

Politics After the Individual

Abstraction, Individuation, Communitisation

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Abstract

Most analyses of the individual's role in politics are either framed around individualist ideologies, addressed to the problem of freedom, or directed within an ethical and moral framework to the choices and responsibilities of individual subjects. Against the idea of the individual as an ontologically given form, this thesis takes up the question of the subject and its relation to politics by placing it within the production of abstraction internal to the practical metaphysics of the capital-relation. Set around two overlapping objectives, the thesis seeks to first demonstrate how the figure of the individual subject is overdetermined by intersecting forms of real abstraction, and second to theorise the prospects for politics after the individual. Situating abstraction first in layers of computational capital, it then demonstrates how the individual is made real via modalities of abstraction that reach from value, through property and law, and into forms of financialisation. By analysing the multiple determinations of the abstract individual in this way, the thesis identifies an impasse of politics encrypted within the capital-relation by the dual form-determinations of value and the individual. The second objective is to consider an orientation to forms of thought and politics that interrupt, break down and exceed this limit. I move through this prescriptive frame by first offering an account of transindividuality as a strategy of critique for breaking with the false dichotomy of the individual and collective. Although the transindividual provides an essential analytic frame, it nonetheless leaves open the question of politics. Finally, by turning to the question of politics directly, I offer a theory of a political form that maps subjectivation and difference to the idea of communism.

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Introduction

Writing in 1985, Alain Badiou demonstrated his frustration with the impasses and failures of organised Marxist politics and the inadequacies of political philosophy with a theoretical intervention that proposed a deceptively simple question, ‘can politics be thought?’ (Badiou 2018). Confronting a post-1968 malaise of politics and theory coupled to the so-called crisis of Marxism, (Althusser 1978, 2006, 7ff), Badiou’s question was positioned at the edge of a wider philosophical milieu oriented to the inquest of politics after the poststructuralist critique of the subject (see Cadava, Connor, and Nancy 1991; Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1997). Rather than retreat further into deconstructive critique, or abandon the subject altogether, Badiou proposed to re-ground the relation between politics and thought by conceiving a formal theory of the subject germinated by *sui generis* thought-forms that could ‘contribute to keeping politics in the realm of the thinkable and saving the figure of being that it contains from the automatism of the undifferentiated’ (Badiou 2018, 39).

Picking up this thread today, the relationship between thought and politics remains framed by the spectre of the same individualised subject that both Badiou and the preceding tradition attempted to leave behind. However, if we are to understand the persistence of this form, we need to apply an analysis of the subject at a level of reflection that Badiou largely avoids, by addressing it to the contours of the capital-relation from which it is produced. Badiou’s own formulation can be contextualised

by an overarching concern in his entire philosophical oeuvre, namely the conditions and forms of political change. But, when set against the impasses of the contemporary situation, the prospect of providing an answer to the question of politics and thought is intimately bound to the complex knot of autonomisation and differentiation tied within the actually existing metaphysics of the capital-relation (see Toscano 2008a, 2019). Untangling this knot to identify the mast of individual subjectivity can only mean interrogating the antinomies of capitalist abstraction as they converge on the ideas and forms that orbit the material practice of individuation.

It would be difficult to overstate the degree to which the figure and the category of the individual structures, and is structured by the practices, institutions and categories of contemporary Western social and political life. And yet, neither is it difficult to locate and undermine enumerable tensions in the notion of autonomous individuality, or to challenge its supposed ontological foundations. My concern in this thesis is not to argue there is no such thing as an individual, but to articulate how politics is forestalled by the orientation to an abstract figure of the individual that is determinate within the practical metaphysics of the capital-relation.

If we take two of the most urgent problems of the current political conjuncture, the rise of reactionary and fascist forms of conspiratorial and counter-revolutionary politics on the one hand, and the rapidly encroaching horizon of ecological catastrophe on the other, then thinking the blockages, impasses and epistemological impediments of politics would appear to be an urgent task. A specific encumbrance common to both these symptoms is an inverted and dissociative idea of individual freedom. Deployed by the so-called 'alt-right' political current, individual freedom

operates as an abstraction to enforce a narrow set of regressive essentialisms closeted by the 'purely' cultural excesses of a socially constructed other (see W. Brown 2018; Savage 2022). Or, in the discourse on climate breakdown, individual freedom is either deployed as a vector for the denial of science (see Malm and Zetkin Collective 2021), or it can light the passage towards market-based remedies of personal choice and responsibility that issue from many of the same processes implicated as causes in the climate emergency.

Contradictory logic like this is constitutive in conceptual forms mobilised by the capital-relation. In the ecological example, the individual becomes the centre of gravity for an otherwise fundamentally structural and metabolic relation with the world as such, thus projecting an inverted world that orbits the individual. Whereas in the reactionary political example, individual freedom is erected against the heteronormative, patriarchal, and racially constructed norms of an illusory and nostalgic political project in which individual freedom becomes the eradication of difference. The inversions and paradoxes in examples like these can be addressed, often in compelling ways, by critiques that centre on ideological individualism, especially in the wake of philosophically grounded analyses of neoliberalism (e.g. W. Brown 2015). But, what if the struggle for climate justice, battles over difference, or projects of political and economic emancipation more generally are not simply confronted with the obstacles of counterrevolutionary ideologies, but are instead impeded by a metaphysical relation common to the structure in which these struggles are waged? Arguing this position is to suggest the issue is not just the kind of ideological individualism that obscures structural issues, or appears in regressive

configurations against anthropological difference, but instead records the individuated subject form as an epistemological limit produced within the metaphysics of the capital-relation.

Interrogating this limit is central to this thesis. We can locate the question of the individuated subject as a fundamental ordering principle within the wider relation between the capital-relation and abstract realism. As Mark Fisher remarks in his essay on *Capitalist Realism*, ‘capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable’ (Fisher 2010, 8). Yet, it is not out of a logic of defeat that this effect emerges, but precisely because the horizon itself is encoded within the forms of thought internal to the capital-relation. Erecting a theoretical matrix around the reality effect of capitalist abstraction can shed new light on the kinds of examples above by demonstrating the way a naturalised form of the individuated subject is overdetermined by the appearances and effects of capitalist forms.

In the sway of real abstraction, the abstract individual is not simply an ideological construct, or overemphasised in lieu of a more authentic collective reality, it is established in practice as a metaphysical reality. If struggles to connect the problem of climate change to structural change, to confront the discrimination and dissimulation inherent in informatic technology, or to overcome the violent concretisation of fascist abstraction can be addressed to an epistemological horizon that has as its core the practice and thought forms of individuation, then I argue a path can be opened to theorising politics beyond a limit represented by the metaphysical figure of the individual.

Anatomising this operation requires an illustration of the peculiar, spectral logic of abstraction on which the capitalist social formation functions. But it also rests on demonstrating how these abstract forms are overdetermined within every day practices to continually reassert their reality. By demonstrating the relationship between the poles of abstraction and material reality, we can move through the grounding of abstraction to individuation in a trajectory that mirrors the dialectical passage from the abstract to the concrete as it is advanced by Karl Marx in his introduction to the *Grundrisse* (Marx 1993, 101). Concrete modalities of abstraction are circumscribed within contemporary practices and conventions that prescribe their experiences to the exigencies of capital. Thus, orienting this process to the current social and political conjuncture means looking to the appearances and effects of abstraction that traverse the technological and financial operations of modern life.

For this reason, I start from the surface area of computational and algorithmic forms to uncover a thread of autonomisation that derives from the historical mediation of capital and machinery. Much of what follows builds on Alfred Sohn-Rethel's seminal critique of capitalist epistemology in his masterwork, *Intellectual and Manual Labour* (Sohn-Rethel 2021), aided by important contemporary readings, interventions and treatments of the relation between capital, abstraction and representation found in the work of Alberto Toscano, Étienne Balibar, Fredric Jameson and others. Out of the ensuing theoretical framework, this thesis offers two distinct and unique contributions to the thought of politics. First, I map the itinerary of real abstraction to the figure of the individual across a continuum of appearances, from the discrete boundaries and tangible individuations of the commodity form, through the

concretising spectrality of value, and into the extraneous effects of finance and computational technology. Throughout, the spectre of the individual returns in reticulated forms, functioning as boundary, thus drawing political struggles into the halting incorporations of capital.

Second, I argue it is only after mapping the actually existing metaphysics of the capital-relation as they cohere in the material and abstract practices of individuation that we can return to the question above from Badiou to place it in its proper context, what is the relation between thought and politics? In the final two chapters of the thesis, I explore two theoretical vectors that can advance the relation of thought and politics in different ways. Theorising politics after the individual requires breaking with political forms that are either directed towards or through a real experience of an abstract figure or issued in proposals that spirit its return. Moving away from this problematic first means applying frameworks across the terrain of theory and practice that hold the relational determinations of individuation in an open light. An emergent field of transindividual literature holds unique potential in this regard for illuminating the individual within an ontology of relations to reveal the contingencies of individuation more generally. However, in theories of the transindividual, the question of political form remains open.

In the end, political forms generated within the metaphysics of the capital-relation are confronted by many of the same incorporations, adaptations and accommodations as the individuated subject. Badiou asks the right question, understanding the relation between forms of thought and forms of politics is critical, both for the formulation of effective political experiments, and for establishing the limits of

political forms. Yet, there are crucial ways in which Badiou's own project outpaces specific forms that might undermine or escape the exigencies of capital to bear on the politics of communism. For this reason, I return to the question of the political form with a critical account of subjectivation after Badiou, bringing together the notion of political thought-forms with concepts and analyses gleaned from communisation theory to mine the prospects for theorising politics after the individual.

Thesis Structure

The thesis is structured progressively through six cumulative chapters. The first four chapters deal with the passage from real abstraction to the overdetermination and concretisation of the abstract individual within the metaphysics of the capital-relation. Focusing first on the abstract realism and autonomisation of capital's forms, I then document a passage of concretion through the value-form before detailing the overdetermination of the individual through the legal-form, regimes of private property and the derivative abstractions of financialisation. The final two chapters of the thesis are addressed to strategies of theory and practice that go beyond the fetishes, thought forms and reifications of the abstract individual that mark the impasse of politics.

Chapter 1 introduces a theoretical matrix of abstraction, outlining important terms, and mapping some of the historical and material undercurrents that accrue in capital's actually existing metaphysics. I start by providing some context for the importance of thinking abstraction by framing the appearance of social forms in the informatic and computational regimes of today as an outgrowth of economic concepts internal to the metaphysics of the capital-relation. Extending Sohn-Rethel's theory of

social synthesis through Balibar's reading of Marx's sixth thesis on Feuerbach, a path is opened for thinking the individuated subject as a real abstraction. The constellation of ideas and concepts outlined in this first chapter map a principle of autonomisation to a theory of second-nature that emerges in the relay between the practical ensemble of social relations and aforementioned metaphysics.

While the value-form is an important but latent concept in the first chapter, it becomes the main focus of Chapter 2. Working from Marx's critique of atomism in his doctoral dissertation, I introduce the concept of form-determination before moving through an exposition of value as the medium of concretion for capital's metaphysics. Via a critical account of Jacques Derrida's reading of Marx coupled to work from Chris Arthur, I build on the exposition of capital's practical metaphysics by exploring the concept of spectrality to illustrate the determinant negativity of the value-form. This chapter deals with themes of language and differentiation, and further establishes the effects of important theoretical threads introduced in Chapter 1 to extend the analysis of autonomisation and real abstraction through the form-determination of value.

Chapter 3 is the first of two chapters that deal with the overdetermination of the individuated subject via forms and effects that extend the analysis beyond the value-form. This chapter is concerned with addressing the effect on real abstraction of the juridical form on the one hand, and enclosures, dispossession and private property on the other. I work through concepts that inhere in the individuated subject by bridging the theoretical work in preceding chapters to both the legal form and the ideological substrates of property and accumulation. Extending the analysis into the paradigm

that inaugurates the liberal form of subjectivity, this chapter closes by bringing readings of John Locke from George Caffentzis and Étienne Balibar into conversation with the theory of real abstraction to ground the possessive form of the individuated subject within the ambit of material practice.

While the analysis to this point in the thesis is largely concerned with the valences of the value-form and its doubles, Chapter 4 moves to update the account of real abstraction by placing it within the conjuncture of financialisation. The chapter begins with a brief periodisation to preface the specific qualitative change conditioned by the regime of finance capital. Taking up interventions from Fredric Jameson and Randy Martin, I work through an updated articulation of abstraction as it is relayed through the circuitry of finance. Whereas the account of real abstraction in the previous chapters orbits the structure of the commodity form, through the aesthetics of finance we observe new contours of real abstraction, moving from the bounded, discrete, and singular object to a more malleable and parenthetical form of concrete abstraction mapped to the form of financial derivatives. The chapter ends with a critique of theories that attempt to build a concept of politics around the idea of dividuality to emphasise how, in their links to the derivative form, they remain reliant on a spectre of the abstract individual

The final two chapters turn to a constellation of ideas that, I argue, hold the potential for reorienting politics beyond the originary abstractions of capital. In Chapter 5, I offer a critical account of transindividuality by working through key aspects from the work of Gilbert Simondon, Étienne Balibar and Jason Read. Transindividuality is theorised as a pivot that traverses the abstract and spectral forms of possession

outlined in earlier chapters, while sketching the undeveloped potential of the underlying material relations that condition those appearances. However, if transindividuality highlights the inherent mutuality of individuation and collective relations, it necessarily describes the presentation of forms discussed throughout the first four chapters. Transindividuality then, provides a critical analytic frame for illuminating both the effects and potential of social relations, but nonetheless leaves open the question of what political forms can overturn these relations.

The sixth and final chapter of the thesis addresses the question of political form directly by proposing a particular orientation of theory and practice to subjectivation and communisation. If politics is foreclosed by the material practices, abstractions and incorporations of the capital-relation, then a renewal of an immanent political form can only be inaugurated in modalities of thought and practice that break down their own limits. I present a critical application of subjectivation after Badiou to theorise a political form aligned to the concept of self-abolition found in the work of *Théorie Communiste*. Whereas the metaphysics of the capital-relation reproduces a second nature of individuation, communisation invites a new dialectic that can overturn this synthesis to unearth and advance new political possibilities.

Without an adequate theory of the political form, the actually existing metaphysics of the capital-relation is an intractable problem. Layers of mediation and abstraction have compounded this metaphysics in the computational and financial structures of contemporary life, further mystifying the extractive relations of the capital-relation beneath the ambient condition of capital's apparent permanence. Between breathless declarations of a post-truth world, the darkening horizon of economic and ecological

perpetual crisis, and the lament over capitalist realism, directing our critique to the effects of the capital-relation on thought itself can offer a different conception of politics. Measuring political experiments against a dialectic of communist practice does more than break down the limits of particular thought-forms. It can halt the eternal return of an abstract individual, to extend the possibilities of distributing the exigencies of life outside the extractive mediations of the value-form that order the capitalist social formation. Only by grounding the political form in a real movement anchored to the forces of difference can we conceive politics after the individual.

Chapter 1: The Reality of Abstraction

Introduction

Capitalism is a uniquely dissimulated social formation. Animated by forms of autonomisation, and structured by techniques of separation, the capital-relation is largely organised around a practical deployment of abstraction. As Alberto Toscano argues, capitalism is ‘the culture of abstraction par excellence’, it is a society ‘traversed by powers of abstraction’ (Toscano 2008a, 273). While this has always been true, the powers of abstraction have only grown more baroque as social relations have become ever more entangled with communicative technologies and financialised structures. The forms of abstraction that traverse the capitalist social formation, however, have the unique property of being acted out in practice. Capitalist abstraction, to take a formula from Marx, is appropriated from ‘its autonomous existence outside the head’ (Marx 1993, 101).

Locating the genesis and reproduction of abstraction in practices external to the mind but internal to the relations of capital refers us to what Toscano has called an ‘actually existing metaphysics’ of capital (Toscano 2015, 2019; Toscano and Kinkle 2015). Toscano’s own account of abstraction builds on Alfred Sohn-Rethel’s materialist critique of Kantian epistemology as an outgrowth of the practical categories and forms derived from the history of exchange. Keyed to this history, themes of separation and autonomisation are parsed through pivotal techniques that culminate in the seeming independence of the intellect. In the wake of Sohn-Rethel’s

thesis, this semblance of independence yields an abstract individual subject that is integral to the exchange relations that mediate the most direct experience of the capitalist social formation.

With these underlying themes in mind, this chapter establishes some important groundwork for interrogating the relation between capital's abstract realism and the socially embedded production of the abstract individual. The chapter starts and ends with an account of technological mediation, first to show how the concepts and forms of capital appear in modern computational technology, and second to demonstrate the role of machinery and technology in distributing the principle of autonomy that substantialises forms of individuation. Between this account, I explore the trajectory of real abstraction through concepts of representation and personification, framing an analysis of the individual subject around Étienne Balibar's reading of Marx's sixth thesis on Feuerbach. Pursuant to categories and themes explored throughout the chapter, I present an account of second nature that is irrevocably linked to the reproduction of the abstract individual. The overarching aim of what follows is to establish the socially produced and practical metaphysics of the capital-relation as a grounding for further exploring the individual subject as a form of real abstraction in the chapters that follow.

Machination

A certain kind of objectified abstraction is a necessary part of the design language of a world acutely mediated by communicative technology and computational forms. It is obvious enough that the methods and devices of computation rely on certain forms of abstraction. Less obvious is how the models, emulations and differentials that

animate modern computation can be traced to an array of coeval economic and social processes that long predate modern technology. Early human interface design in contemporary computation was conceived as an application of metaphor to process, where mathematical and logical processes are abstracted into simple operative symbols and forms that are intelligible to the user (Agre 1997). Thus, in computation, abstraction is a process of obfuscation that works by a kind of divide and rule that shades the complexity of logical processes beneath the appearance of computational forms. Dig beneath this partition of tasks and we see a process that reflects a division of labour, or more specifically one that reflects the historically mediated division of mental and manual labour (Gehl 2012, 182).

These parallels can be carried much further to observe how actually existing relations of capital are encrypted within modern computation and informatics. Theorists like Jonathan Beller and Seb Franklin (2021) convincingly illustrate the different ways that modern computational metaphors are infused with layers of appropriation, value-extraction, and exploitation, not as an after effect but precisely because informatic technology is codetermined with the concepts and abstractions of political economy. In Beller's estimation, however, the categories and forms of capital are not just affected in the evolution of computation, they are embedded within the instrumentalisation of information itself:

the rise of information itself is an extension of the ongoing quantification and instrumentalisation of the life-world imposed by early capitalism, and further that the abstraction of "information" and its mechanisation as "computation" take place in the footprint of the calculus of the value-form and the leveraged value-expropriation of labour by capitalised industry (Beller 2018, 1)

Quantification, measurement and so on are often knitted together in speculations on the co-development of conceptual and economic abstraction and the evolution of machinery (e.g. Lukács 1990, 88–90; Sohn-Rethel 2021, 133–35). Where the practices of modern computation merge with value capture in what is often called ‘the attention economy’ (Beller 2012), socialised labour processes are re-articulated through a rationalising conceptual apparatus already internal to the extractive operations of capital. The increasingly pervasive role of informatics in contemporary capitalism shifts the question of whether we live in an industrial society to whether we live in an information society. No periodisation is needed, however, to grasp the importance of abstraction to any society organised by the capital-relation. Regardless of any shift in the dominant character of capitalist production, the surface area of capital permits no escape from the effect described by Theodore Adorno as ‘deceptive immediacy’ (2003, 124). Such an effect occurs when the underlying determination of social forms is displaced by their appearance.

As an abiding characteristic of the capital-relation, this displacement effect has led theorists to speculate on the aesthetics, representations and navigability of the capitalist social formation, with special attention to the ways in which capital itself can appear (e.g. Althusser 2001; Jameson 2011; Kornbluh 2014; Toscano and Kinkle 2015). But what interests me here, is how this effect is redoubled in the contemporary intersection of information and computation, such that forms of appearance and abstraction are layered on top of each other to create a differential effect that is continually re-grounded in the reality effect of value.

Awareness of this effect is important for grasping how numerous vectors of discrimination and control operate through the abstractions of computation to become realised in the actuality of social relations. Both in the sense that they obscure their origins, and in the sense that they superimpose their supposedly natural reality onto real relations, doubly determining them in the process (see Apprich et al. 2018; Chun 2021; Franklin 2015; Beller 2018; Joque 2022). Within the technological milieu, abstraction operates as a form of intermediation. On the one hand, algorithmic abstractions are produced socially, they emerge from historically mediated social relations. While on the other, as Justin Joque argues, the algorithmic patterns imputed to computational capitalism become the means through which the world is ‘dynamically objectified before our eyes’ (Joque 2022, 187).

No less important to an analysis of abstraction in the computational era is recognising how capital’s production of abstract differentiation abrogates a vector in the philosophical treatment of technology and abstraction that is passed through a prism of homogeneity. For example, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer emphasise culture and technology as a dimension of ideological manipulation and coercion, where abstraction is an evacuating force, or a ‘liquidation’ of the unique; ‘the levelling rule of abstraction’ they argue, ‘makes everything in nature repeatable’ (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 9). Here, Adorno and Horkheimer map a lament of abstraction to an ultimately idealist conception of nature and mastery, which as Christian Lotz argues, obscures the properly constitutive, socio-historic, and universal character of capitalist abstraction (Lotz 2016, 113).

Abstraction and homogeneity intersect most notably in Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of technology where it is filtered through an analysis of the 'culture industry' as a deceptive production of 'pseudoindividuality' (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 94–136). For Adorno and Horkheimer, 'pseudoindividuality' is a 'fictitious quality which has characterised the individual — throughout the bourgeois era' (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 125). Against the emphasis on fiction and deception, I want to argue these symptoms are better understood not as dissimulated effects, but as the practical and real articulations of abstract forms within the capital-relation. Capital does indeed mobilise a plane of equivalence and commensurability but interpreting the production and deployment of abstract forms via this dimension negates the dialectical reality of abstraction. The latter analysis marks the aforementioned displacement effect in the production and replication of a differentiated reality that is operative within capital and not to the homogenous destruction of an otherwise deceived individual duped into the pretensions of sameness.

While there are elements of the pseudoindividuality critique that ring true, Adorno and Horkheimer nonetheless frame it around tropes that imply a spectre of the individual might be retrieved from the morass of modern technology. They write, 'against the will of those controlling it, technology has changed human beings from children into persons. But all such progress of individuation has been at the expense of the individuality in whose name it took place' (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 125). Here, advancing a critique of Kant's famous take on enlightenment as 'the human being's emergence from his self-incurred minority' (Kant 2006, 17), Adorno and Horkheimer nonetheless ground their criticisms on a transcendental framework

that, as Gillian Rose argues, operates as a limit in their thought (Rose 2009, 1).

