous, oscillating between taking it as the mystified expression of the logic of the Capital and taking it as the model for the revolutionary process of emancipation. First, there is dialectic as the “logic of the capital”: the development of the commodity-form and the passage from money to capital are clearly formulated in Hegelian terms (capital is money-substance turning into self-mediating process of its own reproduction, etc.). Then, there is the Hegelian notion of proletariat as “substance-less subjectivity,” i.e., the grandiose Hegelian

¹⁶ Quoted from https://www.academia.edu/3035436/John_Rosenthal_The_Myth_of_Dialectics_Reinterpreting_the_Marx-Hegel_Relation.

¹⁷ Gerard Lebrun, *L’envers de la dialectique*, Paris: Editions du Seuil 2004, p. 311.

scheme of the historical process from pre-class society to capitalism as the gradual separation of the subject from its objective conditions, so that the overcoming of capitalism means that the (collective) subject re-appropriates its alienated substance. The Hegelian dialectical matrix thus serves as the model of the logic of the capital as well as the model of its revolutionary overcoming.

So, again, which mode of relating to Hegel should an ecologically-oriented Marxism assume today? Hegelian dialectics as the mystified expression of the revolutionary process, as the philosophical expression of the perverted logic of the Capital; as the idealist version of a new dialectical-materialist ontology; or should we simply claim (as Althusser did) that Marx only “flirted” with Hegelian dialectics, that his thinking was totally foreign to Hegel? There is another one: a different reading of Hegel’s dialectical process itself that leaves behind the predominant notion of this process as the process of gradual subjective appropriation of substantial content. Already decades ago, in the early years of modern ecology, some perspicuous readers of Hegel noted that the Hegelian idealist speculation does not imply an absolute appropriation of nature – in contrast to productive appropriation, speculation lets its Other be, it doesn’t intervene into its Other. As Frank Ruda pointed out¹⁸, Hegel’s Absolute Knowing is not a total *Aufhebung* – a seamless integration of all reality into the Notion’s self-mediation –; it is much more an act of radical *Aufgeben* – of giving up, of renouncing the violent effort to grab reality. Absolute Knowing is a gesture of *Entlassen*, of releasing reality, of letting-it-be and stand on its own, and, in this sense, it breaks with the endless effort of labour to appropriate its Otherness, the stuff that forever resists its grasp. Labour (and technological domination in general) is an exemplary case of what Hegel calls “spurious infinity,” it is a pursuit which is never accomplished because it presupposes an Other to be mastered, while philosophical speculation is at ease, no longer troubled by its Other.

This brings us back to the topic of fiction. Does this gesture of releasing reality, of letting-it-be and stand on its own, mean that we accept reality as it is in itself, outside the network of symbolic fictions? Here things get more complex. For Hegel, the form of this “letting-it-be” is knowledge, scientific knowledge (in his sense of the word) which doesn’t mess with its object but merely observes its self-movement. What scientific knowledge observes is not its object in itself but the interaction between in-itself and our fictions, where fictions are an immanent part of in-itself – and it is the same with Marx for whom, if we subtract fictions, social reality itself disintegrates. Today’s experimental science, however, displays a stance towards its object which is the opposite of Hegel’s: not a stance of impassive obser-

¹⁸ See Frank Ruda, *Abolishing Freedom*, Winnipeg: Bison Books 2016.

ving the object's self-movement in its interplay with fictions but the stance of active intervention in its object and its technological manipulation, even creation of new objects (through biogenetic mutations), which simultaneously aims at how this object is in itself, independently of our interaction with it. Let's take brain science, the exemplary case of today's science, brain science: neurobiologists and cognitive scientists like to undermine our common sense of being autonomous free agents with the claim that subjective freedom is a fiction – in reality, in itself, our brain processes are fully determined by neural mechanisms. The Hegelian answer to this is that yes, freedom is immanently linked to fiction, but in a more subtle way – to quote a well-known passage from the “Preface” to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

“The activity of dissolution is the power and work of the *Understanding*, the most astonishing and mightiest of powers, or rather the absolute power. The circle that remains self-enclosed and, like substance, holds its moments together, is an immediate relationship, one therefore which has nothing astonishing about it. But that an accident as such, detached from what circumscribes it, what is bound and is actual only in its context with others, should attain an existence of its own and a separate freedom—that is the tremendous power of the negative; it is the energy of thought, of the pure I.”¹⁹

The power of the Understanding is the power of tearing apart in one's mind what in reality belongs together – in short, the power to create fictions. One should be attentive to a key detail in the quote from Hegel: this power is not just the basic form of human freedom, it is the power of “separate freedom” acquired by an object itself when is torn out of its living context and thus obtains a separate existence of its own. But is this power only active in our mind while reality remains the same in itself? In other words, are we dealing with a new version of Sartre's opposition between the reality of being-in-itself and consciousness as the vortex of being-for-itself? We should recall here Marx's definition of human labour from chapter 7 of *Capital*¹:

“A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement.”²⁰

¹⁹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, New York: Oxford University Press 1977, pp. 18–19.

²⁰ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch07.htm>.

These imaginations – fictions – are, of course, not just in the worker’s head, they emerge out of the socio-symbolic interaction of workers which presupposes the “big Other,” the order of symbolic fictions. So how does the “big Other” relate to (what we experience as) external reality? This is THE basic philosophical problem – and, at this point, we should stop.

REFERENCES

- Brandom, B (2019) *The Spirit of Trust*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Carson, R “Time and Schemas of Reproduction” (manuscript). Personal Communication.
- Hegel, F (1977) *Phenomenology of Spirit*, New York: Oxford University Press
- Johnston, A. *monumental Infinite Greed* (manuscript). Personal Communication.
- Lebrun, G (2004) *L'envers de la dialectique*, Paris: Editions du Seuil
- Marx, K (1970) *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, New York: International Publishers
- Marx, K (1963) *Theories of Surplus-Value*, Moscow: Progress Publishers
- Marx, K & Engels, F (1969) *Selected Works, Volume 1*, Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Marx, K (1999) *The transformation of money into capital*. In *Capital*. Volumen I. Available in: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch04.htm>
- Pippin, R (2022) *The Return of metaphysic: Hegel vs Kant*. Available in: https://iai.tv/articles/the-return-of-metaphysics-hegel-vs-kant-auid-2032?_auid=2020
- Ruda, F (2016) *Abolishing Freedom*, Winnipeg: Bison Books
- Saito, K (2017) *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism*, New York: Monthly Review Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15366/bp2023.32.001>
Bajo Palabra. II Época. N°32. Pgs: 19-36