Traced to innovations in a Neo-Kantian framework, a 'society of illusion' falls back on a Kantian structure (Rose 2009, 34–36) to frame a retrieval of reason from a methodology of judgement and values. As we will see later in this chapter, Kant's transcendental framework forms an important part of the central argument in this thesis. For now, I simply want to flag the difference between accounting for abstraction as the over-coding of attributes onto an ideologically captured subject, and seeing the individuated subject as materially embedded in a more fundamental way.

Adorno, for his own part, is at pains to provide an 'objective ground for abstraction' (Adorno 2000, 27ff), but he never quite abandons the spectre of the individual. Returning definitively in essays like 'On Subject and Object', Adorno argues the kernel of subjectivity cannot be relieved of its 'element of individual humanity' (Adorno 2005, 245). Yet, due in no small part to the influence of Sohn-Rethel and his materialist reversal of Kant (Adorno and Sohn-Rethel 1991), the mediations of this subjective figure remain intimately bound to a critique of abstraction. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno remarks upon Kant's transcendental as the 'supreme abstraction of all activity' (Adorno 2004, 201), while in his lectures on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, he remarks upon 'a spectre of reification' that is compounded in a relation between labour and thought (Adorno 2001, 115).

Formulating abstraction around reification and homogenisation situates Adorno in a theoretical current that tracks the mediation of labour and thought to the process of mechanisation investigated by Marx. Running through Adorno's own work with

Horkheimer, this current is typified in György Lukács' theory of reification (1990) and extended most acutely to culture in Herbert Marcuse's theories around the homogenising effects of industrialisation on individuals (1991). For Lukács, the division of labour 'invaded the psyche' via rationalising process of Friedrich Taylor's scientific management (Lukács 1990, 99). While for Marcuse, the same rationality is consummated, *pace* Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of 'pseudoindividuality', as a 'one-dimensional' plane of consumer society (1991). Threaded through all of these theories are the layered connections between technology, labour and capital that converge on abstract forms of appearance as they produce epistemological effects, order experience, and dictate modes of control. However, these theories too often lean on a gap between an obscured but essential character of the subject and the homogenising effects of abstract control, so they tend to fall into some of the tensions Marx himself tried to leave behind.

Although in Marx's own analysis of the relationship between machinery and labour he remarks 'the worker's activity' is 'reduced to a mere abstraction of activity' (Marx 1993, 693), the relationship between abstraction and the worker is marked by a thoroughly dialectical account of machinery as 'a mighty organism' (1993, 693) implicated in the subsumption of life more generally. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx untangles a complex knot between machinery and the socio-historical division of mental and manual labour that is trafficked through transformations in the 'social practice, of the real life process' (Marx 1993, 706). Transformations of this kind are immersed in a conjunction between material practice and the immanent expansion of social knowledge that Marx refers to as the 'general intellect' (1993, 706). As such, it

is not simply that workers are confronted by a levelling image of themselves, but they are reproduced within a concrete system in which the abstractions they interact with come to control their conditions of existence.

A pre-history of ideas detected in Marx's general intellect further emphasises the trajectory of technological abstraction by foregrounding the influence of ideas from Charles Babbage and William Thompson (see Pasquinelli 2019). For his part, Babbage imagined a technological utopia that could eliminate the chaff and idleness of production by fine tuning the division of mental labour through the invention of 'calculating engines' (Babbage 1832). Whereas Thompson offered insights into the potential for distributed knowledge and 'cognitive labour' (Pasquinelli 2019, 49) as it entered his own version of the 'general intellect' (Thompson 1968, 298–99). Both examples underwrite the relationship between machinery and the division of mental and manual labour, which for Marx, is detected through the general cognising capacity of labour as it is potentiated in the technological organs of industry (Marx 1993, 706).

As a concept, the general intellect has been advanced more recently by post-Operaismo theorists to emphasise the role of knowledge in a new layer of subsumption. This is exemplified in Paolo Virno's theories around the communicative, epistemic dimensions of 'living labour' (Virno 2003, 65), or in Franco Berardi's portrayal of the cognitive machinations of the general intellect as a disembodied spectre searching for a body (Berardi 2012, 103–33). Berardi's spectral account of a disincarnate mind is also foreshadowed by concepts like 'immaterial labour' (Lazzarato 2010) and 'cognitive capitalism' (Vercellone 2007) that emphasise

grammatical, informational, and incorporeal aspects of late capitalist subsumption, that again appear in technological abstraction. In turn, these ideas themselves are foregrounded by an autonomisation effect that objectifies the knowledge, capacities, and functions of labour in machinery.

Tracing these conceptions through the history of ideas, we can observe how they echo accounts of cognition that take the factory division of mental and manual labour as their model. For instance, Babbage's (1832) speculations on the rationalisation of factory work reveal deep links between the history of computational paradigms, ideas of cognition, and the division of labour (Franklin 2015, 24). Babbage's renowned materialism (see M. L. Jones 2016), revealed for him a reflection between mental operation and the use of machinery in factories.

the division of labour can be applied with equal success to mental operations...the arrangements which ought to regulate the interior economy of a manufactory, are founded on principles of deeper root than may have been supposed, and are capable of being usefully employed in paving the road to some of the sublimest investigations of the human mind (Babbage 1832, 153)

The reflection of mental models in processes of calculation, however, might recommend roots other than those anticipated by Babbage. Connections between calculation and reason can be found as far back as Heraclitus. Attributed by some scholars to the relay between the birth of philosophical abstraction and the invention of money, Heraclitus' *logos* can be understood as a term of accounting (Dilcher 1995, 34). Bearing this out further still, speculative treatments of abstract thought demonstrate a collateral, if uneven, development alongside economic forms more generally (Seaford 2004, 2020; Sohn-Rethel 2021). However, with Babbage they are

objectified in a uniquely industrialised form. As Franklin argues, ‘Babbage’s mapping of human potentials onto machine actions suggests a historical connection between digitality and capital that precedes the discourse of post-Fordism, immaterial labour, the information economy, and so on’ (Franklin 2015, 24).

Such a historicity is entwined in the relationship between value production, extraction and appearance as it edges the surface area of the modern computational systems that mediate contemporary capital accumulation. However, these mediations are neither in service to homogeneity, nor disembodied and untethered from their material preconditions. Rather, they are imbued in the reciprocal materiality of ambient technological forms that are not only intimately bound up with capital accumulation, but integral to the modalities of subjectivity that are generated out of them. For this reason, Beller (2021) frames the immersive coherence of information and capital as ‘the world computer’, a layered colonisation of semiotics and computation that catalyses both abstract and real forms of discrimination and differentiation through the sociality of machines (see also Beller 2018). Today, capital probes the apertures of separation and differentiation and division to accumulate a surplus through algorithmic and informatic means, but rather than being an entirely new process, this is merely a sophisticated culmination of an historically mediated process.

Although mechanisation and technology has long mediated the division of mental and manual labour, there is one way in which the contemporary era is unique. Today the co-evolution of capital and technology emerges in the tendency of modern computation to fold abstraction into yet more abstraction. Producing and mediating

new forms of accumulation on the back of old forms of separation. This is evident in the operations that further encode patterns of abstract difference, and in the way it merges with models of cognition. Yet, it is also driven on the back of already existing, thoroughly overdetermined abstractions that capital has always relied on.

Separation

Technological mediation and computation might have advanced the assimilation of capital's processes and forms into life processes, but the material pre-conditions for this are already bound up with a thematic process of separation analysed by Marx in his critique of the capitalist social formation (see N. Brown 2021, 228–48; Jameson 2011; Lebowitz 2009). Fredric Jameson argues that conceptually, separation is for Marx what externalisation and the return to self is for Hegel (Jameson 2011, 81). Externalisation is an integral part of the positive process of alienation for Hegel. Keyed to the resolution of nature and mind, alienation for Hegel is a process through which the idea of the world is obtained in self-consciousness (Hegel 2019, 281–83). Marx was critical of Hegel for his handling of alienation, not only for the privilege it grants to the mind, but because of the latter's attempt to resolve the mind back into nature (e.g. Marx 2010a, 342–245). Marx instead worked through different concepts mapped to a general outline of alienation, from his early writings that address an estranged form of power in the products of labour (Marx 2010b), to the more sophisticated account that morphs into the fetish forms of the capital-relation (Balibar 2017b, 76; Musto 2021, 28ff).

Despite his differences with Hegel, on a schematic level externalisation and return remain integral to Marx's re-application of idealism to an analysis of social objectivity

(Balibar 2017b, 65–66). The kinds of differentiation encoded in contemporary regimes of abstraction can be read through this schema of externalisation insofar as they are correlative to the process of separation integral to the historical development of the capitalist social formation. Further to the above reflections on the general intellect, the connect between externalisation and the process of separation separation is clarified by Nathan Brown’s argument that ‘intellectual potentialities’ embedded in production are separated and re-inscribed in a division of labour that is simultaneously immaterial and material:

[...]the process of separation... includes phenomena that may be described in terms of estrangement or alienation, it is also irreducible to those concepts... it not only separates intellectual potentialities from the worker as estranged property, it also designates separation within the labour process itself, separation between its material components, between commodity lines, between productive tasks and activities... the process of production is a process of separation which not only involves the separation of unitary powers from the worker but also the articulated distribution of these powers within “the whole body of social labour” (N. Brown 2021, 233–34)

Brown rightly grounds this process of separation and its distributed return in the continuity that, for Marx, produces relative surplus value (N. Brown 2021, 234). Relative surplus value is the category that drives the creation of further abstraction out of the necessity of extracting value beyond the material limits of production itself. Thus, relative surplus value it ultimately the motor of capital’s full social development via the process of ‘real subsumption’ (Marx 1990, 1035). Moreover, real subsumption signals the return and continual grounding of formal categories in real processes that press back on the already separated operations, categories and components of this

historically mediated process to reshape the material substrates of production in their own image.

An analysis of separation begins for Marx with the prior forms of ‘alienation and estrangement’ in his early writings. In the 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, he observes how the objectification of labour in its products takes on ‘an external existence’ that confronts the worker as an autonomous power (Marx 2010b, 272). The more the worker puts themselves into work, he writes, ‘the more powerful becomes the alien world of objects’ (Marx 2010b, 272). Despite the immediate experience of production as the primary interface between the worker and their material conditions, the world created by workers is abstracted from them by their own labour, they perform their own separation. Marx continues, ‘the worker puts his life into the object; but now his life no longer belongs to him but to the object’ (Marx 2010b, 272). Whereas in Hegel’s formula, alienation is integral to the resolution of nature, for Marx in these early texts objectification is the creation of an alien and ‘external existence’ that instead estranges the worker from nature (2010b, 273).

Alienation takes a more sophisticated form in his later work where he shifts focus away from a naturalising conception of worker subjectivity, to the constitutive abstractions that make up the forms of appearance of capital (e.g. Marx 1990, 433). In the more developed formulation, separation is more comprehensively reticulated through every conceivable division of the capital-relation. As capital properly subsumes social relations, these divisions build on one another until the abstractions that hold them together start to take on a semblance of autonomy; they appear as naturally occurring categories, forms and ideas. Alienation thereafter is no longer a

simple case of estrangement, but as Étienne Balibar suggests, it is a twofold effect embodied in the dual abstraction of the commodity and the contractual form that animates the exchange process (Balibar 2020b, 148), which ‘represents the greater part of “nature” in which human individuals live, think and act today’ (Balibar 2017b, 66).

While exchange comes to mediate the social formation, it is not that that labour no longer factors as an engine of alienation. Rather relations of production are relegated in the order of appearance by the process of separation. Indeed, ‘the forms of appearance’ that issue from these separations constitute more than a simple projection, they are caught up in a double movement that simultaneously effects a reversal which produces an obfuscation of real relations to scaffold the ‘mystifications’ of capital. Such mystifications are extended into the correlative abstractions like freedom and justice that are validated by the classical economists who take these forms of appearance of capital as the empirical validation of natural laws. Marx writes:

All the notions of justice held by both the worker and the capitalist, all the mystifications of the capitalist mode of production, all capitalism’s illusions about freedom, all the apologetic tricks of vulgar economics, have as their basis the form of appearance... which makes the actual relation invisible, and indeed presents to the eye the precise opposite of that relation (Marx 1990, 680)

These mystifications are not simple illusions, instead they are ‘modes of thought’ (1990, 682) that derive their validations from the immediate appearances of objects and phenomena within a logically defined structure. In this way, we can find our way to a material explication of what Kant (1996) presupposed were necessary, or

objective illusions. For Kant, a transcendental illusion is categorically different from a logical illusion. While the latter arises from a lack of perception, a transcendental illusion ‘attaches to human reason unpreventably’ (Kant 1996, 350). While for Kant, such illusions are always an inescapable effect of a metaphysical limit, Marx identifies them as contingencies of the material conditions that produce the basis for metaphysics. Such objective illusions are refracted through a series of practical relations that appear as inverted forms. This bears directly on our understanding of the reality of abstraction. As Lucio Colletti explains in his introduction to *Marx’s Early Writings*, real abstraction is underwritten by a relay between certain separations that reverse the relation between subject and object. ‘it hinges upon the hypostatizing, the reifying, of abstractions and the consequent inversion of subject and predicate’ (Colletti 1992, 39)

Within the capitalist social formation, multiple inverted forms are conditioned within the various domains of separation and hypostatisation, thus translating social relations into the categories and forms of thought (Marx 1990, 677). While the capital-relation generates many different inverted forms, for Marx, the ultimate motor of abstraction is value. Given its proper place in the critique of capital, the value-form is the culmination of separation, it is the cipher that translates the disjunction of production and exchange into the forms of appearance of capital. I return to the value-form in more detail in Chapter 2, where I trace the concretion of capital’s metaphysics through the spectral effects of value. For now, it is enough to flag value as the axis of a process that shapes and inverts social relations into their separated forms. Separation and division are held together by value in general, but properly

insinuated in the contours of everyday life most obviously through the expansive powers of its most cogent form in money. In money's 'seemingly transcendental power', we can observe the most potent articulation of inversion and externalisation:

The need for exchange and for the transformation of the product into a pure exchange value progresses in step with the division of labour, *i.e.* with the increasingly social character of production. But as the latter grows, so grows the power of money, *i.e.* the exchange relation establishes itself as a power external to and independent of the producers. What originally appeared as a means to promote production becomes a relation alien to the producers (Marx 1993, 146)

Here, the outlines of alienation are developed by Marx beyond the narrow confines of estrangement, thus, establishing a basis for theorising the metaphysics of the capital-relation in the historically mediated externalisation of a social relation. Value's self-valorising and self-perpetuating effects are doubled up as a spectre. A contradictory social form, value is contingent on productive relations that are separated and externalised but returns again and again to become ever more inscribed in the practice and production of real effects. Workers are not just alienated by the separation and objectification of their labour, as in Marx's early writings. Rather the capital-relation is a disjunctive formation animated by externalised relations that reinforce separation across the entire capitalist social formation.

Between capital's inherent structuring process of separation and the abstract realism that traverses the surface of informatic technology, the most sophisticated form of separation and differentiation internal to the capital-relation, namely the abstract individual, is not only produced out of this schema but practiced as real because of it. The abstract individual is the capstone of separation, it is the conduit through which

all the other forms of externalisation flow. However, this argument does not begin and end with alienation. An analysis of the production of individuals immanent to the separation and forms of appearance of the capitalist social formation reveals a real abstraction that operates as an interface between social being and the lived abstractions of capital. Moreover, it is not simply that the individual is one of the central categories of capital's material metaphysics, rather it is the essential vector through which the forms of separation and differentiation materialise. Such a figure is heavily encoded in the patterns and effects of computational capital discussed above, but it is also an historically mediated form, one through which political subjectivity is simultaneously projected and evacuated. The individual is the form of separation *par excellence*, a projected and inverted operation of abstraction that returns to itself as a concrete reality.

Persona

Understanding the production of the abstract individual within this schema of separation means looking again at the exchange process to observe the corollaries of abstraction in the performative aspects of economic relations. In *Capital*, Marx uses theatrical metaphors like the 'dramatis personae' and 'social mask' to illustrate the personification of economic relations as they materialise in exchange (1990, 249, 757). Remembering that *Capital* is prefaced from the outset on dealing with individuals 'only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories' (1990, 92), individuals as such must act as the bearers of the same relations through which they are reproduced. Adding the above performative metaphor to his analysis of the exchange process, Marx builds on the idea of an 'aesthetic semblance' form his

1857 introduction to the *Grundrisse*, where he characterises the individual as the mythological ‘Robinsonade’ of political economy (Marx 1993, 83).

By placing these insights in a theatrical idiom, Marx establishes the deep connections between the abstract and performative aspects of commodity exchange and the legal construction of the *persona* that derives from allusions in Roman law to an abstract part or role (Hollis 1985; Lütticken 2015; Long 2006, 335). A conjunction between terms of theatricality, personhood and juridical abstraction is central to the history of political thought. We find this evidenced by Thomas Hobbes’s reflections on the division of representation between the ‘natural person’ whose words are their own, and the ‘feigned or artificial person’ who represents the words of another (Hobbes 1998, 106). Explaining the Latin use of *persona*, Hobbes writes, ‘a person, is the same that an *actor* is, both on the stage and in common conversation; and to *personate*, is to *act*’ (Hobbes 1998, 106). Hobbes is often identified as inaugurating the modern liberal doctrine (e.g. Macpherson 1989; Gilbert 2014, 49–68), in which this figure of the *persona* becomes the bearer of the property rights that occupy the intersection of capital’s historical development with the legal ideology that runs alongside it (E. M. Wood 2012).

Considering these connections, it is no surprise to find performative metaphors taken up in various contemporary sociological and philosophical accounts of the individual and identity, with notable examples in Erving Goffman’s (2008) dramaturgy of the self, and Judith Butler’s (1999) theory of gender performativity. Such accounts of individuality are founded on important insights into the semblant and aesthetic qualities of identity, but they tend to be underwritten by a form of individual

subjectivity onto which qualities of performance are inscribed. In Marx's own image of the theatrical mask, individuation comes in the other direction, between the illusory and the real. The performance of economic relations is a fundamentally material process of presentation that is constitutive in the production and reproduction of individuals in the first place. By articulating this process through the forms that appear in exchange, Marx identifies a mechanism that transposes a double fetish of material objects and real people (Balibar 2017a, 186) from the already separated and abstracted relations of production that form the condition of possibility for exchange.

While these appearances are exemplified in exchange, the schema of separation and return as it converges on individuals is first demonstrated by Marx through production. Echoing Marx's analysis of estrangement, as outlined above, in *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels note how labour appropriated under capital's regime of private property evacuates the 'real-life content' of people, thus creating abstract individuals who then 'enter into relation with one another *as individuals*' (Marx and Engels 2010, 87). In this argument, the material interdependence between people is displaced under capital onto an abstract figure that gains an independent appearance when social relations come to be mediated by the exchange of commodities. It follows from this formulation that we are not talking about an effect that is simply abstract, but real. The abstract relation becomes a real relation in the way that it is practised. Marx's famous formula for describing a social formation mediated by commodities is, 'material relations between persons and social relations between things' (Marx 1990, 166). Despite this purely objective appearance of these

social relations between things, the mediation of these relations must be performed by the bearers who support them. As Marx continues, ‘commodities cannot themselves go to market’ (1990, 178), they are placed into relation by ‘characters who appear on the economic stage’ (1990, 179). In the intersection between the performance of exchange and its substance, the individual becomes a form of identification. Here, in a strange reversal of the formula above, individuals who have entered ‘into relation with one another *as* individuals’ this time experience themselves as abstract individuals. Indeed, exchange is always fundamentally concerned with a mode of identification. As Jameson notes, because exchange value is an abstract term that mediates the incommensurability of two objects, it is ‘the primordial form by which identity emerges in human history’ (Jameson 2007, 23).

Returning to where we started with informatic technology, given the deep entanglement between computation and the forms and categories of capital, it is not surprising that modern informatic technology converges so often on identity. At a basic level, identification between abstractions is an integral part of computational code (see Hayles 2005, 15–38). But, in the profile dependant interfaces of social computation, abstract identification converges with the sociality production and exchange to reproduce the abstract individual as a computational form within its own peculiar objectivity. Building on observations from Beller and Franklin that the substrates of modern computation are layered with economic abstractions and metaphors, in the sphere of computational capital today the individual becomes a site of production because it is inextricably bound to the identification process that starts with exchange. Thus, the performative metaphors that underwrite the personification

of economic relations traverse the computational surface area of contemporary sociality to acquire their own autonomisation. Operating within a layered 'aesthetic semblance', the abstract individual is inscribed in an over-articulated structure of self-identity and externalisation (see Bratton 2015, 256).

The figure of the *persona* outlined above has long been identified as a conduit for liquidating the distinction between persons and things (Esposito 2015, 58). However, the abstract objectivity of technology has blurred this distinction even further by enabling the colonisation of any area of life that can be documented and shared. Within computational capitalism, the *persona* is coupled to the replication of new forms of abstraction, but those forms are themselves captured as part of the value structure as the abstract individual forever presses up against modes of commodification. An imbrication of the commodity and an increasingly technologised life-world is illustrated by writers like Franco Berardi (2011), Tiziana Terranova (2000), Jonathan Crary (2013), Neal Curtis (2013) and many more. Perhaps the most acute collapse of this distinction, however, can be found in the hyper-documented spectacle of micro-celebrity (Khamis, Ang, and Welling 2017).

All of these are contingent on the schema of the character mask and the logic of exchange. They are further projected as productive forms of self-creation, 'self-design' (Groys 2018) and abstract personal freedom that extend the aforementioned 'mystifications' of capital into the modes of commodified reflection that bleed into the real. Freedom that is guaranteed by the exchange relation and mediated by the market meets its image in the intercession of branding, self-design, pro-forma self-creation and so on. Under these terms, the figure of the individual is not just a

speculative reflection of the commodity form, but a form enacted and performed as constitutively real; a real abstraction.

Religious Representation

Recognising the source of the abstract relationship between abstraction and the individual is central to Marx's general philosophical orientation. The individual is the axis around a contestable break in Marx's thought proposed by Althusser, from the correspondence of an 'essence of man' and 'philosophical humanism' to the more constitutive forms of appearance in the analysis of *Capital* (Althusser 2005, 227).

Premised on Marx's argument in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, the break is located in the criticism of Feuerbach's naturalised 'essence of man' as an abstraction 'inherent in each single individual' (Marx 2010c, 4). Marx's critique hinges on the difference between a socially mediated relation and Feuerbach's own critique of religion as 'a mere projection of man's own essence' (Feuerbach 1967, 47). Feuerbach, in Marx's words, 'does not see that the "religious sentiment" is itself a social product, and that the abstract individual... belongs to a particular form of society' (2010c, 5).

In the wake of his critique of Feuerbach, Marx deploys religious allegory against similar mistakes in the naturalising tendencies of economics. First, to demonstrate the separations and inversions of capital's projected forms, and second to uncover how these forms are confused as concrete, natural and immutable. Moreover, from the sketch of incarnation in the appearance of value (Marx 1993, 310) to the Eucharistic imaginary of transubstantiation in money (Marx 1990, 197), Marx makes extensive use of Christian motifs to illustrate the spectral, abstract and fetishistic operations of capital. An illustration of this special resonance is exemplified by Marx in his claim

that Christianity is a ‘cult of man in the abstract’ (Marx 1990, 172). Moreover, a continuity with the theme of separation outlined above is detected in Christianity’s division of the subject between man and soul, and in the division between heaven and earth as a template for an abstract form of equality that has no bearing on the actual inequality of relations. As Marx observes, ‘Christians are equal in heaven though unequal on earth, the individual members of the people became equal in the heaven of their political world, though unequal in their earthly existence in *society*’ (Marx 1992, 146).

It is not just the form of religious abstractions applied to capital, but the disposition of religious affect that occupies Marx. The latter captures the fetishism, faith and miraculation that translates the ambient forms of capital into forms of cognition. Building on these inherent dualisms, Christianity is implicated in the justifications and mystifications of capital’s ideological scaffold to mark the division between idealism and concrete appearance. But again, we are not talking about simple metaphors, but an inherent homology effected in the social production and transference of forms. Addressing this production within a dialectical frame that excavates their social and productive ground, Marx confronts the problem of conceiving religious superstition and representation through Enlightenment style judgements of the intellect, which as Toscano writes, ‘often rely on the idealist, asocial view that the sway of religious representations and ideologies over human affairs can be terminated by a mere change of consciousness’ (Toscano 2017a, 182)

Instead, for Marx, only by uncovering the underlying conditions of possibility that naturalise this idealist, asocial view, *pace* Feuerbach above, can we progress the

resolution of false appearances. A dialectical critique of the representations and effects of religion ultimately grounds these ‘social, cultural and intellectual abstractions’ against their determinations in ‘the real abstractions of value-form, money and abstract labour’ (Toscano 2017a, 190). While this effects the congruity of the Christian ideas outlined above with the ‘atomism and false equality’ of capital (2017a, 190), its ultimate purpose is to demonstrate the basis on which socially produced abstractions come to appear as the autonomous concepts of capital’s reality principle. Toscano continues, religious analogy is ‘necessary for grasping the process of autonomisation that characterises a society, that of capitalism, in which men are dominated by abstractions’ (Toscano 2017a, 199). Indeed, religious representations are emblematic of capital’s metaphysics for ‘their seemingly autonomous, “spectral” existence’ (Toscano 2017a, 182).

Exemplifying this is the religious allegory underwriting the ‘trinity’ formula that Marx accords to the political economists. Following the forms of fetishism, mystification, and reification that emerge from relative surplus value. Marx describes how the effects of personification and autonomisation are mapped by political economist to a holy trinity of capital, land and labour:

[...]this economic trinity...the components of value and wealth in general and its sources, completes the mystification of the capitalist mode of production, the reification of social relations, and the immediate coalescence of the material relations of production with their historical and social specificity: the bewitched, distorted and upside-down world haunted by Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre, who are at the same time social characters and mere things (Marx 2016, 897)

Here the capital-relation is worn by characters representing capital and land, but 'autonomisation' and 'personification' are affected more generally in a 'religion of everyday life' that captures all agents to the capitalist social formation (Marx 2016, 897). Marx deploys the trinity with a degree of irony to critique the faith-based project of economics as a self-justifying endeavour, one that, 'corresponds to the interests of the dominant classes' (2016, 897). But this religion of everyday life naturalises the appearances of capital's forms for everyone, indeed it pays to remember that religion is not just a regime of fetish forms and misplaced beliefs, it is an embedded practice that orders the understanding of life in general. Marx continues, 'it is also quite natural... that the actual agents of production themselves feel completely at home in these estranged and irrational forms of capital... for these are precisely the forms of appearance in which they move' (Marx 2016, 897).

If religious representation is the key to the separation and autonomisation of capital's metaphysics, the acme of this process is observed in the form 'interest-bearing capital' that propels finance. Capital's purest form is defrayed by surplus value and fertilised by interest to produce 'self-valorising value' or, money that begets money. Thus, it is the form that most obviously consummates the social relation as an autonomised and self-perpetuating thing (Marx 2016, 493). For Marx then, interest-bearing capital completes the circuit of autonomisation, 'the ossification of the form against its substance' because the memory of its origin, 'is not simply obliterated but actually placed in a form diametrically opposed to this origin' (Marx 2016, 898). In other words, interest bearing capital is the most profound illustration of the deep homology between religious representation and the metaphysics of capital as it performs a self-

sustaining, all but miraculous autonomy. Our present conjuncture's domination by finance and computation makes this formula for autonomisation crucial to understanding both the operations of capital, and the role of abstraction more generally in transposing forms into their real effects. Interest and credit are interspersed by the cognitive maps (Jameson 1988) and financial imaginaries (Haiven 2011) that are traversed by the epistemological operation that emerges out of this autonomisation.

Real Abstraction

Establishing the role of autonomisation in the circulation and naturalisation of capital's forms can help us unpack notions like the individual subject as *a priori* ontological. Exploring the individual as a real abstraction requires navigating the convergence of abstract and concrete processes within the capital-relation. As Toscano observes, capital's concrete modality of abstraction is 'the *differentia specifica* of capitalism vis-à-vis other modes of production' (Toscano 2008b, 67; 2008a, 273). Capital's tendency of concretising abstractions is catalysed by the process of separation in the first instance, where particular concrete entities are shadowed by their generic, abstract form. As such, the adherence of concrete abstractions in the determinations and boundaries of both action and thought is key to recognising the reproduction of these abstract forms within the reality dealing machinations of capital's material ideology (see Althusser 2014, 258)

Marx argues in the *Grundrisse* that a contradictory, inverted relation makes individuals appear independent in a society mobilised by money and exchange. A semblance of freedom and independence is imputed specifically to the role of

abstraction in mediating social relations of dependence, instituting an indirect rule of abstraction in the place of previously linear coercion:

In the money relation, in the developed system of exchange, the ties of personal dependence...are in fact exploded, ripped up, and individuals *seem* to be independent...but they appear thus only for someone who abstracts from... the conditions of existence... These external relations are very far from being an abolition of 'relations of dependence'; they are rather the dissolution of these relations into a general form...These objective dependency relations also appear, in antithesis to those of personal dependence... in such a way that individuals are now ruled by abstractions, whereas earlier they depended on one another (Marx 1993, 163–64)

Rule by abstraction is not a simple form of domination by the imposition of ideas. Rather it ascends from the materialist principle proposed in *the German Ideology* which states, 'the production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness...is directly interwoven with the material activity...the language of real life' (Marx and Engels 2010, 36). Marx returns to this principle in the *Grundrisse* to contextualise ruling abstractions as 'nothing more than the theoretical expression of those material relations which are their lord and master' (Marx 1993, 164). Moreover, in identifying the dominant role of abstraction as intrinsic to material relations, Marx rehearses a criticism of idealism for mistaking 'the creation of free individuality' within the overthrow of ideas (1993, 164). It is within this context that we can observe the mythology of the naturalised individual (Marx 1993, 83).

The conjunction of exchange relations, abstraction and the question of 'nature' is most thoroughly formalised by Sohn-Rethel in his materialist critique of epistemology, *Intellectual and Manual Labour* (2021). Sohn-Rethel traces the exchange abstraction to the invention of coinage in Ancient Greece to excavate a pre-

condition, not only of capitalist abstraction, but of the kind of abstract conceptual thought necessary to the invention of philosophy (see also Seaford 2004; Thomson 1972). Moreover, tracking this particular form of abstraction to its material grounding, for Sohn-Rethel, reveals an historical spatiotemporal grounding for an ahistorical and atemporal thought form that is projected onto nature (Sohn-Rethel 2021, 166).

For Sohn-Rethel, the mediation of exchange by the money form requires a *sui generis* form of abstraction which, he writes, ‘is not thought-induced...does not originate in men’s minds but in their actions’ (Sohn-Rethel 2021, 16). We have seen above how exchange is implicated in forms of personification, but for Sohn-Rethel exchange mediates a reality making ‘social synthesis’ that consummates an abstract nature through the ‘socialised mind of man’ (Sohn-Rethel 2021, 108). Such a ‘social synthesis’ depends on a specific modality of abstraction that can be simultaneously physically present and abstract in kind:

By its own physicality in terms of spatio-temporal action the abstraction from natural physicality, which exchange enforces by its separation from use, establishes itself as a physicality in the abstract or as a kind of abstract nature...This abstract and purely social physicality of exchange has no existence other than in the human mind, but it does not spring from the mind. It springs from the activity of exchange and from the necessity for it which arises owing to the disruption of communal production into private production carried on by separate individuals independently of each other (Sohn-Rethel 2021, 47–48)

Here again, we find separation and individuation implicated in a particular deployment of abstraction. From this abstract nature, Sohn-Rethel discerns a ‘logical uniformity’ out of which the ‘formal elements’ of conceptual thought are derived

(Sohn-Rethel 2021, 96). The ubiquitous nature of money and exchange in the capitalist social formation elicits a form of social reflection, which is re-formalised via, ‘the rationality of intellectual labour in its scientific activity’ (Sohn-Rethel 2021, 63). Thus, it sets up a kind of feedback in loop in which the already naturalised abstractions becoming the compass for navigating nature as such. The separations, differentiation and abstractions that converge on the rationality of intellectual labour are fed back into the capitalist social formation by the technological mediations that are produced by scientific activity (2021, 96–100). Here we can also come back to the discussion on technology, machinery and computation to observe the recombinant process that absorbs abstract principles into the social objectivity of technological forms.

For Sohn-Rethel, the rationality of modern science is synthesised in production and machinery through a ‘postulate of automatism’ (Sohn-Rethel 2021, 100). However, the consummation of automatism and the rationality of intellectual labour meets its most resonant formalisation in the invention by philosophy of the individual subject. Sohn-Rethel argues, ‘nothing could be wrapped in greater secrecy than the truth that the independence of the intellect is owed to its originally social character’ (Sohn-Rethel 2021, 64). It is here that all of these elements, categories and forms enter the socially produced separation of the intellect to complete a homology between the abstractions of exchange and Kant’s invention of the ‘transcendental subject’:

the ‘transcendental unity of the self-consciousness’, to use the Kantian expression... is itself an intellectual reflection of one of the elements of the exchange abstraction, the most fundamental one of all, the form of exchangeability of the commodities underlying the unity of money and of the social synthesis. I define the Kantian

‘transcendental subject’ as a fetish concept of the capital function of money (Sohn-Rethel 2021, 64)

Sohn-Rethel’s material reversal of Kant’s idealism is proposed as a corrective to elements missed in Marx’s own analyses of the capitalist social formation (Sohn-Rethel 2021, 1–2). However, this social production of abstraction remains derivative of one of the critical features of Marx’s own materialism in the way that, while the subject and object appear separated, they are constituted together and appear in an inverted form. Elaborating on Marx’s specific relation to idealism, Balibar observes that for Marx there is ‘no theory of objectivity without a theory of subjectivity’ (Balibar 2017b, 64–65; see also Kordela 2016). This double constitution, and reversal of subject and object is what gives the inverted world its objective character. Balibar argues further that Marx addressed himself to the problem sidelined by Kant of ‘the metaphysics of pure thought, which did not refer to anything in experience’ (Balibar 2017b, 65). For Marx, this metaphysics is reconstituted through the ‘socially valid, and therefore objective’ thought-forms of ‘bourgeois economics’ (Balibar 2017b, 66; Marx 1990, 169). Thus, it is from these thought-forms that we derive both the metaphysics of capital, and their collapse into bourgeois ideology.

It is by understanding the operation of real abstraction and autonomisation that we come to see how the abstract figure of the individual is generated internal to the logic of capital as the kind self-sustaining form that attaches itself to the circulation and exchange of objects. This inevitably comes back to dominant ideas of personhood and to individuating notions of subjectivity that are central to both the machinations of contemporary capitalism and the social and political ideologies that form in support of it. Forms of automation appear everywhere in the sphere of exchange to affect the

appearance of independence and autonomy, from automated bank tellers to self-service apps and delivery drones, self-checkout machines, and the Mechanical Turk dissociations internet life. One way or another these appear as exchange objects that both reinforce separation and elide their own productive origins.

A contentious line has been drawn by certain theorists who argue Sohn-Rethel's account of real abstraction undermines, or overlooks Marx's labour theory of value (e.g. Jappe 2013). However, the question hinges more on locating how and where abstractions of separation and independence appear, not in their reduction to a singular cause. Debates on the genesis of real abstraction that emphasise either exchange, or labour (e.g. Postone 1993) risk overlooking the truly relational nature of the capitalist social formation; the fact that production and exchange are inextricably linked in a commodity society. We have already seen how modern information technology extends the mediation of machinery in the production of abstraction, but as it will become clear throughout the remainder of this thesis, the relation of the individual to the capital-relation is not simply an outgrowth of either labour or exchange. It is overdetermined by modalities of abstraction that go well beyond both. Real abstraction is internal to the logic of capital, but capital itself has an uncanny ability to latch on to and transpose abstractions that run parallel or even counter to its development.

Individual Essence

For all the debate surrounding particular elements of Sohn-Rethel's work, his singular achievement is inverting the cause of abstraction to place it within the patterns of everyday life (Toscano 2008a). If aforementioned critiques of Sohn-Rethel succeed in

anything, it is not shifting the pole of real abstraction from exchange to abstract labour but highlighting an underlying asymmetry that subtends the production of real abstraction as a relational phenomenon. Capital does not operate on the basis of a singular kind of abstraction, rather it creates a reality out of abstractions in general. Indeed, Marx never tires of emphasising a fundamental point advanced in the methodological introduction to the *Grundrisse* that studying capital requires a method of abstraction because its concrete formation brings together multiple underlying determinations. He writes, ‘the elements which are not general and common, must be separated out... so that in their unity — which arises already from the identity of the subject, humanity, and of the object, nature — their essential difference is not forgotten’ (Marx 1993, 85). Entering a debate of the primacy of either labour or exchange not only negates the uneven development of capital but overlooks the unified operation of the capital-relation as a social formation that reflects all its underlying elements.

Further, capital is not only involved in the production and mobilisation of abstraction at a functional level, but in its simultaneous capture and repurpose for continual expansion of value extraction. For example, building on the comments regarding relative surplus value above, abstractions of difference such as race, class and gender often appear historically elliptical to the uneven development of capital but are nonetheless internal to the logic of capital accumulation and evermore necessary to the continued expansion of the capitalist social formation (e.g. Endnotes 2013; Roediger 2019; Toscano 2015a; Hall 2021). It is important here to emphasise the continuities between the production of an individualised subject and the categorising

abstractions of difference. One way or another, the differentials that traverse the capitalist social formation are catalysed via an experience of separation and individuation that converges on the naturalisation of the abstract individual. But this is not so much an evacuated form, but a 'phenomenal form' inscribed within further categories of abstraction that apply recursive layers of individuation. I return to this in more detail in the following chapters, both with regards to forms of property and law in Chapter 3, and in Chapter 4, when dealing with finance capital's production of difference. For now, I want to keep the focus on further establishing the abstract figure onto which these other forms of abstraction are projected.

Interpreting this figure of the individual brings us back again to Marx's critique of Feuerbach, particularly in his 'sixth thesis' where he writes, 'Feuerbach resolves the essence of religion into the essence of man. But the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations' (Marx 2010c, 4). We have already seen above, how this formula involves the rejection of the essential humanism inflected in Feuerbach's own criticisms of religion. However, as Balibar notes, it also includes 'reflecting dialectically the transition from individual consciousness...to where subject and object become complementary aspects of the same historicity' (Balibar 2017b, 130). The specificity of this dialectical move is to present two complementary theses at once, first, that the specifically abstract form of subjectivity peculiar to capitalism is not a simple dualism inherent to singular individuals but is distributed in the socialisation of individualisation more generally, and second that this distribution fashions the form

of appearance that is not only mistaken by Feuerbach as essential but taken as given more generally in the practical metaphysics of capital.

For Balibar, there is a further layer to Marx's "'humanist" corrective' (Balibar 2017b, 135), that again bears on the religious current discussed above. By fixating on the antithesis between 'abstraction' and 'individuality', Balibar argues most commentary on Marx's sixth thesis overlooks a key mediation that echoes allegorical forms of interior truth and internal presence that centre on the human soul in the Augustine theological tradition (2017b, 135). In the phrase that marks the human essence as 'no abstraction inherent in each single individual' (Marx 2010c, 4), the term 'inherent' is translated from the German word *inwohnend*. However, Balibar suggests a more accurate translation gleaned from Pierre Macherey, of 'residing in' to mine connotations of 'inhabiting' 'possession' or 'being possessed by' from their philological context in the Church Latin term *inhabitare* (2017b, 133).

For Balibar, the precise context of Marx's phrasing reveals two traditions that Marx rejects in his critique of Feuerbach, 'Aristotelean naturalism and Augustinian spiritualism', both of which pivot around a universal abstraction of the individual (Balibar 2020b, 143). Furthermore, Balibar maps the itinerary of metaphysical individualism from these traditions, from post-Aristotelian hylomorphism to theological subjectification, as it converges on Kant's formalisation of the transcendental subject (Balibar 2017b, 134). However, if the transcendental subject is an unstated spectre in Marx's critique of Feuerbach, there is another element that curiously reflects ideas that are found in the same traditions that subtend Marx's critique.

Inhabitation reveals more than the theological idiom with all the connotations of possession and incarnation, it also hints that a latent process of habituation lurks in Marx's formula for the ensemble as essence (Marx 2010c, 4). Let us not forget, the sixth thesis is specifically concerned with the difference between how an individual appears and how it is produced. In a sense, there is a transition from the inhabitation of an abstract essence that appears as a naturalised individual, to the habituation of abstractions that are nonetheless inflected with the appearance of this naturalised form. This also brings us back again to Sohn-Rethel, to argue that the reality of abstractions forms out of practice. The kinds of abstractions that converge on the presupposition of the metaphysical individual are habitually practiced to the point that they appear natural, immutable, and real.

Balibar would be aware of the connotation of habit, both traditions that form the backdrop of his analysis of Marx's sixth thesis include conceptions of habit. The Augustine tradition, for example, has been called a theology of habit (Carlisle 2013), while habit and habituation are crucial to Aristotle's ethics and anthropology (Aristotle 2009, 23–24). Moreover, as Catherine Malabou argues, the synthesis of habit, man and spirit from Aristotle's anthropology is important in the development of psychology and second nature for Hegel (Malabou 2005, 26), and Hegel is another figure who hovers in the background of Marx's critique of Feuerbach. Indeed, it is through Hegel that Balibar proposes a solution in Marx's formula to the problems that orbit reality and abstraction, drawing on the correspondence between reality and actuality in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, to indicate not only what 'the human essence

actually is, but also what it *becomes when it is actualised* — that is, produced as the result of material and historical operations’ (Balibar 2017b, 138)

Within the capital-relation, these questions orbit the forms of real abstraction that cohere in the modalities of production and exchange. Balibar brings this into focus by contextualising Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach* against the aforementioned critique of the individual advanced by Marx in ‘On the Jewish Question’ to demonstrate something like a minimal condition for the appearance of a bourgeois subject, namely the habituation and internalisation of private property. Further illustrating the image that cuts across the immanence and transcendence of Man’s relationship to God, to demonstrate again the transference of religious representations onto the forms of capital:

The idea that what ‘possesses’ from within the abstract or isolated individual (who might also be referred to as the individual *individualized* to extremes, dubbed ‘egoist’ in this context) is nothing other than the *idea of (private) property*, which Marx elsewhere suggests replaced God in the bourgeois epoch as the ‘inner truth’ and sovereign source of commandments for man (Balibar 2017b, 137)

What matters in Sohn-Rethel’s intervention is undermining the tradition in philosophy that determines, ‘abstraction is the inherent activity and the exclusive privilege of thought’ (Sohn-Rethel 2021, 15). For Sohn-Rethel, it not simply a case of settling accounts in Marxian theory, but entering into one of the more fundamental battle lines in the history of western metaphysics, namely the opposition of thought and being. He writes, ‘if the formation of the consciousness, by the procedure of abstraction, is exclusively a matter for the consciousness itself, then a chasm opens up between the forms of consciousness on the one side and its alleged determination in

being on the other' (Sohn-Rethel 2021, 15). We see this in the transcendent operation that divides the abstraction of the individual from the historically mediated form of individuation.

Sohn-Rethel locates the pre-history of these metaphysics in Parmenides's declaration of the unity of thought and being. For Sohn-Rethel, Parmenides is the first 'pure thinker' whose thought is founded upon a 'social postulate' derived in the exchange abstraction (Sohn-Rethel 2021, 59-60). A line is opened up here that runs from Greek philosophy in Parmenides, Heraclitus and Pythagoras by thinking the figure of 'the One', all the way to Descartes, for whom Hegel writes, 'the unity of being and thinking is primary' (Hegel 2009, 111). Richard Seaford offers further support for this thesis by arguing that Parmenides produced a philosophy of self-evidence as an attack on the illogic of Ionian cosmologies by, 'a projection of universal abstract (monetary) value abstracted even from its material embodiment in circulating money' (Seaford 2012, 96).

Within the trajectory opened up by this history of philosophy, Sohn-Rethel's account is carried to its logical conclusion by Kant's epistemology in the construction of the transcendental subject. For Sohn-Rethel, it is in Kant that we see the full expression of the commodity fetish abstracted into a system of thought (Sohn-Rethel 2021, 64). In the same way that Parmenides is seen to abstract a projection of the universal from the concrete experience of a socially mediated practice, the various aspects of Kant's transcendental argument, from the categories to *a priori* forms, from pure reason to the transcendental aesthetic (Kant 2004, 1996) are synthesised in correspondence

with the abstractions of an exchange society to emerge in the appearance of bounded reason, epistemological limit and transcendental individuation.

Second Nature

We can bring many of the elements discussed in this chapter so far together with a discussion of Sohn-Rethel's treatment of second nature. Second nature emerges in the separation of two spheres of nature, the 'purely social, abstract, functional reality' that, 'finds its external expression in money' (2021, 50), and the elemental or 'primary nature' which is constituted in the direct materiality of use and human labour (2021, 23, 47). For Sohn-Rethel, these two spheres correspond to the division of intellectual and manual labour that forms the basis of his epistemological critique. Ultimately, this division bears on the perception and redistribution in principles of autonomy, because the 'social synthesis' operates in 'total separation from any of the operations of man's material interchange with nature' (2021, 50). Again, for Sohn-Rethel, the social synthesis is mobilised via the subsumption of the exchange-relation as a mediating force in the capitalist social formation. Exchange forms the axis of second nature around necessary solipsistic consciousness (Sohn-Rethel 2019), or 'practical solipsism' (Sohn-Rethel 2021, 32–35) that converges on the character masks of the *persona*, the fetishism of religious abstractions, and the internalised abstraction of individual essence discussed above, to facilitate exchange.

Echoing the discussion above from Marx on the theatrical idiom of exchange (Marx 1990, 180), Sohn-Rethel points to a performative paradox in that exchange is simultaneously social and individual. Indeed, the second nature Sohn-Rethel describes is part of a generalised system of reciprocity driven by the abstract

commensurability that, as Marx discovered, attaches itself to the commodity form. A kind of aporia emerges in the perception of self-dependency, the aforementioned consciousness is produced in common to facilitate a social act, but is acted out in an individuated scene through a kind of lacerated reciprocity. Sohn-Rethel writes, 'it is precisely through the real character of abstraction that this "relation of reciprocal foreignness" and of the practical solipsism of antagonistic ownership interests functions as a vehicle of socialisation' (Sohn-Rethel 2019, np).

For Marx, it is not just classical economics and bourgeois ideology that perform these naturalisations. Hegel's alliance of exchange and alienation commits to the same underlying schema that he criticises in Feuerbach. For Hegel, alienation is part of the movement towards self-creation in the distribution of needs, it involves 'subjective self-seeking' that is a 'mediation of the particular through the universal' (Hegel 2008, 192). Arguing for the necessity of alienation, Hegel nudges remarkably close to the market-based idealism of classical economics when he suggests 'subjective self-seeking turns into a contribution to the satisfaction of the needs of everyone else' (2008, 191,). Marx captures the problem inherent in this formulation with his reply to Adam Smith, pointing to the formal mediation of 'reciprocal dependence' as an obfuscation of the conditions of its own possibility:

The point is rather that private interest is itself already a socially determined interest... hence it is bound to the reproduction of these conditions and means. It is the interest of private persons; but its content, as well as the form and means of its realisation, is given by social conditions independent of all (Marx 1993, 156)

Herein lies a crucial difference between the treatment of alienation in Hegel and Marx. Marx argues further that exchange is not the mediation of the particular by the

universal, rather it is the negation of both. Mutual dependence mediated by the formal exchange relation requires the value-form, which in turn means ‘the reciprocal and all-sided dependence of individuals who are indifferent to one another forms their social connection. This social bond is expressed in *exchange value*’ (Marx 1993, 156). Here we have the precise formulation that Sohn-Rethel describes above as producing a ‘second nature of solipsistic consciousness’. In Marx’s reflection, the exchange relation coheres in a ‘social form’ that produces the appearance of mutual independence and the effect of mutual indifference (Marx 1993, 157).

If the production of an individuated and indifferent second nature has always been part of the logic of capital, it is crucial to understanding how this appears in a contemporary conjuncture subject to the kind of technological and computational mediation discussed at the beginning of this chapter. The computational milieu goes beyond fetishism and objectification to generate further layers of mediation and abstraction that facilitate a paradoxical indifference to the other that is based on the abstract production of difference (Salecl 2020, 109). Moreover, this abstract production is gathered to the site of the abstract individual for cross-sectional modes of categorisation.

A discussion of second nature also comes back to the question of habit and habituation discussed above. Although Hegel’s deployment of alienation in the context of exchange remains caught in the mystifications and essentialisms inherent to capital’s forms, he nonetheless provides important insights into how second nature is acquired in the habituation of being (Hegel 2007, 150). Indeed, habit is how nature is inscribed, which for Hegel means human nature is always a second nature

(Malabou 2005, 66). Describing nature in these terms, moreover, undermines arguments that justify capital expropriation on the grounds that it develops necessarily out of so-called human nature. Instead, capital's forms are indicated in a second nature through which a metabolic relation to nature itself is formed (cf. Schmidt 1971). Marx clarifies this as a kind of epistemological trap, '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' (Marx 1990, 899). It is precisely within this epistemological trap that we can observe the construction of the naturalised individual.

Although these forms are detected most readily in the exchange abstraction, Sohn-Rethel offers a compelling account of how the naturalisation of separated second nature is subsumed into the general machinery of the capitalist social formation. We have seen above how the culminating image of autonomisation for Marx appears in the form of interest-bearing capital, but for Sohn-Rethel, the logic of autonomisation is embedded by separated rationality of intellectual labour, as it performs an isomorphy with the forms, goals and interests of capital. He writes, 'the scientist investigates what can be experienced of first nature through the epistemological concepts of abstract second nature' (Sohn-Rethel 2019, np). In this, an epistemological loop between the exigencies of capital's categories and forms is set up, for Sohn-Rethel, in the application and practice of this 'postulate of automatism' (Sohn-Rethel 2021, 98) to the conditions of control over production. Continuing, 'automatism does not spring from any source in the technology of production but is inherent in the production relations of capitalism' (Sohn-Rethel 2021, 98).

Here we can return to the discussion that opens this chapter, to again consider the currents of real abstraction that flow through the sociality of information, machinery, and computation. For Sohn-Rethel, this flow of sociality channels the application of second nature into the autonomising capacities of machinery. Echoing Marx's discussion on the mediation of the division of labour by machinery, he writes:

In automation the second nature reigns supreme...The subjectivity of the individual labour-power, the mental, sensorial and nervous functions of an individual while at work, has been replaced by the electronics of automation. Technological devices, in substituting for the workers' personal attributes, emancipate the subjectivity of labour from the organic limitations of the individual and transform it into a social power of machinery (Sohn-Rethel 2021, 144)

This image of autonomisation in the social power of machinery returns to confront us in the algorithmic, informatic and computational forms that mediate so much of sociality today. But what matters most to the arguments of this thesis is how the autonomising operation of second nature converge on the abstract individual. Embedded in the portraits, profiles and interfaces of computational forms, the abstract individual becomes a form of virtual practice, an externalised interaction that habituates persons as users by their interaction with forms of technical mediation that always already have the autonomised second nature of capital encoded within. As Hegel writes, 'in modern times, the individual finds the abstract form ready-made' (Hegel 2019, 21).

Conclusion

Real abstraction and second nature come together for Sohn-Rethel in a mode of necessarily false consciousness that, bound to the specificity of social conditions,

could not arise other than the way it does. He writes, ‘necessary false consciousness is false, not as a fault of consciousness, but by fault of the historical order of social existence causing it to be false’ (Sohn-Rethel 2021, 162). Centring this around necessity moves the debate away from an ideological framing addressed to subjective notions of faulty reason, which in turn leads to the idea that bad ideas, or reason itself could be corrected to align consciousness to an apparently overlooked reality (Rehmann 2013, 6–7).

Shaping an account of consciousness to real abstraction instead puts an emphasis on the effects of separation and autonomisations that are mapped in practical relations to the reproduction of an abstract individual. The stakes hinge on the difference between addressing the resurrection of an essential and alienated individual, and orienting politics to a change in the structure that produces the abstract individual as a form of thought and a form of practice. Returning to where we started, the difficulty lies in the fact that a rationality mapped to objectifying the abstract individual is infused so deeply in social processes as to become part of the flow of information itself. Between techniques of separation and transcendent projections of autonomy outlined above, the computational milieu of contemporary capitalism is structured around practices and ideas that are always already impregnated with the individuations and separations of capital’s forms.

Once we take seriously the social, historical and material origins of thought the more we understand that concepts like subjectivity cannot reasonably be thought outside their determinate conditions. Moreover, as Jameson explains, mapping the ‘infrastructure’ of concepts reveals the effects of ideology, ‘cannot simply be thought

away by thinking of a better thought, by new forms of philosophising and more adequate concepts' (Jameson 2007, 24). Moving beyond the abstractions in question would require orienting ourselves to something more like decolonisation to uproot the structures of dispossession, extraction and oppression beneath their contemporaneous forms (Beller 2021). For decolonisation as a concept to be given its full force, however, it cannot be framed as a mode of imagination (see Barber 2020). Instead, it must be addressed to the material enclosures, separations, and private appropriations whose forms cohere in the production of capitalist subjectivity. Before we think the prospects of a politics directed to these forms, however, we need to understand how they are recursively imputed to abstract objectivity of capitalist value. Thus, it is to value that I turn next.

Chapter 2: The Spectre of Value

Introduction

The previous chapter introduced the relation between real abstraction and subjectivity, focusing on the theory of real abstraction that underwrites the practical metaphysics of the capital-relation. Moving from the contemporary mediation of computational and informatic forms, I traced abstraction through themes of separation and autonomisation to account for the production of real abstraction in its relation to the abstract individual. The chapter closes by recounting how forms acquired in material practice become habituated to a second nature through which abstract individuation is imputed in a form of necessarily false consciousness.

While value was an important but at times latent concept in Chapter 1, in this chapter I turn to a more specific analysis to consider the role of the value-form in the concretion of capital's abstract conceptual reality. Underlying this reality is a materialism that bridges a mutual production of subjectivity and objectivity to the 'social substance' of value (Marx 1990, 128), a mutuality that produces the effect that subject and object appear separated. In what follows, I start by introducing the Hegelian notion of form-determination as it derives from Marx's early critique of atomism, before further unpacking this through the recursive relations of capitalist circulation and production, to then elucidate the energising negativity of value that spans the social reality of the capital-relation. Throughout, I present the value-form as a crucial axis for concretising the abstractions of capital's metaphysics in the relay

between subjectivity and objectivity. Where it comes to understanding the relation of value to the abstract individual, not only do the ambient, projective qualities of the value-form operate through the modes of personification and performance of economic relations introduced in Chapter 1, but the form-determination of the individual means it is socially constituted as a condition of possibility for the capitalist social formation and reproduced within the structure of value as an end in itself.

Elementary Forms

In the very first sentence of *Capital*, Marx famously writes, ‘the wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an immense collection of commodities; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form’ (Marx 1990, 125). This term, ‘elementary form’ is a transliteration from the original German text, in which Marx describes the singular commodity as capital’s *elementarform* (Marx 1983, 17). We know Marx chose this term deliberately as the entire sentence is rephrased from an earlier draft with new emphasis on the notion of form by the introduction of *elementarform*. In the second draft of *Capital* (see Dussel 2001), the text known as *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, the conceptual implications of form are missing from the opening sentence, instead the individual commodity is described as ‘elementarisches Dasein’ (Marx 1980, 107). The earlier phrasing is rendered in English as, ‘its unit being a single commodity’ (Marx 2010a, 269). Unfortunately, the phrasing of this translation loses some important connotations, not only does it leave out the important elemental implication contained in both German versions, but it elides the specific inheritance of the term *Dasein* from Hegel.

Modern English translations of Hegel usually render *Dasein* as ‘determinate being’, or ‘being-there’ (Arthur 2004, 163; di Giovanni 2010, lxviii). The term itself refers to a kind of appearance that contains obscured determinations, noting that what appears is not all there is. Between the different drafts of *Capital*, Marx is clearly experimenting with terminology that can illustrate certain logical complexities of the commodity, expressing it as a mode of presentation that contains a particular kind of *being*. Shifting the emphasis to the notion of *form* in the term *elementarform*, however, means the commodity is not only a mode of appearance that turns on hidden determinations, but as becomes clear in Marx’s elaboration on value, it is a form that retains these determinations while also being determinate in itself.

The first three chapters of part one of *Capital*, unfold out of the term *elementarform*, suggesting that Marx repurposes the Hegelian notion of ‘form-determination’ [*formbestimmung*] that was important to the critique of atomism in his dissertation (Marx 2010c; Hegel 2010, 460–61). Credited by writers like Issak Illich Rubin, ‘determination of form’ is the medium that expresses the correspondence between various ‘productive relations’ and their ‘social form’ or ‘social function’, giving economic categories like the commodity form their seemingly autonomous function (Rubin 1973, 37–39). Following Rubin, certain strands of Marxist theory take up form-determination as a crucial latchkey for unlocking Marx’s entire critique. Most notably, theorists of the so-called ‘new reading’ of Marx (Bellofiore and Riva 2015; Heinrich 2012) provide insights not too dissimilar from Sohn-Rethel, but oriented instead to the role of Hegel’s logical categories for understanding value as a concrete universal.

Furthering the sense of separation between an undercurrent of determinate relations and the appearance of social forms, the overtones of element and form are complemented by a molecular metaphor that runs through *Capital*. Demonstrating the complexity of movement between the concrete and abstract forms that adhere in the capital-relation, Marx uses cellular forms to paint a picture of the capitalist social formation as a body. Perhaps most famously in comments from the 1867 preface to *Capital*, Marx argues the method of turning abstraction against itself for the analysis of economic forms is necessary ‘because the complete body is easier to study than its cells’ (Marx 1990, 90). Continuing, he explains ‘in the analysis of economic forms neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of assistance. The power of abstraction must replace both. But for Bourgeois society, the commodity-form of the product of labour, or the value-form of the commodity, is the economic cell-form [*Zellenform*]’ (Marx 1990, 90).

Applied to value, the method of abstraction foregrounds an inherent dualism in the ‘twofold nature’ of commodities (Marx 1990, 32) as a paradoxically singular form embodying a physical undercurrent of use-value and the socially divisible form of value (Marx 1990, 152, 166). Between a critical account of atomist physics and the socially mediated form-determination inherent to the capital-relation’s logic of appearance, these ideas figured in the discussion of separation and real abstraction in Chapter 1 by demarcating the transition from a subterranean materiality to the concepts and forms of appearance that disseminate what Balibar describes as a ‘materialism without matter’ (Balibar 2017, 23; Toscano 2014). The armature of this intersection between idealism and materialism is found in the relation between the

commodity object and the value-form of the commodity. While in the former we have the empirical world of objects, what drives them is an all but unseen material force that enters into subjective relations on the one hand and attaches itself to objects on the other. In Marx's own words, 'not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as value' (Marx 1990, 138). Rather the peculiar objectivity issuing from value congeals in the reality of 'subjective activity' (Marx 1993, 104).

Of the insights Marx holds from his investigation of Democritean and Epicurean atomism, perhaps the most important is gleaned from an observation that the necessary *form-determination* of atoms negates any possibility of their isolated and discrete appearance (Nail 2020, 49). Although it still rings with the kind of Hegelian idealism that he moves away from after his critique of Feuerbach (Bloch 1971, 156), in this early work Marx is already working through the contingencies of appearance that will inform his critique of ontological individuality as an abstraction. From the observation that atoms cannot appear as anything in themselves, it follows they must be determined by form. From this, Marx draws conclusions about the logic of appearance in general (Nail 2020, 50). He also infers from this logic that where it comes to 'abstract individuality and self-sufficiency' form-determination can only be a simultaneous repulsion of being presented in an idealised picture of itself (Marx 2010c, 52). Abstract individuality in this light is not the genesis of being but its negation. It 'swerves away' from all being, it is 'freedom from being, not freedom in being' (Marx 2010c, 62). Hence, atomism provides the prototypical formula for the kind of idealist individuation that takes an abstract form as independent in itself:

[...] abstract individuality can make its concept, its form-determination, the pure being-for-itself, the independence from immediate being, the negation of all relativity, effective only by *abstracting from the being that confronts it...where abstract individuality appears in its highest freedom and independence, in its totality, there it follows that the being which is swerved away from, is all being* (Marx 2010c, 50)

Repulsion is taken in exactly this form from Hegel's own analysis of atomism, where *being-for-itself* is premised on a negative relationship of 'mutual excluding' (Hegel 2015, 154). Whether we are considering an individual commodity or the abstract individual, the problem is precisely this: positing individuation as an essential and originary form requires that *being* itself is abstracted from determinate material relations that constitute its condition of possibility. Connecting Marx's critique of atomism to the *form-determination* of commodity relations then, just as the atom has no determination in itself, this argument is echoed in the observation from Marx that the value form of a commodity can only be understood in its relation to other commodities (Marx 1990, 158). And, moreover, that the appearance of the commodity as the *elementarform* is not indicative of a singular form that appears as part of a collection, but a logical form within a network of relations that govern both the 'the immense collection' and the 'elementary form' (Marx 1990, 125).

When it comes to exploring the form-determinations of value in *Capital*, Marx constructs a theory of 'social objectivity' in which objectivity cannot be separated from subjectivity and vice versa (Balibar 2017, 65). Translated through capital, objectivity itself becomes a process of separation, thus the adjacent subjectivity that arises consequently from this social objectivity is experienced as the separation of subject and object. However, the underlying logic can easily be overlooked, thus rendering this abstract appearance as if it were an empirical reality. Similarly, much of the

critique of atomism turns on the gap between ‘objective appearance’ on the one hand, and ‘subjective semblance’ on the other (Marx 2010c, 39–40). Presenting either case *tout court*, leaves one ‘wandering through half the world’ (Marx 2010c, 40), either caught within the blunt empiricism of ‘objective appearance’ or the alienated rationalism of ‘subjective semblance’. Both the discrete commodity-form and the idealist form of individuated subjectivity can be seen in this light, when abstracted from their objective determinations both appear as self-determined forms. In the former value appears to be an inherent property of the commodity, and in the latter the abstract individual appears to be an independent subject correlated to an historically ‘natural individual’ (Marx 1993, 83; 2010b, 105). Both are entangled in the dialectical reciprocity of objectivity and subjectivity and governed by a set of unseen relations, but they appear as forms in themselves.

While form-determination mediates the social function of economic categories in general, atomism is further inflected in the commodity form through its necessary divisibility. Consider how the money form of the commodity, as Sohn-Rethel observes, operates like an atomic substance, a malleable and divisible substrate that enables the commodity itself to remain discrete while expressing both differential quantities and cohering in equivalent states. Such contradictions can only occur because ‘money confronts the mind through the mediation of its form’ (Sohn-Rethel 2021, 44). Marx explains, ‘as a value, every commodity is equally divisible; in its natural existence this is not the case’ (Marx 1993, 141). Herein lies the contradiction embedded in the ‘twofold’ nature of the commodity (Marx 1990, 152). It is simultaneously a distinct material object, and the expression of form of value that is

both quantifiable and equivalent in a certain relationship, thus it is paradoxically discrete and divisible. Divisibility attaches itself to a supposedly indivisible object, as ‘a product of the human brain’ (Marx 1990, 165), thus it emerges in the doublet of objectivity and subjectivity required for exchange. Embodying an inherent divisibility through an individuated form is a necessary property of value, but this principle is only properly realised in the money-form of value, as the generic form that ‘brings the unlimited divisibility of matter into play’ (Sohn-Rethel 2021, 44).

Similar to the way Sohn-Rethel posits the pre-history of real abstraction in the dual invention of money and conceptual thought, Marx’s critique of atomism is given further context when put against the atomists adoption of Parmenidean being as a metaphysical substrate (Seaford 2020, 327). In Chapter 1, I briefly discussed how Parmenides is identified by Sohn-Rethel as inaugurating the form of conceptual thought that obtains in practice of monetary exchange. As Richard Seaford argues, the Parmenidean substrate relies on the divisibility of an abstraction from a unitary substance that mirrors a cosmologised schema of money (2020, 321–24). Common to these early philosophies is a model of dualism that turns on the division between a unitary substance and the abstract determinate being that emerges from it. Crucially, as Seaford explains, intuitions that yield the Parmenidean One, and ‘the multiplicity of appearances’ of atomism, are not created by observation, experimentation, or by logic, instead they issue from the translation of social mediation performed by money (Seaford 2020, 323–24). Or rather, cosmologies invented by a great number of ancient philosophers take the form they do because they are cross-pollinated by social systems mediated by circulation and early forms of monetisation.

The schema looks much the same when translated to the invention of the self-sufficient, individual subject. Seaford charts a parallelism between these cosmologies and the model of individual consciousness the bleeds into the 'isolated self-identical unitary individual' (Seaford 2012, 85), arguing that naturalised individuation inhabits the imagination at the same time that money is transcendentalised. Not only is individualisation an abstraction born of transactional social relations (2012, 86), but we again see the strange fusion of objectivity and subjectivity where 'individual subjectivity is shaped by the new communal measure of the objective' (2012, 88).

Finally, the notion of autonomisation explored in Chapter 1 is also inflected in this pre-history. In the first instance, a contradiction entailed in the appearance of a simultaneously unified substance and its abstraction into a form of being, is intimately bound to a process of 'self-alienation' (Seaford 2012, 96). Further to Seaford's observations on the homology between monetisation and individual subjectivity, the process of abstract individuation mirrors the appearance of the commodity as an elementary form; a kind of subreption that, as Sohn-Rethel argues, 'is cut off from its social origin' such that, 'the abstract intellect emerges with a peculiar normative sense all its own, serving as its "logic"' (Sohn-Rethel 2021, 56). As a cognate of value's autonomisation, the self-alienation of abstract individuality is an operation anterior to thought, abstracted and consummated in the autonomising operations of mind to create the illusion that it originated there.

Insights like these can be traced to forms that long pre-date capital, so might sit awkwardly within an analysis of abstraction within the capitalist social formation.

And yet, to reiterate the case I made in Chapter 1, just as capital's uneven

development is not materially related to a singular cause, its conceptual grounding is unearthed in practices whose tail is often indefinably long. Moreover, the value operations of capitalism are contingent on a particular modality of money as capital, but capital itself has an uncanny ability to absorb, recode and repurpose social forms for the sake of extraction and accumulation, a necessary capacity for the continual expansion of its abstract operation. Moreover, it is because these forms long pre-date the capitalist social formation that we might call them elemental in another sense, as elements integral to the development and extension of capital-relation. As Marx intones, money existed before capital as prerequisite, 'a simpler category' that is developed and 'expressed by a more concrete category' in its form as capital (Marx 1993, 102).

Substance

The imperceptible revolutions of form-determination motivate other metaphors that illustrate the metaphysical operations of capital. For example, Marx famously makes extensive use of gothic imagery throughout *Capital*: the first few chapters in particular are filled with the language of phantoms, spectres, and other ghostly figures. More than a stylistic choice, the language of spectrality is emblematic of the ambient properties and residual elements of value in general that cohere in its operative form, the value-form. Illustrating a seemingly mysterious relationship between value and labour, Marx alludes to an axis of appearance for understanding the exchange-value of a commodity as abstracted from both use-value and 'the material constituents and forms which make it a use-value' (Marx 1990, 128). There is a sense here that in the process of exchange, which *pace* Sohn-Rethel, catalyses the

operation of real abstraction, there exists a relay between two kinds of differentials which are transposed through this axis of appearance into a sort of spectral materialism.

Where it appears in exchange, the commodity form is haunted by the ‘disappearance of the different forms of concrete labour’ (Marx 1990, 128). Rendered independent and inhabited by elements of a common ‘social substance’, the value-form of the commodity, argues Marx, congeals out of ‘quantities of homogenous human labour’ (1990, 128). Here we can recognise a familiar structure, a form energised by an invisible substrate that resonates with the unseen world of atoms. Marx applies this to a specific operation, in this social substance from which the value-form coheres is ‘crystallised’ the oft-quoted ‘phantom-like objectivity’ (1990, 128), or what Michael Heinrich argues is better translated as ‘spectral objectivity’ (2012, 34; 2021, 64).

By rendering the abstract objectivity of value through the concept of ‘substance’, Marx places it within a specific philosophical matrix (Heinrich 2021, 65). Substance is often traced to Aristotle, to the term *hupokeimenon*, from which the Latin term *Subjectum* is derived. For Aristotle, the term references the subject as substance, that which is not predicated on anything but itself, but to which all other things refer (Aristotle 1998, 174). It is worth noting also that Aristotle tends to discuss this subject in the context of matter and form (e.g. Aristotle 1998, 174–76). Thus, in alluding to a substrate of social substance from which a form is determined, Marx evokes the notion of a substrate that passes into certain later understandings of the philosophical subject (Balibar 1994, 2003). We should keep this in mind when considering value’s spectral objectivity, especially in light of the aforementioned

forms and processes of autonomisation and the attendant subjectivising effects that issue from the capital-relation.

Spectral objectivity shades into the logic of appearance and the thematic of autonomisation in the acute imagery Marx crafts to illuminate the trajectory of value through its different forms, from money to commodity to money again, ‘without becoming lost’ (Marx 1990, 255). Value is created by the productive relations from which it is abstracted, however it traverses the surface area of a capitalist social formation that is constantly fed by those same relations and mediated by the form that they take. Value, therefore, circulates through its different modes of existence to appear as if it renews itself. Although, for Marx, the resulting objective force is animated by the totality of the capital-relation, it is only expressed in the appearances of circulation:

Circulation...which appears as that which is immediately present on the surface of bourgeois society, exists only in so far as it is constantly mediated. Looked at in itself, it is the mediation of presupposed extremes. But it does not posit these extremes. Thus, it has to be mediated not only in each of its moments, but as a whole of mediation, as a total process itself. Its immediate being is therefore pure semblance. *It is the phenomenon of a process taking place behind it* (Marx 1993, 255)

In the original German version of the *Grundrisse*, Marx uses the term *Setzen* (Marx 1976, 177–78), which like *Dasein* above, also has a specific philosophical lineage. As Jameson argues, *Setzen* is a particular kind of positing. The way Hegel deploys the term, positing might be described in prefigurative terms as ‘theatrical’ or ‘pro-filmic’, to suggest ‘the effects of a spectacle provided in advance...the illusion of specific depths, the lighting in foreground and background, etc’ (Jameson 2017, 28). Positing,

in this sense, turns on how we think about appearance, not as the kind of idealism that separates representation from objective phenomena, but in the way, Jameson observes, as 'a category of thinking' that once again is determined 'outside or beyond the mind' (2017, 29). For Hegel, this indicates a speculative process as an extension to the representational limits of cognition presupposed by Kant. Marx, on the other hand uses it in a sense that indicates the projective appearances of a process that creates an abstract reality, by turning its back on obfuscated origins, but also by projecting beyond material limits.

Expressing circulation in the terms of being and phenomenology also evokes the latent subjectivity mobilised in the aforementioned 'materialism without matter' (Balibar 2017, 28), a materialism we might call spectral which again relies on the conjunction of the subjective and objective. This is put into context by drawing the latent connotations of subjectivity. Projecting all the properties traditionally associated with idealism, Marx locates the real subject of capital in value's 'occult ability to add value to itself' (Marx 1990, 255). Again, this occult ability bears on the thematic of autonomisation, not only to consider the role of value in autonomising capital, but to bring these things together as a medium of concretion; a mode of experience that takes on the semblance of self-determination precisely because the necessities of life in a capitalist social formation must be negotiated through the mediating effects of value.

Further to the schema of externalisation and return discussed in Chapter 1, in Hegel's account of value the subjective and objective constitute an axis of concretion; value is externalised and returns in its concretisation through money in the act of exchange

(Hegel 1983, 122). For Marx, in turn, concretion describes a process of real abstraction that results from multiple determinations (Marx 1993, 101) through which a concept is 'given in the head, as well as in reality' (1993, 106). Applying the concretion of the concept to form-determination, Marx explicitly invokes Hegel's schema when suggesting the objectivity of value only properly animates the capitalist social formation when it returns to its ground (Marx 1993, 255). Returning to ground in this context means the value-form turns back upon itself to affect the mediations described above, given a life of its own. Marx explains this first through the relation between production and circulation. Under the capital-relation, exchange-value requires that both production and circulation simultaneously presuppose each other, thus 'production... posits circulation and constantly returns from it into itself in order to posit it anew' (1993, 255).

What remains, or rather what is constantly renewed in this process is the 'spectral objectivity' of value described above. As we will see later in this chapter, spectral objectivity is a kind of form without form. A negativity that adheres in the gaps of the capital-relation, it is infused with real objectivity in the moments that value takes possession of things. Without accounting for the return to ground, however, we cannot grasp the operations of value as a determinate, relational form that scaffolds the peculiar subjective objectivity of capital. As Chris Arthur explains, it is the failure to recognise the value-form's determinate role in the system of capital that leads to the mistake of viewing 'the human individual as the originator of value relationships, rather than viewing human activities as objectively inscribed within the value form' (Arthur 1998a, 14). Recognising the form-determination of value is to understand

that capital 'subordinates commodity production to the aim of valorisation and is the real subject (identified as such by Marx) confronting us' (Arthur 1998a, 14; Marx 1990, 255).

Not only does valorisation give the forms of capital the appearance of objectivity, the value-relation transposes this semblance onto abstract individuality, first in the necessary production of economic subjects, and second by making such subjects bearers of value. In the first instance, a form of individuated subjectivity is encoded in the abstract by constituting people as commodities. As Balibar observes, under capital subjects are constituted as a form of value in the first instance by becoming 'owners and sellers of themselves as labour-power' (Balibar 2017, 67). However, as the Endnotes collective argue, the value-form's primary social mediation means, 'the reproduction of individuals and their needs becomes an end in itself' (Endnotes 2010, 94). Taking this up within the ambit of form-determination, a kind of trans-temporal form of individuation bears out where the socially produced individual is both a requisite form for the possibility of commodity exchange, and a form reproduced within a social formation shaped by value (see Amariglio and Callari 1989).

Marx also invokes a kind of spectrality on the other side of the capital-relation, again evoking possession as both ownership and enchantment when considering the role of the capitalist in the circulation of the capital-relation. Marx explains that circulation takes both a simple form via the circulation of commodities for 'the satisfaction of needs' and a more complex one, in which 'the circulation of money as capital is an end in itself' (Marx 1990, 253). Again, 'end in itself' signals the autonomisation process of value, where it acquires no purpose other than to expand indefinitely.

Here, as Heinrich rightly points out, ‘an inversion of means and ends takes place’ (Heinrich 2021, 268). Such an inversion must also inhabit a ‘character’, entering into the form-determination of the capitalist ‘as the conscious bearer of this movement... as capital personified and endowed with consciousness and a will’ (Marx 1990, 254).

Movement

Mapping a spectral doublet of form and possession to autonomisation, value’s objective reality is most obviously concretised by the universal character of money as its ‘finished form’ (Marx 1990, 153). We can carry this further by observing money’s own spectral autonomisation. Physical forms of money could once be seen as a concretising medium of value, but as some have argued, money itself has developed through digital and computational forms of ‘virtualisation’, to become a fluid, automising force (Lotz 2016, 121–22). While this is not a historical novelty, such a development builds on the properties of money that Marx observes in the relationship between value as the ‘automatic subject’ of capital and money as its independent form:

Money and the commodity function only as different modes of existence of value itself, the money as its general mode...the commodity as its particular...it is constantly changing from one form into the other, without becoming lost in this movement; it thus becomes transformed into an automatic subject... it alternately assumes and loses the form of money and the form of commodities, but preserves and expands itself through all these changes, value requires above all an independent form by means of which its identity with itself may be asserted. Only in the shape of money does it possess this form (Marx 1990, 255)

Although the schema of appearance and the image of forms makes these terms important in the first instance, the sense of movement in this passage draws them

together to reinforce the autonomy of value as an animating force. Spectral objectivity is initially energised by a dissimulated source in concrete labour, but as above, attains autonomy through a decoupling process, subsisting in a phantasmagoria that reinforces the objectivity of value through form-determination.

Spectrality as a concept contains the obvious ghostly connotations, but also infers an aesthetic impression of a reflective surface, mirror, or projection as in the positing with the circulating semblance above. Marx offers an analogy of the sensuous and supra-sensible. With the excitation of the optic nerve and the transmission of light an object appears in its 'physical relation', but as a commodity it also appears in its fetish form as an autonomous figure of the mind (1990, 165). A sense of movement again brings these things together, illustrating the value-form's materialisation from a spectral form to its embodiment in which it 'attaches itself to the products of labour' (1990, 165). Value moves through 'modes of existence' in this way, taking on the various logical forms that intermediate its appearance (1990, 255). Marx is constantly stressing movement, circulation, the change of modes and transformations to give the sense that value is a verb and not a noun, it is something that happens not something that exists in itself, a subject not merely substance.

Movement factors into the transition between 'social substance' and appearance in a way that again mirrors the formative logic explored in Marx's critique of atomism. For some, this is because the trajectory of Marx's theory of value can be mapped to developments in physics, from substantialist theories incorporating the conservation of energy to field theories in which energy becomes a relation between things (Pitts 2021, 41). Relational energy offers another version of the spectrality animating the

objectivity of value. Heinrich's reading using 'spectral' instead of 'phantom' or 'ghost' avoids reducing value to something spooky and mysterious and instead directs to the proper subject of 'social substance' (Marx 1990, 128). We might recognise in this the difference between positing fetishism as a mystical form, a property of the necessarily false consciousness discussed at the end of Chapter 1. Moreover, whereas the phantom or ghost tends to appear only in certain circumstances, a contingency of place, the spectral gives the sense of an ever-present underlying field of relations, invoking a further implication of 'spectrum' as a continuum. Here we retain an important aesthetic dimension that shades into the schema of real abstraction where Marx emphasises this substance not only takes 'forms of appearance' that contrast with the relations that are obscured in their background, but they are forms 'reproduced...spontaneously, as current and usual modes of thought' (Marx 1990, 682).

As these forms of appearance and thought traverse the surface of the capitalist social formation, they appear as the supposedly empirical, self-evident categories from which 'bourgeois economics' takes its departure, which is why Marx can claim they are 'forms of thought which are socially valid, and therefore objective' (Marx 1990, 169). Such forms are inscribed within the spectrality of value-objectivity in a way that again brings us back to the discussion of necessarily false consciousness, where in a similar way, objective validity is measured against the standards of 'social existence' (Sohn-Rethel 2021, 161). As Heinrich intimates, value's spectral objectivity trucks with the naturalisation, reification and fetishism that derive from 'an image of reality that develops independently as a result of the everyday practice' (2012, 34). As Marx

himself argues, everyday practice is articulated in the ‘upside-down world’ of ‘social characters and mere things’ (Marx 2016, 897), the very reverse relation that endows capital with the image of its own autonomous, productive power (Marx 1990, 451).

Seen in this light, the value-form is not just an abstract facility of exchange but is constitutive of the distribution of social reality under the capital-relation. Furthering the overtones of a materialism coalescent alongside the matter in which it is incarnated, Arthur argues that spectrality for Marx is more than a simple rhetorical device. It illustrates an underlying ‘metaphysics of value’ through which value gains real *being* as a negative presence (Arthur 2004, 153–54). Value is not simply a representation abstracted from its essence. Departing from this kind of linear empiricism or phenomenal logic marks the key difference in Marx’s analysis of value from the likes of Ricardo (Zelený 1980, 104–7; Arthur 1997; Murray 1993). Rather, the value-form is a representation of the representation, its *being* appears where the relation itself occurs. It is incarnated in material objects but its materialism as such is paradoxically anterior to those objects. Relations, not unlike the schema of atoms, are only inferred in forms of appearance, they cannot appear in themselves, but are inflected in the forms that mediate their existence. In this way the value-form is a negative being, a spectre that moves through the capitalist social formation, paradoxically concretising its social objectivity.

Differential

We can further decrypt the value-form’s peculiar negative *being* by turning to an analogy Marx draws with language. Channeling a kind of proto-structuralism, Marx

comments on the error of equating money directly with language, if only to draw an analogy that relies on a process that depends on language, but remains external to it:

Language does not transform ideas, so that the peculiarity of ideas is dissolved and their social character runs alongside them as a separate entity, like prices alongside commodities. Ideas do not exist separately from language. Ideas which have first to be translated out of their mother tongue into a foreign language in order to circulate, in order to become exchangeable, offer a somewhat better analogy; but the analogy then lies not in language, but in the foreignness of language (Marx 1993, 163)

Value emulates a third term, not language itself or even translation, but foreignness, a mediating concept that retains its 'social character' simultaneously outside the terms and yet integral to the logical form they entail. As Gayatri Spivak observes, underlying Marx's analogy is a sophisticated claim that value is analogous to a linguistic chain of signification where reality is separated from its expression (Spivak 2006, 228); such symbolic forms have no inherent content, they only make sense in their differential relation to other signs. Spivak gets at the expressive quality of the value-form by emphasising that likewise, value is not a form in itself but a form without form that only makes sense when shepherded by a logic of difference. As Marx writes, value 'can only appear in the social relation between commodity and commodity' (Marx 1990, 139).

At the core of these observations is the structural linguistic approach to meaning as a differential system without positive terms (Saussure 2013; see also Karatani 2020). Similarly, value's negativity is both immanent within yet anterior to its signification. It can only be expressed in differential forms through the relation between commodities. Money, as value's generic expression, is often equated with the social

structure of language for this reason, not as language as such, but as the unconscious scaffold that underwrites the sense-making capacities of language. Although it takes particular forms, it always already exists as a mediating structure, immanently articulated but simultaneously outside that structure. Hence, Marx suggests money is a 'social hieroglyphic', and emphasises that it is 'as much men's social product as is their language' (Marx 1990, 167). Note, again, Marx does not designate it as language as such, but chooses a pictorial form of inscription, something in which language can be expressed materially. Taking this further, writers such as Marc Shell (1993) treat money in a parallel with real abstraction to demonstrate how these inscriptive and linguistic qualities of monetary structures are bound together in the production of cultural forms.

Outlining this negative, differential symbology gives further weight to value as capital's underlying mode of transmission. It is not only a means to facilitate the circulation of commodities for capital's expansion, but a symbolic plane that underwrites the concretion of 'forms of appearance' in 'forms of thought' (Marx 1990, 682). Always in the background is a curious interchange between equivalence and differentiation that adheres in the concretion of capital's conceptual reality as two sides of the same coin. Pierre Macherey remarks on how the radical distinction of *value* from *use* appears because 'value is defined only in relation to the entirety of values' whereas use is 'determined simply by its relation to the thing' (Macherey 2015, 209). However, as Toscano points out, the curious reversal in exchange means that, 'the "abstract" activity of equivalence and commensuration is concrete, while use-value becomes a matter of ideal representation, and thus turns out to be abstract'

(Toscano 2014, 1228). Hence, in exchange we have an alternation between the category through which things are differentiated, and the activity through which abstract identification operates. What we should notice here is that equivalence itself is only necessitated by difference.

Macherey illustrates how Marx constructs value as a concept, arguing that value's conceptual ground as a differential relation is constructed as a concrete form of knowledge out of its 'definite material conditions' (Macherey 2015, 208). As we have seen, those material conditions cohere in the concretion of an abstract reality. Like the concept of foreignness offered by Marx above, this concrete knowledge necessarily retains a kind of autonomous existence, instead of being abstracted from a one-to-one relation with a material object, it is a concrete conceptual reality that returns in the other direction.

Furthering the case that the materiality of the capital-relation consists in ideality anterior to the matter that is inflected within it, this conceptual reality is the operation of an abstract universal supported by a recursive grounding. We might formulate this as a kind of cosmological constant that foregrounds the perspectival emergence of the value-form. Evoking Nietzsche's theory of the concept as an 'equation of the dissimilar' abstracting from arbitrary differences (Nietzsche 1989, 249), Macherey argues, 'value is not given, or revealed, or displayed: *it is constructed as a concept*' (Macherey 2015, 203). We can read the conceptual construction of value into the circulatory subsumption of movement explored above, where value is the primary mediator not just as a form but as an idea. Value gains a measure of autonomy as it is concretised, thus Macherey argues the autonomy of the concept

closes the circuit of material practice by producing knowledge on the basis of itself (2015, 208).

Much like Marx's claim of its 'hieroglyphic' nature (Marx 1990, 167), Macherey's analysis of value as a concept marks it as inherently dialectical insofar as it inheres in forms of distinction that operate from a determinate symbolic field. In this material reality, value is constituted as a spectre that can only be observed in the force it exerts or the shadow that it casts. As Macherey puts it, the value-form 'is the phantom that must be expressed to the exclusion of any empirically observable quality, yet it is nonetheless a material reality' (Macherey 2015, 209). Such a force must exert itself in 'a spatiotemporal action', according to Sohn-Rethel, it operates an abstract 'social physicality' that performs 'quantitative differentiation' (Sohn-Rethel 2021, 47). Because value must appear, it appears in forms that obscure its social reality. Most importantly to the central argument of this thesis, these appearances operate through an interchange of separation and individuation that is mediated by a form of negative commensuration.

Value is not a simple relation of one thing to another but a relational *form* that contains within it the determination of all the other relations that make it possible. Yet, it is not the relation that appears but an abstraction from relations that expresses a differentiated form or concept. Such is the logic of the capital-relation more generally: although bound by a relational schema, capital's reliance on abstraction means that relations themselves tend to disappear beneath the forms they determine. This is just as true of the individual as it is of the commodity. As Marx argues, the determinate relations that make up the condition of possibility of value have their

traces extinguished once value is converted into the forms of appearance of capital (Marx 1990, 976). Money, as the quintessential expression of this form is the culmination of this effacing process, which is why Marx describes it as a ‘vanishing mediation’ (Marx 1993, 269). Vanishing mediation is the separation of both form and concept from effaced relations; it is the animating effect that energises capital’s operation of autonomisation. However, it also facilitates the process of individuation within the capital-relation.

Metaphysics

Arthur observes that a common complaint against Marx’s characterisation of value is it veers too far into metaphysics (Arthur 2004, 153). Yet this is precisely the point. Marx is explicit about the fact that he is analysing the metaphysics of value. He openly describes the commodity form of value as, ‘abounding in metaphysical subtleties’ (Marx 1990, 163). The capitalist social formation is structured around the negativity of value as a metaphysical principle. Only by such a reading can we understand how Marx can get from the ‘magic and necromancy’ of commodities to the social validity of forms of thought. As Balibar argues, Marx reconstitutes metaphysics in a theory of ‘social objectivity’ to consolidate ‘the real and imaginary’ in a rational contingency (2017, 65–66).

Arthur argues that a metaphysics of value obtains in ‘an ontological inversion’, through which the value-form ‘gains self-presence’ (Arthur 2004, 153). Precisely because value is a negative form that mediates the drive toward accumulation at the heart of the capital-relation, ‘an increase in emptiness is mistaken for a plenitude of wealth’ (Arthur 2004, 172). Moreover, this manifest lack is what makes the process of

capital accumulation the sublimation of the real into ‘a ghost of itself’ (2004, 172). It is worth considering the depth of what this means. In spite of capital’s historical development through real processes of dispossession, extraction and enclosure (e.g. Chakravartty and da Silva 2012; Gago and Mezzadra 2017; Harvey 2005), it never accumulates as anything other than an intangible excess of emptiness.

At the same time, the immediate experience of capital’s actually existing metaphysics elides the historical realities that underwrite its conditions of possibility, instead presenting the naturalised categories of capital as reality itself. As a corollary, the further capital travels from ‘so-called primitive accumulation’ (Marx 1990, 873ff) the more it must create new differentials to derive this excess, creating yet more separations and new abstractions of difference (e.g. Roediger and Esch 2009; Gilmore 2002). As Marx argues, the circulation of capital cannot ‘ignite itself anew’ but requires evermore fuel for its mediation (Marx 1993, 254–55). As we have seen above, the concept itself is already grounded in a process of differentiation, but in these latter forms of abstraction, difference itself is inscribed within the concrete experience of capital’s social relations. However, like the social substance of value, these abstractions accrete in a parallelism that must be grounded in individual forms.

Such an accumulation of abstractions is integral to understanding capital’s metaphysics of value as part of ‘the inversion of concrete and abstract’ (Arthur 2009, 171). As Arthur observes, ‘value, develops systematically from its more simple and abstract shapes to its most complex and concrete reality’ (2009, 171). Marx initially writes of the ‘almost imperceptible outline’ of the simple form of value as a moment in which the value-form emerges, before unfolding into its appearance as the money

form (Marx 1990, 139). An image of self-actualising appears again where he writes, 'a commodity... appears as the twofold thing it really is as soon as its value possesses its own particular form of manifestation, which is distinct from its natural form' (Marx 1990, 152). The image of value possessing its own form is striking, it folds into an abstract appearance by negating its own determinations, performing its own autonomisation. The simple form of value for Marx appears in a discontinuity of oppositions, between use-value and value within the commodity, with the relation between the commodities of exchange appearing on the surface (Marx 1990, 152).

In this simple form, exchange-value has not yet come to possess a form other than itself. For this reason, the idea must develop through the expanded, relative and equivalent forms before it matures into the general form that provides the support for money (Marx 1990, 152–63). However, the simple form is where we first detect the metaphysical form of value as a pure relation. In the simple form, it is the mediator in itself before it has come to appear in a generic equivalent. The apparitional 'residue' accompanies the transition through forms as an adherent, or what in Hegel's terms would be a logical moment insofar as it becomes necessary to the appearance of the form (Hegel 2015, 125). The spectre here then is the spectre of the idea, or to echo the comments from Macherey above it is the emergence of a concept. It accompanies the thing in the way that the mask is the materialisation of the relation, however here it appears the other way around as the spectre of a thought-form.

As this 'concrete reality' is constituted by the social relations that are inscribed within it, the mediation of value becomes an ever more complex process of self-perpetuation. Together with value's immanent negativity, this self-mediation motivates value-form

theorists to argue that capital has a logical structure that communicates Hegel's description of essence (e.g. Murray 2016, 11; Arthur 2004, 71). In Hegel's articulation of 'the becoming of essence', we recognise many of the attributes of Marx's alchemical structure of the commodity, the inverse appearance of a form, its vanishing mediation and so on. For Hegel, essence is expressed as a 'self-sublating contradiction...a unity immanently negative and absolute' (Hegel 2010, 330), that 'mediates itself with itself' (2010, 326).

As I have already noted, value's essence is pure relationality, so it can only manifest in a form of appearance, it cannot appear 'in itself'. Likewise, in Hegel's formula essence *must* appear (2010, 418), but can only appear in something that is not immediately identical to itself (Murray 2016, 258; Arthur 1998b, 455). For Hegel, essence and appearance remain locked in a dialectical relation to each other, 'essence stands between being and concept, it makes up their middle, its movement constituting the *transition* of being into the concept' (Hegel 2010, 339).

By evoking essence in this way, we also return to Marx's critique of Feuerbach discussed in Chapter 1. Locating a further homology between the value-form and the abstract individual, both illustrate the difference between an essentialised abstraction, and a form conditioned upon an underlying 'ensemble' of 'social relations' (Marx 2010d, 4). Mistaking value as an inherent property of an object would make the value-form consonant with 'an abstraction inherent in each single individual' (2010d, 4), but we know that value is not intrinsic, but a form mediated by, and abstracted from material relations. Hegel's formula for essence then, as it is applied by value-form theorists, aligns to Marx's critique of Feuerbach, where the appearance of

essence is abstracted from the ensemble of relations. Again, echoing the themes of separation and autonomisation, although value is created by an ensemble of relations, as Arthur writes, ‘the value form develops to the point at which, with self-valorising value, it is constituted as a *self-relation*’ (Arthur 2004, 155).

Mining the dialectic of value for its underlying negativity reveals a categorical void that nonetheless exerts its gravitational force on the entire social formation of capital. Understanding this field of negativity means pushing the metaphysics of capital beyond the surface area of real abstraction to consider ‘spectral objectivity’ as a mode of transmission. Returning to the isomorphism between subjectivity and the appearance of capital’s forms, this conceptual transmission relates specifically to the fetish form of the subject that we can recognise in the abstract individual. As Balibar observes, the entanglement of the objective and subjective in capital’s metaphysics means the autonomous effect of commodities is coupled to the subjective mechanism of fetishism (2017, 65). Consolidation between the appearances of capital and the norms of experience is secured in the conceptual circuits of value. Thus, when Arthur argues that ‘human bearers of this structure are reduced to personifications of its categories’ (Arthur 2004, 7) this is an effect that bears on the experience of subjectivity. Articulated in this formula is the categorial mistake of confusing the subject of politics with a figure that coincides with the personification of capital’s categories.

Personification of Persons

Arthur’s arguments on the spectrality of value borrow the language Jacques Derrida employs in his lectures on the *Specters of Marx* (1994). In Arthur’s view, Derrida

overestimates the purchase of his main conceptual innovation in these lectures, namely the idea of 'hauntology', the spectralised inversion of a mediation that does not belong to being, but stands in for it (Derrida 1994, 63; Arthur 2004, 172 n.1). Nonetheless, Derrida's reading of Marx offers a path into the deep associations between language, value, and the animating force of negativity. Derrida observes a spectral dimension in Marx's work that goes beyond the evocative imagery of *Capital*. From the patrimonial spirit in the dedication of his dissertation, the 'genealogy of ghosts' in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, ghosts of idealism in *The German Ideology*, and the famous spectre of communism in *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Derrida suggests 'rich spectrology' motivates Marx's work (Derrida 1994, 130–34).

Staking his entire argument on spectrality, Derrida is understandably critical of translations of Marx that, 'efface the semantics or the lexicon of the specter' (Derrida 1994, 187). Resurrecting these spectres means highlighting an aporia of visibility in Marx's analysis of the relations between value and its appearance in the commodity form, where the value-form comes to negate the *prima facie* simplicity of the commodity (Derrida 1994, 187). On the one hand a ghost haunts the scene of value's non-corporeality, on the other it again illustrates the way value can only cohere in the possession of forms. Furthering the sense of the negativity at heart of capital's metaphysics, Derrida argues Marx's analysis of the commodity form turns on the appearance of 'invisibility itself' (Derrida 1994, 187). Hence, the spectre of value takes shape for Derrida in 'the body without body of this invisible visibility' (Derrida 1994, 187). Invisibility in this sense trucks with the recursions and oscillations of

possession and incorporeality, emphasising the ‘aporetic’, and reflecting a ‘transcendence...not altogether spiritual’ (1994, 189). Derrida uses the languages of animated silhouettes, movement, displacement, allure and so on, to illustrate a presence that is equally not there.

It is interesting to note how Derrida’s deployment of invisibility echoes insights from his one-time teacher, Althusser, for whom the capitalist social formation is a ‘terribly concrete reality’ which is invisible ‘to the naked’ eye, hence abstract (Althusser 2001, 49). Althusser makes this argument in the same text in which he advances his infamous suggestion to neglect the chapters on value when first reading *Capital* (2001, 52), however, only after providing a formula in which we can recognise the same concrete reality prescribed by a mediation of the value-form:

Abstract concepts designate actually existing realities...a concrete reality which certainly exists but which it is impossible ‘to touch with one’s hands’ or ‘see with one’s eyes’. Every abstract concept therefore provides knowledge of a reality whose existence it reveals: an ‘abstract concept’ then means a formula which is apparently abstract but really terribly concrete, because of the object it designates. This object is terribly concrete in that it is infinitely more concrete, more effective than the objects one can ‘touch with one’s hands’ or ‘see with one’s eyes’ and yet one cannot touch it with one’s hands or see it with one’s eyes (2001, 48–49)

What Althusser misses in his reading, however, is while capital’s concepts meet this criterion in general, value is the form *par excellence* of capital’s concrete reality. It is the value-form that provides the interface of capital, value animates the autonomisation that designates this reality. Focusing precisely on the parts of *Capital* that Althusser sets aside, Derrida has value in mind when remarking on the ‘specular’ of reflected light and the ghosting imagery of ‘social and spectral becoming’ that

objectifies the 'human *socius*' in the 'phantasmagoria...between things' (Derrida 1994, 196–97). Images of autonomy, fetishism, and religious representation return in the 'phantasmopoetic' operations of exchange, where the commodity becomes a kind of distorted mirror that returns the 'perturbed reflection' of an unmediated object (Derrida 1994, 199). The circuits of fetishism are activated by the input and output signals of thought and language as they pass through the reflection of the commodity, prompting a riddling phrase from Derrida that inadvertently repeats Marx's formula for real abstraction, setting capital's autonomising effects against, 'a subjective representation...from its head in its head, outside of it inside it, beginning with itself, departing from itself' (Derrida 1994, 199).

Derrida's play on reflection is more than an extension of Marx's own specular imagery. It also echoes Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror-stage in which the infant perceives autonomy in an image that obscures an apparatus of support, 'some prop, human or artificial' to revel in an independence that obscures its own reality (Lacan 2006, 76). Lacan's own theory is founded on the symbolic chain of identification — again differential in nature — in which the appearance of autonomisation is achieved against 'an ambiguous relation' (Lacan 2006, 77). A resonance between Lacan's model and the projection of value's autonomy, particularly in the money form, is no accident. Lacan himself credits Marx as a 'precursor of the mirror stage', precisely through his analysis of value (Lacan 2017, 73). Like the image in the mirror, value is metonymic in that it must presuppose an obfuscated whole to operate as a part; value presupposes both equivalence and value, but functions by 'abandoning a very important part of their meaning' (Lacan 2017, 73).

Derrida's version of the mirror image, however, departs significantly from Lacan's formula in the way the image is presented. First, the disintegrated perception of labour's social reality is lost behind a mirage, and Derrida writes, like a 'vampire' it is 'deprived of a specular image' (Derrida 1994, 195). And second, a dissimulated image animates the autonomisation of the subject by projecting onto the object, 'the autonomy lent to commodities corresponds to an anthropomorphic projection... it breathes the spirit into them, a human spirit, the spirit of a *speech* and the spirit of a *will*' (Derrida 1994, 197).

Although the imagery of projection and autonomy accords with the negativity of value, Derrida at times paints a confused portrait of the exchange process. Derrida's reading focuses on the sections in *Capital* that explore the fetishism of commodities, yet, despite recognising the loss of labour's social reality in the image of the commodity, he does not account for the form-determination of value. Instead he leans heavily on themes of haunting and mourning that at times conflate Marx's historical application with the more technical spectrality of value (e.g. Derrida 1994, 199). Mourning evokes the past in a specific way, mistaking the disjunction in Marx's critique between the naturalising appearances of capital's forms, and the historically multiple determinations on which they are grounded for a desire to erase that history altogether. Further, the mystical application of fetishism alluded to in the symbolic of haunting commits Derrida to a reading of Marx that mistakes fetishism as an effect, and not intimately bound to the form-determination of value.

By failing to distinguish the difference between value in general and the exchange abstraction of the value-form (Choat 2010, 83), Derrida tends to trivialise the

mediation of value as the product of imagination, a mystification that must be read through the theme of haunting, instead of an historically mediated relation that produces these effects. In the background of this is Marx's claim that, 'commodities cannot themselves go to market' (Marx 1990, 178; Derrida 1994, 197). Derrida reduces Marx's account of fetishism into a kind of antiquated totemism. He suggests that the 'guardians' of commodities 'pretend to inhabit these things' (Derrida 1994, 198). Although he recognises the recursive nature of this inhabitation, a kind of latent volition appears when he writes, 'persons are personified by letting themselves be haunted by the very effect of objective haunting' (Derrida 1994, 198). However, if we return form-determination to its proper place in the account of exchange, it is not an 'anthropomorphic projection' (1994, 197) that animates the spirit of commodities. Rather the reverse is true, as Marx writes, people are 'personifications of economic relations' (1990, 178–87).

Nonetheless, Derrida's discussion of spectrality points toward something important in the reduplication of abstraction that produces the abstract veneer of subjectivity within the capital-relation. Spectral inhabitation traverses a redoubled image of the autonomous commodity as it becomes superimposed on the personification of persons in exchange. This reversal and reflection hinges on the secondary layer of the person that appears in exchange, the figure of the persona introduced in Chapter 1. We have already seen how real abstraction coheres in the conceptual traces of exchange, but in this we also see an aesthetic reflection that operates as an adjacent form of recognition (Balibar 2020b, 151). As such, exchange relations go beyond the practice of individuating abstractions, because individuals are the bearers of value, through

this mutual reflection actors can only recognise one another in value. Here, we can grasp the form-determination of actors in practice.

Even if he does not adequately account for the value-form, Derrida's sketch of personification brings us face to face with the metaphysics of self-possession that emerge out of exchange. I will therefore return to self-possession in more detail in Chapter 3, where I detail the nexus of the juridical form, private property and individuation. But here we can foreground the overdetermination of an individuated subject through its appearance in the duality of 'social characters and mere things' (Marx 2016, 897). A transference between personification and reification engenders a subjectivity-effect, the 'subject' appears as a displacement of the relations it obscures. However, this is not a direct relay between the commodity and its bearer in the way that Derrida describes it. Instead it results from the mediating effect of abstraction that translates a structuring field of value into an anamorphic aesthetics. Considering this again in the context of Sohn-Rethel's second nature, we get a sense of how real abstraction always includes an aesthetic dimension.

Returning to Arthur, capital's spectrality turns on the effect of displacement induced by the value-form's negative presence. Once again evoking the movement of externalisation and return to self, the autonomisation of value transits through modes of 'Being — non-being — Being' in a parallel of Hegel's 'absolute negativity' to at first negate itself, then 'take the shape of material production' and 'recover itself in fuller form' (Arthur 2004, 168). Describing this in the terms of subsumption, Derrida's hauntology can be applied in a more narrow sense to illustrate the way abstractions of exchange return to haunt production and remake the world in their image, in a

process that necessarily includes the way value comes to structure the world of meaning. As Arthur argues, the ‘ontological inversion’ of capital’s spectrality estranges meaning, and substitutes the truth of the world for capital and accumulation (2004, 169). Echoing Althusser’s metaphor of hailing, through which subjects recognise themselves in a field of ideological meaning, (Althusser 2014, 190), Arthur further evokes the spectre as an operation of transmission:

The spectre interpellates all commodities as its avatars, an uncanny identity of discernibles, a spectral phenomenology. This negative presence, posited thus, fills itself out through emptying them of all natural being, and forming for itself a spectral body, a body of spectres. In capitalism all is *always* ‘another thing’ than what it is (Arthur 2004, 167)

Translating the personification of persons through this formula, the reverse is also true, this ‘spectral phenomenology’ operates a subjective mode in which all avatars are interpellated as commodities. For Arthur, this spectrality is homologous with Hegel’s phenomenology. In *The Phenomenology Spirit* Hegel’s concept of spirit substantialises itself in the ever-increasing expansion of consciousness (Hegel 2019), resolving itself with nature. Whereas for Marx, the ambient substance of the capitalist social formation is value, a substance that tunes social relations to a divisive second nature. Arthur’s reading of spectrality urges the links between idea and value as the alpha and omega of the capital-relation (Arthur 2004, 79–110). In this light, the spirit of capital’s metaphysics is the practical transmission of a conceptual field, granting ‘objective validity’ to a spectre of ‘the phenomenal subject’ (Arthur 2004, 172). Avatars of abstract individuation are animated in the aforementioned subjectivity-effect because they are constituted within the value mediated field of the capital-relation. As Arthur writes, ‘we exist for each other only as capital’s zombies, its

personifications, masks...a world of spirits is therewith incarnated in us' (Arthur 2004, 172).

Tracing Value

Derrida edges toward the mediating role of value when drawing on an aporia in Marx's account of commodity production, 'use-value is in advance contaminated...pre-occupied, inhabited, haunted by its other' (Derrida 1994, 201). Yet, he commits to a misreading that proposes use-value as the 'correlative of a limit-concept' (1994, 201), thus servicing an allusion that in his efforts to banish the ghosts of exchange Marx ultimately desires the purification of use-value (Derrida 1994, 202; see also Choat 2010, 81). Invoking the idea of purification chimes with criticisms of communism as a hopeless idealisation of the past, a regressive desire for primitivism. Here again, Derrida denies the primacy of the value-relation in Marx's work by suggesting the threshold of capital in the latter's critique of political economy lies in the concept of use-value.

Responding to Derrida, Jameson rightly argues that use-value is not a primitive ground, but also lies 'before us and not behind us' (Jameson 2008, 55). Subjecting the concept to Derrida's projected exorcism would relegate the category to 'a nostalgic survival only if we project it into what we imagine to be a simpler past' (2008, 55). In a strange sense Derrida underestimates the full consequences of arguing that use-value is haunted by exchange, neglecting the proliferation of commodities that have no use at all outside the context of capitalist exchange. Contextualising the future of use-value instead also comes back to some of the themes explored in Chapter 1 to invite further analyses of the deep entanglement of use and

value with the development of informatic and communicative technologies (2008, 56). Crucially, reducing the critique of capital to the purification of use-value neglects Marx's own arguments in this area. Especially when placing similar developments in the context of real subsumption, he argues that the conditions for overcoming the contradictions of capitalism are internal to capital itself (e.g. Marx 1993, 706).

When dealing with real subsumption in the unpublished sixth chapter of *Capital*, Marx writes, 'it is only with the emergence of capitalist production that use-value is universally mediated by exchange-value' (Marx 1990, 951). Placing this question in light of real subsumption reiterates that *form-determination* is the force that profanes production in the image of value. As Simon Choat argues, Marx is more interested in undermining the naturalisations of the value form to instead affirm their social origins (Choat 2010, 82–83). Moreover, he aims to reveal the autonomising effect in which these naturalisations appear as concrete ideas that structure reality, as 'products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own' (Marx 1990, 165). The idea of unveiling the determinate relations that comprise 'the great foundation-stone... of wealth' (Marx 1993, 705) raises the question of whether or not decontamination is a bad thing. Indeed, abolishing the value-form is not a process of purification as much as it is the replacement of a differential mediation that requires the various modes of separation, hierarchy, conflict and so on, by determinate relations that could mould such a 'foundation-stone' to a common purpose.

Nevertheless, Derrida's formula for the haunting of use-value touches on something important by evoking the spectral presence of the other. Although a more effective

application recognises the layers of value, in the first instance the other of the commodity is one step removed — it is the other of the value-form, namely the ghost of value that is both social substance and a mode of transmission. Spectrality here conjures the ‘multiple determinations’ that underwrite the concretisation of value as a category, the contingency of capital’s real nightmare, the historical conditions of its possibility; separation, enclosure, the ‘bloody legislation’, cruel work houses, and the determinations of capital itself as vampiric ‘dead labour’ (Marx 1990, 342).

Reiterating again, once the manifold features of concrete production are abstracted away, only the abstract form itself remains beyond the object it attaches itself to, the other in this sense is not use-value but what remains of everything already used and discarded.

Second, commodity exchange necessarily implies the presence of an other without whom exchange could not take place, the other bearer of the character mask that appears on the stage. Turning this around, the commodity-form becomes the means by which the trace of the other is lost, given over to its synthetic double. A commodity’s transit through ‘inverted phases’ (Marx 1990, 2017), forms and the transmutation of roles is inherently structured by a vanishing other in the alternating ‘equivalent-form’ of money. Again, this occurs in the interchange of materiality and abstraction, of subjectivity and objectivity:

[...] a commodity comes face to face with money; the latter is the form taken by the value of the former, and exists over there in someone else’s pocket in all its hard, material reality. A commodity-owner is thus confronted with a money-owner. Now as soon as the commodity has been changed into money, the money becomes its vanishing equivalent-form, whose use-value or content exists here on the spot, in the bodies of other commodities (Marx 1990, 206)

A further trace appears in this circuit, behind the alternation of inhabited roles in the commodity-form and the money-form, the 'abode of production' (Marx 1990, 279) remains hidden. Yet, as we have already seen, the value-form is the trace that overdetermines all the others. Value remains in the circuit to decipher all future transactions; it is the remainder of a differential form. Derrida proposes a concept of trace as an aporetic lack or absence that is nonetheless present, a structuring principle that subtends his critique of presence: 'the trace is not a presence but the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates itself, displaces itself, refers itself, it properly has no site' (Derrida 1982, 24). On the other hand, the trace is imputed to difference as, 'the very thing that cannot let itself be reduced to the form of presence' (Derrida 2016, 61).

As we have seen, exchange is structured by modes of identity and difference, channelled through the medium of value's negativity. But where Derrida's concept of the trace inadvertently expresses an underlying indeterminacy, the value-form is imputed in *necessary* forms of appearance. As Murray clarifies, 'not only is exchange value the necessary form of value's appearance, money is the necessary end form of exchange-value' (Murray 1993, 48). Although Derrida loses sight of the differences between forms of value at times, his commentary on Marx and spectrality rings true where he points to Marx's description of money as spectral, even echoing Sohn-Rethel's critique of Kant by remarking on the 'basically Kantian' schema of transfigured idealism (Derrida 1994, 55–56). For Marx, however, money is not simply the materialisation of an abstract principle, it is an integral mode of transmission, both to the concrete experience of the capital-relation and for the reproduction of the subjective figures through which that experience is relayed.

Tracing value through money, a generic sociality of value presses back against the general equivalence by what Spivak refers to as a 'chain of displacements' (Spivak 1995, 73). In these displacements the immediacy of money becomes the real experience of something illusory, leading Marx to formulate 'the magical significance' of money's paradoxical nature as both an individuating force and the substance of community:

Money thereby directly and simultaneously becomes the real community, since it is the general substance of survival for all, and at the same time the social product of all. But as we have seen, in money the community is at the same time a mere abstraction, a mere external, accidental thing for the individual, and at the same time merely a means for his satisfaction as an isolated individual (1993, 225–26)

In the 'real community' of money, the contours of social reality are mapped against other significant threads of communal existence. On the back of value's autonomisation, money is both an abstract and concrete substance that communicates a seemingly a priori aesthetic structure (Toscano 2015, 96). Money performs a variety of functions for capital, from the primary functions of measurement, exchange and store of value (Murray 2016, 32) to the more diffuse operations of protocol and command (Galloway 2004). But it is money's arbitration of community through the concretion of value where abstract and objectified social relations are most strikingly real (Marx 2010a, 289).

Money also happens to perform the 'magic' trick of individuation, inscribing the processes of separation and autonomisation in real experience. In money the individual is 'objectified...in a social quality (relation) which is, at the same time, eternal to him' (Marx 1993, 226). Marx describes this inversion through the

movement of value into the money form as ‘the action of society’ that creates the ‘universal equivalent’ (Marx 1990, 180). But in the movement toward naturalisation, the mediation vanishes, even its appearance in coin is paid back as irrelevant (Marx 1993, 226). Only the symbol of money remains, it is autonomised as force that stands in for the relations between people:

What appears to happen is not that a particular commodity becomes money because all other commodities express their values in it, but, on the contrary, that all other commodities universally express their values in a particular commodity because it is money. The movement through which this process has been mediated vanishes in its own result, leaving no trace behind...men are henceforth related to each other in a purely atomistic way (Marx 1990, 187)

Here we return to the metaphor of atomism to detect the image of the trace in the swerve of abstract individuation in the way it was discussed earlier in this chapter. Marx is continually evoking the lost traces that confirm ‘capital automatically valorises itself’ (Marx 2016, 558). But we also find support for Derrida’s notion of the trace in the concept of the vanishing mediator. If the trace disappears it does so most effectively where real subsumption liquidates the distinction between social forms of value, equating the value of anything through the value of money. For Marx, real subsumption occurs when production is conditioned by the valorisation process (Marx 1990, 1021). Updating this today means again considering the role of computation and communicative technology to see how real subsumption has threaded capital’s forms into the codification of informatic systems, and the technological mediation of social life (Beller 2021, 127; Parisi 2019, 102). Derrida foreshadows some of this through the lens of spectrality, owing to his annexation of semiotics to a system of writing and difference, ‘the differential deployment of

tekhne, of techno-science or tele-technology...obliges us more than ever to think the virtualisation of space and time, the possibility of virtual events whose movement and speed prohibit us...from opposing presence to its representation' (Derrida 1994, 212; see also Jameson 2008).

Derrida raises the spectre of undecidability, but as we have already seen, under the capital-relation this negative presence in the real subsumption of information and technology is traced to a hypertrophy of the value-form. Value's autonomy is expressed in the mumbling 'language of commodities' and projected into a 'sublime objectivity' (Marx 1990, 143–44). On the surface, the metaphor of the 'sublime' takes in the chemical process that resolves solid matter into its vaporous form, but Marx again renders this formula in the context of thought and expression (1990, 144).

Distilling the sublime into the manifold implications of transcendence on one side and a subliminal unconscious on the other, the diffuse properties of sublime objectivity traverse the materiality of capital's spectral metaphysics.

Invoking the sublime in this way also puts us in the register of another famous Kantian category, the sublime as a purely aesthetic form of self-transcendence (Kant 1987). Theorists like Kojin Karatani (Karatani 2003, 214–15) and Todd McGowan (2016, 219) have attempted to reconcile the Kantian sublime with Marx through money and fetishism respectively. However, these analyses hinge on a reading of sublimity capacitated by dis-interest, or the transcendence of self-interest in the sublime object, whereas I want to argue 'sublime objectivity', as Marx intended it, mobilises a transference and subsequent recognition of an abstract form of self-interest. It is not simply the projection of self-interest on to the object, but the

creation of a real abstraction of the self through which self-interest is realised. On the one hand, sublimity registers in a relay between the appearance of the value-form's autonomy and the reflection of personified, individuated subjectivity, while on the other hand it enters into the 'real presence' effected by the ambience of informatic and communicable forms of value.

Here we can return to Derrida's formula in which commodities are imbued with the 'the spirit of a *speech* and the spirit of a *will*' (Derrida 1994, 197). In the appearance of an abstract form, we are concerned with a sequence of projection on the one hand, and the underlying cipher for transcoding that sequence onto real bodies on the other. Value's signification bleeds into the oscillations of everyday life where the language of value encounters sublime objectivity both in its communicable, autonomous form, and in its latent condition of understanding. Again, Marx flirts with this point with the analogy of the 'social hieroglyphic' discussed above. He writes, 'the characteristic which objects of utility have of being values is as much men's social product as is their language' (Marx 1990, 167). If the abstractions of capital and value provide the armature for the kind of computational and informatic forms explored in Chapter 1, it is on the back of this linguistic sublimity.

Explorations by writers such as Jean-Joseph Goux (1990) and Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (1975) indicate a saturation of value in structures of thought and cultural production that goes beyond mere mimicry or mimesis of capital's forms. All of these drive at the precipitous collapse of the distinction between the value of anything in general and the value-form as such. Spivak's comments in her essay, 'Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value' are prophetic in this regard: 'the complicity between cultural

and economic value-systems' she writes, 'is acted out in almost every decision we make' (2006, 229). Coming back to the object of real abstraction proper, it is more important than ever to understand the way this convergence is grafted onto analyses that tend to confuse for ontology the appearance of forms that stand in for one. Avoiding the trap of indeterminacy means understanding the value-form as the real motor of capital's separations. As Arthur writes, 'the fault is in reality; hence the needed critique is not a critique of a false view of the world, but one that moves within the object itself, granting its objective validity, epochally speaking: in the society of the spectre the false is *out there*' (Arthur 2004, 172).

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have considered the value-form as a mode of concretion for the practical metaphysics of the capital-relation. Much of this turns on the analysis of value as a 'social substance' as the spectral medium for the concrete conceptual reality of the capitalist social formation. Situating the abstract individual within capital's value mediated objectivity we start to get a picture of the form-determination of the individuated subject. It is not simply that the individual subject is a reflection of the commodity, but individuated subjectivity is constituted within the concrete social conditions that are mediated by the value-form. On the one hand, this follows observations discussed in Chapter 1, where Sohn-Rethel's conception of the 'practical solipsism' arises from the individuation and separation of actors in an exchange society. Value-objectivity, however, provides the screen upon which the personifications of exchange are projected. A recursive relation, the value-form is

externalised in the process of autonomisation, then returns to affect a determination of the very relations that have established it as a form.

Value, permeates the capitalist social formation in this way, shaping an ever-cascading accumulation of effects. The culmination of these effects is a corollary of the process Althusser (2015) describes as the 'society effect', namely the production on an individual effect. For Althusser, the 'society effect' is capital's constitution of 'the concrete, conscious, or unconscious relation of the individuals to the society as a society' right down to 'forms of social consciousness' (Althusser 2015, 68). My argument is that the individual effect is a concretised form-determination of the individual from within the value-objectivity that makes such a society effect possible.

Throughout this chapter I deploy the idea of spectrality as a metaphor for the metaphysics of value. On one level, the image of the spectre reiterates that value has no objectivity in itself, it is an abstract non-object without matter of its own (Marx 1990, 138). On a second level, the concept of the spectre reveals the obverse relationship between the value-form and possession, one that squares with the sense of habit and second nature discussed in Chapter 1. Here we find the notion of a subject that is possessed by forms of value. Marx redeploys the logical process of essence and appearance from Hegel to demonstrate how value must take a form other than itself. In so doing, value coheres out of a conceptual field to inhabit both persons and things. Thus, on the back of the autonomisation of value and the subsequent form-determination of social relations, the separated and individuated subject is not only the bearer of value relations but is reproduced as an individual out of the necessity capital's limitless expansion. Tracing value through the alternations of

negativity and possession, the abstract individual becomes a complementary form-determination, thus the capitalist social formation is effected in the dual form-determinations of value and the individual.

Chapter 3: Properties of the Subject

Introduction

The previous two chapters concentrated on a theoretical grounding for decrypting the production of individual subjects via the lens of real abstraction. Starting with the surface area of modern computational and informatic abstraction, I worked through the themes of separation and autonomisation to account for a general relation between abstraction and the individual in Chapter 1, before moving in more detail to consider the concretion of capital's abstract conceptual reality via the value-form in Chapter 2. Both chapters were concerned with the interrelation of capital's categories and forms with the figure of the abstract individual. By emphasising the concretion of value objectivity, however, Chapter 2 moved towards a consideration of the forces and effects that constitute the individual as real abstraction.

Building on the arguments around concretion, this chapter now moves beyond value to consider two further vectors of abstraction that bear on the production of the individual within the capitalist social formation, namely the legal-form and private property. Mapped to the logic of overdetermination at the outset, reciprocal relations of juridical ideology and accumulative property relations move in lockstep with the development of the capital-relation and the forms of subjectivity.

This chapter begins by discussing the logic underpinning the appearance of the natural individual that forms the basis of classical economics, liberal and social contract theories, as criticised by Marx. Working through Marx's methodological

innovation in more detail, I first outline an aspect of Hegel's logic adapted by Marx to illustrate the recursive nature of concretion, before introducing the concept of overdetermination. What follows, is an account of different genres of abstraction that converge on the individual, first through the symbology of juridical forms, and then through the conjunction of enclosure and private property mapped to an ethic of improvement that echoes into the present day. Working with Balibar's interrogation of Locke, I examine how these forms that cut across the formalisation of individual subjectivity can be traced to further practices of abstraction to overdetermine the individual as a form.

Natural Individual

Previous chapters have treated the connection between the commodity and the individual as forms of thought that relate to modes of practice. We can also read this in the other direction to unpack the objectification and naturalisation of concepts (Marx 1993, 83–111). Certain strands of thought take concepts like the individual as *a priori* forms because capital operates through a suspended temporality through which it naturalises what it claims as already natural. Keeping in mind the process of form-determination, by understanding how this logic works we can work through social practices that overdetermine the individual as a real effect of the abstract forms that subtend capital's autonomised second nature. Starting with the naturalised individual, I begin this chapter by anatomising the obscured logic that shapes both the abstract forms and overdetermined reality of individuation.

For Marx, blindness to the historically determined social relations that underwrite the appearance of economic forms leads classic liberal economists like John Stuart Mill

(e.g. Mill 1884) to misconceive an ahistorical natural order in the extractive relations of bourgeois ideology (Marx 1993, 86). Historically mediated phenomena like the separation of production and circulation, the naturalisation of private property, and the self-determined individual are presented *inter alia* by economists like Mill as ‘encased in eternal natural laws independent of history’ (Marx 1993, 87).

Naturalising the concepts of economics in lieu of their determinant relations, for Marx, means ‘bourgeois relations’ can be ‘smuggled in as the inviolable natural laws on which society in the abstract is founded’ (Marx 1993, 87).

Keyed to these ostensibly ‘natural laws’ is the essentialised individual I introduced in Chapter 1. Marx argues the idea of the naturally occurring, independent individual is an ideal projected into the past, a notion used to support the theory of human nature advanced, not just by Mill, but by other economists like Adam Smith and David Ricardo (Marx 1993, 83). A chimera of the Enlightenment, the naturally occurring individual subject is advanced *a priori* as the basis for philosophies of natural law, to underwrite speculations on individualised production, and scaffold theories of the social contract. Marx argues that theories which bring ‘naturally independent autonomous subjects into relation and connection by contract’ are an ‘aesthetic semblance, of the Robinsonades, great and small’ (Marx 1993, 83).

Allegories of the isolated individual that play into the mythology of autonomous agents of history are advanced based on an abstraction that is created by the very history it elides. Marx in turn takes his point of departure from ‘socially determined’ individuals. What the idealisms of economists and social contract theories don’t realise, argues Marx, is that the ‘isolated individual’ held up as a natural agent of

history is not in any way natural, but a standpoint of ‘the hitherto most developed social relations’ (Marx 1993, 84). Addressing this standpoint is a problem writ large throughout Marx’s work in general. For instance, in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, he criticises Proudhon’s vision of marketised individual sovereignty for naturalising an ideological fiction erected within the metaphysics of political economy. Proudhon, argues Marx, holds things ‘upside down’, and in so doing perceives ‘nothing but the incarnation’ of economic categories (Marx 2010b, 165).

At the heart of Marx’s critique of Proudhon is an assumption about the abstract equality of workers as individuals (Marx 2010b, 143). Proudhon’s political program is an idealist paradigm constructed on the back of a naturalised individual. Taking an abstraction as his point of departure, Proudhon does not interrogate the conditions from which these abstractions arise. Underlying these criticisms is the claim that Proudhon follows Hegel in reducing the movement of everything to ‘applied metaphysics’ (Marx 2010b, 164). Proudhon, writes Marx, ‘understands very well that men make cloth, linen or silk materials in definite relations of production. But what he has not understood is that these definite social relations are just as much produced by man as linen, flax, etc’ (Marx 2010b, 165–66).

These criticisms are not only important for uncovering the metaphysical logic that goes into naturalising the individual, but they should also be positioned within Marx’s critique of Hegel. Escaping ‘applied metaphysics’, Marx instead aimed to construct a materialism engaged with the production of a practical metaphysics that works in the other direction (Marx 1990, 102). However, this does not stop Marx from making use of Hegel’s logic. As we have seen in the preceding chapters, where economic forms

operate as concepts their precise determinations evaporate behind the abstractions that appear in their place. However, the paradox embedded in these forms is that they are determined by the historically mediated conditions that create capital, but later subsumed as actually concrete forms that become further determinants in themselves.

Marx makes this point by demonstrating how historically determined forms common to the development of all forms of production are established by the abstract rationality of economics as if they were eternal. Instead, he argues, ‘the so-called *general preconditions*’ of bourgeois economics are made up of abstractions, they are ‘abstract moments with which no real historical stage of production can be grasped’ (Marx 1993, 88). These comments are underwritten by the structure of Hegel’s logic (Uchida 1988, 18–27). For Hegel, ‘abstract moments’ have a specific meaning, they are integral to ‘the logical domain’ which comprises the abstract understanding, dialectical negativity, and speculative rationality:

These three sides do not constitute three parts of logic, but are moments of every properly logical content [*Momnente jades Logisch-Reelen*], that is to say, of every concept or everything true in general. They can all be brought under the first moment, i.e. that of the understanding, and thus separated and kept apart, but in this way they are not considered in their truth (Hegel 2015, 125)

Abstraction remains a necessary part of thought for Hegel, but where thought is suspended in the abstract moment — where abstractions themselves are mistaken as empty universals — understanding is trapped in the immediacy of ‘reified thinking’ (Jameson 2017, 1–5). Preparing the ground for the elaboration of ‘logical content’, Hegel maintains an abstract universal is one-sided insofar as it exists in an ‘abstract

relation to itself' (Hegel 2015, 122). It follows from this suspended immediacy that one cannot take an abstraction as truth in itself:

[...] immediately knowing the *being* of external things is deception and error, and that in the sensory realm as such there is no truth; rather, the *being* of these external things is purely contingent, transitory, a *semblance*, *i.e.* that they...have a concrete existence that is separable from their concept, their essence (Hegel 2015, 124)

We might recognise this logic for its application by Marx to abstract individuality in his critique of atomism. Keeping in mind the natural individual as an abstract moment, it is worth pointing to the specific way Marx uses this logic. The material grounding of these abstract moments is not simply structured in thought, but operative within the practical metaphysics of the capital-relation. Although 'abstract moments' are equated by Marx as products of the mind, if we come back to the mode of concretion outlined in Chapter 2, we observe how they issue from a concrete conceptual reality in which they become determinate elements. Advancing what he took to be the key difference between his own application of the dialectic and Hegel's, Marx gestures again to the problem of his standpoint when he argues 'Hegel fell into the illusion of conceiving the real as the product of thought concentrating itself' (Marx 1993, 101). Although he concedes to Hegel the method of 'rising from the abstract to the concrete', as discussed in Chapter 2, the key for Marx lies in understanding how the concrete coheres out of a determinate multiplicity. For Marx, 'concrete is the concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse' (Marx 1993, 101).

Crucially, the distinctive way capital mobilises abstract moments is to treat them as real concepts that have their own truth content (see Hegel 2015, 124), which in turn

reinforces the real effects of abstraction. Marx's adaptation of Hegel's logic demonstrates an underlying rationality intersected with the evolution of capital and the ideas that support it. But this rationality is not the simple advance of ideological content, it is the effect of abstract moments enunciated in the relay between the historical mediation of material practice on the one hand, and the inscription of the resulting conceptual reality back into the concrete relation from which abstractions are derived. With this in mind, we can decode the iteration of concrete categories that emerge from lived abstractions:

The same men who establish their social relations in conformity with their material productivity, produce also principles, ideas and categories, in conformity with their social relations. Thus these ideas, these categories, are as little eternal as the relations they express. They are historical and transitory products. There is a continual movement of growth in productive forces, of destruction in social relations, of formation in ideas; the only immutable thing is the abstraction of movement (Marx 2010b, 166)

This formula, 'the abstraction of movement' continues to be important for Marx. It brings us back to the locomotion animating capital, feeding the effect Arthur describes as 'fluidity' that kindles the relation between capital and real abstraction (Arthur 1998, 116). In Marx's account of determinate multiplicity, the individual forms concentrated in this movement are subject to ever new groundings, they return from their abstract forms to take up a reality of their own. Parsing this through the logical structure outlined above, as Arthur argues, the circuit of capital moves through its 'abstract moments', grounding itself in the concrete conceptual reality by 'supervening upon them in its movement through them' (Arthur 1998, 116). Looking upon the natural individual as one such abstract moment, the abstract figure of the

individual passes through the oscillations of capital's value mediations not only as real appearance, but as a conceptual reality that is acted out in forms of practice that reinforce it as a genuinely real effect of capital's objective reality. I want to argue that the individual is not simply reproduced within a system of needs that enforce modalities of isolation and independence. The individual is a form-determination, both determinate and determined within the social practices and relations that orbit individuation.

The circuits through which the abstract individual passes are many and varied, which in turn means the individual is not naturalised in any particular way. Instead, the individual subject is overdetermined by the variegated practices in which individuation is lodged as a form. We can think of overdetermination with a definition from Freud, for whom the analysis of dreams uncovers a multiplicity of 'dream-thoughts' that converge at intersections of representation (Freud 2008, 216). In Freud's usage, overdetermination is categorically concerned with appearance, it is a methodological concept bearing on the interpretation of symptoms. An image of a dream-thought represents a multiplicity of underlying symptoms that appear in a seemingly singular effect, 'each element of the dream-content turns out to be overdetermined, to be represented many times in many ways' (2008, 216).

Overdetermination bears further on the relation between the abstract and the concrete outlined above if we look to how Althusser deploys the concept for his own resolution of the difference between Hegel and Marx (Althusser 2005a). Although Althusser invokes the concept as an attempt to divorce Marxism from Hegel, it has been well documented that his intervention is based on a narrow reading (Montag

2013, 29–30), and even reproduces key elements of Hegel’s own system (Hamza 2015, 282; Žižek 2008, 45). Adopting the term from Freud, Althusser adapts overdetermination to a reading of Marx’s methodological claims, to advance an ‘internal principle’ (Althusser 2005a, 102–3) that arises from the ‘multiple and uneven determinations’ of a complex whole (Althusser 2005b, 195).

Overdetermination, for Althusser, sutures the co-existence of uneven temporalities, displacements and contradictions that enter into the process of concretion (Sotiris 2021, 34). Distilled into a formula, the concept expresses ‘the reflection in contradiction itself of its conditions of existence’ (Althusser 2005b, 209). Again, this claim highlights certain ironies in Althusser’s neglect of value with a formulation that echoes the schema of form-determination, which comes from Hegel in the first place.

Overdetermination as a concept retains an important efficacy for framing the understanding of the individual subject as a form that paradoxically emerges from the effacement of its own determinations only to become determinant in itself. Mapping the elliptical development and uneven temporalities of different categories of abstraction to the overdetermination of the subject makes it possible to view the form-determination of the individual as a complement to the form-determination of the value-form. A recursive logic of overdetermination subtends the appearance of abstract moments as they are first naturalised, and then fed back into the logic structures that draw upon that naturalisation. Out of this, a so-called ‘natural individual’ is indexed to a multiplicity of real practices that the philosophical and economic tendencies outlined above take to evolve from the actions of the very individuals these relations create. Abstract insofar as they operate as forms of

thought, they nonetheless develop out of historically mediated processes, and become ever more real as these forms of thought pass into dominant, ideological modes.

Juridical Form

We start to get a sense of the extent to which the individual subject is overdetermined by the forms and concepts of capital by considering the imbrication of the modes of abstraction explored in the previous chapters with legal ideology. Juridical systems that co-evolve with capital and the liberal state are kindled by a legal form that resonates with the rationality and symbolism of capital's forms. We see this resonance taken up in different trajectories of Marxian philosophy. Balibar claims, albeit reductively, that Marx's philosophical legacy diverges in two particular directions (Balibar 2017b, 56). The first, a corollary of real abstraction, orbits the idea of reification exemplified in the work of Lukács (1990). Reification is a standpoint from which the analysis of generalised commodification is extended through the social formation to include not just all manner of activities, but consciousness itself (Lukács 1990, 93).

The second current runs through theories addressed to the symbolic domain of language, inscription and other transmissive activities that analyse 'the mode of subjection implied in the process of exchange' (Balibar 2017b, 56). It is this trajectory that brings us back to the discussion of language from the end of Chapter 2, one that in some ways runs parallel to Michel Foucault's thesis privileging juridical forms as the instrument for the development of 'types of subjectivity, forms of knowledge, and, consequently, relations between man and truth' (Foucault 1997, 4). Foucault's work in the political domain is notable for his treatment of liberalism as a form of political

reason (Foucault 2008), but where Foucault more often than not relegated analysis of economic structures to the analysis of discourse, Balibar outlines how theorists like Evgeny Pashukanis (2002) and Jean-Joseph Goux (1990) articulate a symbolic structure common to both the economic and juridical spheres. Complementing the concrete conceptual reality of value, this structure transposes a mode of equivalence adjacent to the fetishism of commodities onto the social circuits and structures of meaning:

The structure common to economic and to juridical (and moral) fetishism is *generalised equivalence*, which abstractly and equally subjects individuals to the form of a circulation...It supposes a *code* or a *measure* — both materialised and idealised — before which ‘particularity’, individual need, must yield. It is simply that, in the one case, individuality is exteriorised, becoming an object or value, whereas in the other it is interiorised, becoming a subject or will (Balibar 2017b, 72)

In Pashukanis’ (2002) version, juridical structures are predicated on the evolution of a legal form that retains an isomorphic relation to the commodity form. Echoing Marx’s opening line in *Capital*, Pashukanis writes, ‘in as much as the wealth of capitalist society appears as “an immense collection of commodities”, so this society itself appears as an endless chain of legal relations’ (Pashukanis 2002, 85). Pulling on the elemental thread deployed by Marx, and discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis, Pashukanis spins the image of the cell-form of capital into the appearance of the legal form. Like the commodity-form, argues Pashukanis, ‘the legal relation is the cell-form of the legal fabric’ (Pashukanis 2002, 85).

Further illustrating the logical homology between commodity and law, legal relations cohere in the formalisation of rights similar to how Marx describes economic concepts

as the ‘forms of appearance’ of capital (Marx 1990). Just as the concepts of capital appear naturally occurring from the point of view of liberal political economy, so legal rights and their ensuing norms appear natural from the point of view of the law (Pashukanis 2002, 85–86). Pashukanis presents the legal form as a kind of Archimedean point for the liberal subject (2002, 115), not simply a means for protecting class interests or advancing bourgeois ideology but as a mechanism through which the subject itself is abstracted from the social relations of production and placed in the context of a dispute or conflict of interest (Miéville 2005, 86; Pashukanis 2002, 93). The pretence of the legal domain’s autonomy from economic relations means that the subject’s sense of autonomy is redoubled by becoming the bearer of relations that appear to be outside the sphere of capital, while remaining contingent on interests that are internal to it (Pashukanis 2002, 93).

Much like the spectral capacity of value, this duplicating modality of abstraction instils in the legal form an autonomy that takes on an apparitional character.

Pashukanis writes, ‘the legal subject acquires a double in the shape of a representative, and himself attains the significance of a mathematical point, a centre in which a certain number of rights is concentrated’ (Pashukanis 2002, 115). First, we see the parallels with value here, where the law attributes ‘properties’ to individuals (Balibar 2017b, 74). But rendering the ideal materiality of the individual subject as a mathematical form also hints at the continuity between an ascriptive legal subject and the figure now transposed and codified in the computational forms explored in Chapter 1. Indeed, various theorists have pointed to the representative form of the subject as a container for the figure we now refer to as a user (e.g. Bratton 2015, 115;

Hu 2015, xvii), which in itself points back through the circuits of value and the mediation of machinery to another way the category of use is subsumed in the circuits of value.

Juridical fetishism, moreover, mirrors the abstractions generated in both production and exchange to further inscribe the abstract individual in a structure that modulates individualisation as a real effect. It is not simply that individuals misrecognise themselves in ideology, but the interlocking relation of capital's forms with the social institutions, practices and norms that coalesce around the legal structure mean individuation necessarily acquires a concrete reality. It is granted a rational coherence within the symbolic structure. Echoing the discussion on Derrida and the performative animation of exchange in Chapter 2, Balibar intimates that much of this coherence owes to an 'economico-juridical' relation that relays the symbolic operations of exchange into an alternation between possession and will:

Just as individual commodities seem by nature to be bearers of value, so individuals engaged in exchange seem by nature to be bearers of will and subjectivity. Just as there is an economic fetishism of things, so there is a juridical fetishism of persons. In reality these are one and the same thing because the contract is the other side of the exchange and each is presupposed by the other. The world lived and perceived on the basis of the expression of value is, in reality, an economico-juridical world (Balibar 2017b, 71–72)

Here, Balibar draws on Marx's own exposition of exchange as a process overdetermined by two relations, the juridical and the economic. Marx writes, 'the content of this juridical relation (or relation of two wills) is itself determined by the economic relation' (Marx 1990, 178). However, where it comes to the legal domain, the expression of form is translated from the forms of identity, independence, and

equivalence, and mediated by the value-form into the ideological forms of 'freedom and equality' as properties 'attributed to individuals by law' (Balibar 2017b, 74). Again, we see how forms of equivalence and forms of differentiation are two sides of the same coin. Just as value is attached as a particular attribute of a commodity, so the legal form is attributed to distinct instantiations of abstract rights or principles (2017b, 76).

Looking at this in more detail, a double determination of the individual subject exists where the abstract relation collapses into a perceptual object across the complimentary practices of law and exchange, but as social forms they appear together in the exchange-relation. Premised on an abstract unity of appearance, these determinations are discharged in the formal imagery of the legal-form as a real relation translated into a structuring abstraction that communicates particularity and universality in spatiotemporal practice (Sohn-Rethel 2021, 28). We also start to recognise overdetermination when we consider that the subject reinforced within contractual relations is contingent on a form it is somehow implicated in creating. Such an apparent paradox can be illustrated by its parallel in theories of the social contract, where the individual is a precondition for the contractual process that is the very condition for granting individuality (Althusser 1972, 126–28; see also Toscano 2020, 171).

Teasing apart this double determination, we recover an outline of the naturalised individual, which for Marx, in his early writings was already reflected in the formation of the bourgeois political state. In the critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, and in *On the Jewish Question*, Marx foreshadows the critique of capital by

analysing the mediation of the political state as the ‘dissolution of civil society into independent individuals’ (Marx 2010a, 167). What results is the separation of an abstract ‘allegorical, juridical person’ from the naturalised, individuated ‘egoistic man’ (Marx 2010a, 167).

Driving at a hidden metaphysics that forms the bedrock of the logic of the state, Marx argues ‘the political revolution resolves civil society into its component parts without revolutionising these parts’ (Marx 2010a, 167). Animated by a projection of religious abstraction onto the political form, the secularism of the state is an intermediary in the liberation of man, thus Marx argues, ‘all emancipation is a reduction of the human world and relationships to man himself’ (Marx 2010a, 168). Iterating through abstract and concrete forms, Marx describes a subject individuated within concrete relations that are reinforced by an ensuing abstract subjectivity:

In his most immediate reality, in civil society, man is a secular being. Here, where he regards himself as a real individual, and is so regarded by others, he is a *fictitious* phenomenon. In the state, on the other hand, where man is regarded as a species-being, he is the imaginary member of an illusory sovereignty, is deprived of his real individual life and endowed with an unreal universality (Marx 2010a, 154)

Later Marx translates these forms of subjectivity from the analysis of civil society and the political state onto the mechanics of capital. Abstract subjectivity is part of the orthopraxy of fetishism, spectrality and religious abstraction common to both civil society and capital. Whereas in the early texts secularisation is observed first through a nominal dissolution of religion in the state form that emphasises forms of alienation, in the analysis of capital’s autonomisation and the resulting objectivity of value these are shaped into a more fundamentally pervasive ‘religion of everyday life’

(Marx 2016, 897). Marx often deals with the forms of ideology that correlate to legal forms in his earlier writings. The allegory of religion is demonstrated as a form of idealism insofar as the formalised legal subject is transposed from the abstractions of natural law and the mythology of the individual onto a secularised inscription of those beliefs. Translated to the capital-relation, the fetish forms remain, but these forms become determinant within the practical metaphysics of the capital-relation.

Reflecting on how this feeds into the logical structure explored at the beginning of this chapter, the history of law itself shows how juridical ideology is overdetermined by the multiple temporalities of the legal form that traverse the capitalist social formation. At once immanent to the exchange relation, juridical abstraction is both historically anterior to the formalisation of capital and internal to the mechanisms that expand the capital-relation through the dispossessive regime of accumulation that underwrites colonialism (Bhandar 2018). First, the concept of the natural individual that Marx criticised for belonging to the ‘unimaginative conceits of the eighteenth-century’ (Marx 1993, 83) is invested with the conceptual weight of its own pre-history. By this I mean, drawing a parallel with the connections with Greek philosophy and money (Seaford 2012; Sohn-Rethel 2021; Thomson 1972), a history of the legal form can be traced to the designation of things and the administration and performance of personhood found in Roman law (Pottage 2004; Esposito 2012).

On the other side of this history, juridical ideology is freighted with the categories and concepts naturalised by economics to establish the legal form and the value form as the double-sided armament of ‘so-called primitive accumulation’. As Marx points out, only in the brute materialism of colonial expropriation do the ‘conditions exist to

turn a social contract from a dream into a reality' (Marx 1990, 934). The violence on which 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey 2005) depends is overwritten and internalised, recoded by inverted forms that champion what Marx describes as 'the eden of the innate rights of man...the exclusive realm of Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham (Marx 1990, 280).

Improvement

Pashukanis has been criticised for constructing a limited, even idealist conception of the law, and for applying an image of the calculating and exchanging capitalist that cannot account for the range of different subjections and types of property relations that traverse the economico-juridical field (Hirst 1979, 99–100; Bhandar 2018, 100). Brenna Bhandar notes that a nuanced application of the subjective figure to specific colonial settings makes clear a dialectical technique that, 'presumed not only the existence of the abstract individual proprietor but an abstract figure of the Native whose lands were open for appropriation' (2018, 100). Here, it is important to reflect again on the form-determination of the abstract individual as it relates to concrete situations. The transmission of economico-juridical logic means regardless of how legal relations coalesce, or via what modalities subjection concentrates, both the experience and the redress of these relations is channeled through the codified individual subject. Further, by interrogating the legal form of subjectivity as an outgrowth of the specifically capitalist form of private property, Pashukanis connects his theory of law to another important vector of overdetermination for the individual subject (Pashukanis 2002, 40).

Balibar points out that while Marx's theoretical trajectory takes him from ideology to fetishism, the two cannot be entirely separated from one another (Balibar 2017b, 74). For Balibar, both attempt to analyse the contradictions entangled in a doublet of socially structured individuation and the universalised abstractions of freedom, equality, justice and so on (2017b, 76). The continuity of fetishism and ideology enters into a reflection between the subject as both a particular individual and the 'bearer of the universal' (Balibar 2020a, 106), and the paradoxically discrete and divisible characteristics of value. This symmetry turns on the correlations between personhood and property, where the individual subject is an enclosed site for the accumulation of roles and relations.

If the connections between personhood and property can be traced in their abstract form to the aforementioned pre-history in law, in their actual form the connections bear out in material processes oriented to a specific ideology of private property. Ellen Meiksins Wood recounts how capitalist property relations in sixteenth century English agriculture were advanced in parallel with an 'ethic of improvement' (E. M. Wood 2002, 106–15). Improvement signifies a conjunction of two complementary operations, first the material inscription of the private property abstraction in the enclosure of common land to save it from so-called 'waste' (Neocleous 2011; Slack 2015); and second, the idea of self-improvement that can be traced to contemporary notions of freedom, self-help, individual mastery and so on. As Stefano Harvey and Fred Moten have argued, improvement is historically mobilised under the auspices of a juridical-relation that not only necessitated individuation, but sanctioned within

that relation a precise kind of individual, the contracted, ‘self-improving’, and ‘self-accumulating individual’ (Harney and Moten 2021, 33).

Wood explains how in the sixteenth century ‘to improve’ did not signify betterment in a general sense, but was specifically tethered to property relations, it ‘literally meant to do something for monetary profit, especially to cultivate land for profit’ (2002, 106). By the following century, the term ‘improver’ would ‘refer to someone who rendered land productive and profitable, especially by enclosing it or reclaiming waste’ (E. M. Wood 2002, 106). As Bhandar suggests, improvement is assigned to the parcelisation of land with the same logics of quantification, calculation and measurement that assign value and define social relations according to their productive capacity (Bhandar 2018, 35). To recall, quantitative techniques are key to concretion and autonomisation of real abstraction in general. Perhaps more interesting here, however, is not only the recognition that modern connotations of improvement can be excavated from historically mediated abstractions informed by the enclosure of private property, but, that the resultant norms ascribed to personhood and subjectivity can be detected in the vectors of measurement and quantification that are key today in the digitisation of self-improvement (see Fors et al. 2019; Lupton 2016; Moore 2017).

The history of the concept of improvement can be traced back to the process that inaugurated the ‘enclosure of the commons’, by the development of new and particular forms of property that removed customary practices antithetical to productive use (E. M. Wood 2002, 107–8). Indeed, the enclosure of the commons is an infamous reference point for tracing the early development of private property to

an annulment of customary rights coupled to the imposition of new subjective standards. Such standards translated an ontology of belonging from the unstated right to use common property into abstract rights contingent on the denial of that use (Federici 2014; Nichols 2020). In the imposition of these standards we again find a disjunctive logic that indicates the degree to which these economic and juridical forms are overdetermined in the concretion of new relations. As Robert Nichols observes, dispossession was not simply the ‘privation of possession’ but the arrival of the ghostly presence of possessiveness that can only be understood as the imposition of a recursive relation (Nichols 2020, 6–12). Recursion within this context means imposing a logic of the future anterior, in what Nichols describes as ‘a looping effect’, the epistemic objects of colonialism are encoded as if they were always already empirical (Nichols 2020, 145). Internal to this process is a violent negation, a traumatic doublet that simultaneously imposes alienation to a negative relation, thereby rendering material realities in the terms of new abstract entities:

New proprietary relations are generated but under structural conditions that demand their simultaneous negation...the dispossessed come to “have” something they cannot use, except by alienating it to another...because of the way dispossession generates property under conditions that require its divestment and alienation, those negatively impacted by this process—the dispossessed are figured as “original owners” but only retroactively, that is, refracted backward through the process itself (Nichols 2020, 8)

For Bhandar, the process of imposing property relations via colonisation is intimately tied to the oscillations of abstraction, subjectivity, and the ethic of improvement (2018). Mapped to an ‘imperative to quantify and measure value’, Bhandar argues, dispossession and displacement were motivated by, ‘an epistemological framework where people came to be valued as economic units’ which ‘set the ground for a fusing

together of ownership and subjectivity' (Bhandar 2018, 35). This fusion mobilises an 'ideology of use that casts both land and its native inhabitants as in need of improvement', one that is mediated by a juridical relation that binds together the abstractions of identity with property relations (Bhandar 2018, 29). First, colonisation itself is vindicated as a process of improvement that liberates land from idle waste, in order to frame it as property, and part of a value relation (2018, 35). Second, racial abstraction is setup in a symmetrical relation to the abstractions of property, where dispossession erases indigeneity and replaces it with racialised subjectivity parsed through an individuated form and encoded with abstract figures like 'the Savage or Native' (2018, 82).

Annexing land to the ideology of improvement, moreover, mobilises logics of criminalisation for anyone who slips outside the structure of property and commodified labour (Bhandar 2018, 37). Here, the concept of improvement shades into the contrivance explored by Silvia Federici, of enclosures that included stamping supposedly 'unproductive' communal practices and beliefs with the deviant markers of superstition, especially for women through the figure of the witch (Federici 2014). For Federici, the historical practice of enclosure went well beyond land to include 'knowledge', 'bodies' and 'our relationship to other people and nature' (Federici 2018, 21). Thus, separations and divisions incorporated to the act of 'primitive accumulation' should be understood as 'an accumulation of differences, inequalities, hierarchies, divisions' (Federici 2014, 115).

Enclosure therefore is not simply the subsumption of customary access to abstract rights and norms of private property, it is the initialisation of a subjective container

which eventually becomes the interface for the concatenation of abstractions compounded in the overdetermination of individuated subjectivity. When concentrated in ‘the mathematical point’ proposed by Pashukanis (Pashukanis 2002, 115), there is a sense in which improvement becomes a vector through which to gather and concentrate these constituent properties into a singular node, one that can tether the abstract individual to an actually individuated body. Similarly, for Moten and Harney, the effects that flow from the ideology of improvement extend a negative or ‘anti’ dimension of the social contract as ‘violence towards whatever shows up at the rendezvous of differentiation, incompleteness, and affection’ (Harney and Moten 2021, 34).

Further, the notion of self-improvement today, emanates from roots in moral philosophy that are likewise, heavily codified in agrarian origins of capital (N. Wood 1984). This is especially true for Locke, in whose work the entire complex of personhood and morality is tied directly to the value generated from the enclosure and appropriation of land for improvement (Locke 2003). Locke’s philosophy hedges many of the elements above, from the deracination of ‘land left to nature’ on the pretext of rescuing it from ‘waste’ (Locke 2003, 118), to the naturalisation of disciplinary regime prescribed to incipient property rights (Locke 2003, 105–16). Property itself, for Locke, is conveyed as a God-given right, making enclosure and improvement composite with the self-possession and morality that foregrounds the very possibility of subjectivity (Locke 2003, 111–12). Not only does this extend enclosure into a normative process bound to a very particular understanding of individuated subjectivity, it initiates a logic upon which the construction of rights are

bound to the anatomy of natural law. Here we come to the ‘conceits’ Marx derides for naturalising the mythology of the individual, to consider the nexus of property and juridical ideology that spans the various accounts of natural law and social contract theory from Hobbes, to Locke and Rousseau. Marx singles out Rousseau, but the influence of Locke is evident in more subtle ways than in the idea of the social contract, as evidenced by Rousseau’s claim that the ‘faculty of self-improvement’ is ‘inherent in the species as much as in the individual’ (Rousseau 1984, 88). Thus, we see inflected in the naturalised individual a kind of originary mythology arrested in the advance of privatised property relations.

Locke’s foundational myth renovates God’s gift of the earth to mankind (Locke 2003, 111), which, as Boer and Paterson (2014) suggest, allows him to smuggle private property into the Garden of Eden (2014, 73). This philosophical act of banditry does more than naturalise the mythos of appropriation. It anchors to the originary myth of creation the acquisitive conception of human nature that sanctions property as a delimitation of who can and who cannot be admitted to the category of human person. The profound consequences of ontologising property in this way can be observed in the myriad practices across the capitalist social formation that dehumanise people, a process put into most stark relief by the historically capitalist institution of race-based chattel slavery (see Baucom 2005; Losurdo 2014).

Subject

In the co-evolution of modern subjectivity and contemporary juridical systems we can also recognise the paradigm of judgement that can be traced to themes of moral philosophy, particularly after Kant (Esposito 2015, 45). By this account, an intriguing

correlation emerges with Sohn-Rethel's argument that equates Kant's epistemology with the commodity form, but instead maps the parallel abstractions of juridical ideology to Kant's practical philosophy. Detecting traces of the conjunction between subjectivity and property in Kant, however, requires recognising the connection of the former to Locke. As Balibar argues, Kant's entire philosophical endeavour is built around the scaffold of self-consciousness, possession of will, and subjectivity for which Locke's theory of mind is a necessary precondition (Balibar 2013). We cannot overlook the fact that such a precondition is inextricably bound to the abstractions of property.

Studies mapping the development of modern subjectivity and selfhood more often than not begin from the supposed invention of modern subjectivity in Descartes' exploration of consciousness (Descartes 1996). Balibar, however, argues that Descartes' meditations on the 'thinking thing' are primarily concerned with conscience and doubt, and not with consciousness as such, so not with the kind of reflexive subjectivity he is often associated with (Balibar 2013, 19–32). Working through the arguments advanced by both Descartes and Locke in detail, Balibar finds no support in Descartes for a concept of the subject, 'as an autonomous self-consciousness, a reflexive centre of the world and therefore a concentrate of the essence of man' (Balibar 1994, 6). Instead, in Balibar's reading, it is John Locke who invents what has come to be known as the dominant paradigm of subjectivity, which in turn makes clear the extent to which the origins of the subject are intimately tied to the archetypes of property, contract, and moral philosophy.

Locating the invention of subjectivity in Locke rather than in Descartes also displaces the concept of the individual subject from rationalist philosophy onto the nominally materialist constructions of Locke's empiricism (Balibar 2013, 56). Locke's individual subject is constructed around a process by which thought is an act appropriated to an 'inner sense' by a 'reflective self' (Balibar 2013, 125). Such an inner sense is inscribed as fundamentally acquisitive, in a process that encodes subjectivity as an appropriative process, which as Paul Rekret observes, extends 'the equation of subjectivity with property... to the level of thought itself' (Rekret 2019, 76). Attributing this model to Locke is important not only for the significance of the arguments around property and improvement outlined above. When set against the contractual figure of the subject that assumes accumulation and autonomy as its rationality, Locke's philosophy signals a conjuncture that codifies the appearance of capital's forms more generally.

Although it is Kant's critique of Descartes that supposedly yields the transcendental subject, Locke's model provides much of the vital componentry. As Balibar observes, although Locke is the original architect of the form, it is Kant who gives the name *subject* to 'that universal aspect of human consciousness and conscience...which provides any philosophy with its foundation and measure' (Balibar 1994, 6). Kant, moreover, attributes the invention or discovery of this model of subjectivity to Descartes, obviating his own lineage in the process (Balibar 2003, 11). In another recursive act, an elliptical relationship between this archetype of subjectivity and the abstract figure encrypted in the legal form is further met by a substructure which attaches the categories of judgment, validity and value that are critical for Kant, to

the standards of self-formation, vigilance, and responsibility set out by Locke (Rose 2009; Balibar 2013, 56).

Here we see the constituent elements of contract and law mentioned above, however foregrounded by the equation of consciousness and property in oneself advanced by Locke. The formal construction of subjectivity in Kant, however, explicitly places this model in the domain of universal law, judgement and morality which in themselves are encrypted in the transcendental structure that Sohn-Rethel equates with the social synthesis of the commodity. Balibar outlines the stakes of Kant's formalisation:

On the one hand, Kant's philosophy invents the problematic of a thought for which its access to the objectivity of the laws of nature, as well as to the universality of ethical and aesthetic values, reside in its own constitution. On the other hand, that philosophy names as the "subject"... the general individuality immanent to the play of the faculties of consciousness which, for all finite souls, constitutes the world and confers meaning on action within it (Balibar 2003, 11)

We should not lose sight of the presuppositions inherent in the structure of Kant's thought as they relate to the acquisitive and laborious regime of Locke. Kant's self-proclaimed Copernican revolution (Kant 1996, 25) turned representation on its head to insist there is no objectivity without subjective experience. Out of Kant's revolution, however, comes the irony that the subject has become the very centre of objective reality (Meillassoux 2008, 118). As Balibar clarifies: 'the categories of predication are no longer of the order of being, but rather are rules internal to thinking. They are not categories of being but categories of the subject, constitutive of the object' (Balibar 2003, 12). For Kant then, the individual subject is the very limit point of a structure internalised within itself. To be a 'subject constitutive of the object' means

consciousness is actuated in objects whose determinations have been evacuated.

Instead, the subject is the condition upon which objects can be understood. In Kant's own words:

[...] consciousness alone is what turns all presentations into thoughts, and hence solely in it as the transcendental subject must all perceptions be found; and apart from this logical meaning of the *I* we are not acquainted with the subject in itself that, as substratum, underlies this *I* as it underlies also all thoughts (Kant 1996, 389)

In the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant 1996) Kant praises the 'illustrious Locke' for opening up a path to 'singular perceptions and 'universal understanding' (Kant 1996, 143). In his own development of these categories, cognition is divided from a material substrate, and then imputed to the accumulation of knowledge by a transcendental invariant (Kant 1996, 392–96). Kant's radical invention erects a trans-temporal structure through which forms of consciousness can be deciphered. Yet, the Copernican metaphor is undermined by Kant's inauguration of a universal simultaneously locked to its bearer behind a divided and individuated structure. As Gillian Rose (2009) argues, the transcendental structure of Kant's philosophy sets an indefinable limit to the horizon of thought. Kant's phenomenology, Rose argues, is self-validating, 'it presents the realm of appearance as defined by limited forms of consciousness' (Rose 2009, 50). In other words, counter to the radically de-anthropomorphising move of Copernicus, Kant's philosophy sets the epistemic conditions for centring the individual human-subject as a transcendental condition.

Although these arguments from Rose are important, she rejects out of hand the work of Sohn-Rethel as 'fastidious' and terminologically confused (Rose 2013, 37). I propose that Sohn-Rethel's articulations on the homology of structure between the

commodity-form and Kant's epistemology can be augmented by emphasising, as Balibar does, Locke's fundamental role in shaping the foundations of subjectivity formalised by Kant. That these connections are so often unexplored means that Locke's triangular formalisation of consciousness, property and subjectivity can be indicted for the ideological connections with capital and liberalism, but is not explored for its role as the basis for the practical metaphysics of capital.

Accumulation

Working through the relationship of Locke's theory of subjectivity to the ideology of private property and consciousness brings us back again to the frame of real abstraction. On one level, there is a familiar resonance with the money-form in the fundamental importance of abstraction and universality to Locke's theory of mind (e.g. Locke 1997, 155). Viewing Locke's ideas through the prism of real abstraction, we can shift the constellation of forms in the analysis of real abstraction beyond critiques that reduce accounts of real abstraction to a borderline Manichaean debate between exchange on the one hand and abstract labour on the other as the mode of abstraction specific to both capital and Marx's critique (e.g. Jappe 2013; Postone 1993, 177). This has the further merit of augmenting Sohn-Rethel's construction by the inclusion of both property relations and the legal-form explored above, bearing out the thesis that the individuated subject is overdetermined by multiple modalities of abstraction.

George Caffentzis makes an argument parallel to Sohn-Rethel's to suggest that Locke is part of a constellation of thinkers who formalise the division of mental and manual labour in a 'labourious approach to thought' continuous with the development of

capitalism (Caffentzis 2013, 167). Caffentzis narrows the gap between real abstraction and ideology, arguing that Locke's eagerness to advance a philosophical justification for the enclosure of property leads him to project presuppositions on the 'privateness' of personhood onto 'the ontological transformation of the earth' (Caffentzis 1989, 52). Locke's theses, however, enact their own recursion. As Caffentzis points out, they are drawn from an 'inter-temporal' loop (1989, 101), that includes a justification for enclosure and so-called 'improvement' obtained from a proprietary model of self-ownership that itself is reflected in the ideological notion of property that it wishes to justify (1989, 53).

Drawing more generally from Locke's disquisitions on property, memory and freedom of the will, Caffentzis argues that Locke's philosophy on the whole is structured by an 'ontology of money' (Caffentzis 1989, 14). Central to this claim is an argument filtered through Locke's 'corpuscular' materialism that bears a striking resemblance to those advanced by Seaford and Sohn-Rethel, namely the notion that, 'ideas of substance which are abstracted from particular ideas are caused by non-mental, corpuscular structures "outside" us' (Caffentzis 2011, 187). Although the foundational relay between labour and property in Locke's thought would have been better formalised as an ontology of capital, Caffentzis' distinction is given further weight by an analysis of Locke's theory of language, that, 'each word must be backed by a publicly recognised, temporally durable, conceptually distinct and determinate idea' (Caffentzis 1989, 122). An ontology of money, or capital in the money-form, moreover, bridges aspects of Locke's work to some of the troubling moral problems that ail the money-form in general, in particular money's role as a mediator of

indifference (Marx 1993, 156). Locke's theory of sovereignty for example, as Warren Montag argues, is a brute justification for coercion, dispossession, even starvation (Montag 2017, 176).

Despite identifying a formal affinity between property and personhood in Locke's work, Caffentzis criticises the argument from C.B. Macpherson (1989) that Locke's philosophy exemplifies 'possessive individualism' for its potential of reducing Locke's ontological arguments beneath an impression that the expansion of capital owes to the ideological motivation of a singular figure, 'an "anal retentive," petit-bourgeois shopkeeper sitting atop his chest of crowns and guineas with a shot gun' (Caffentzis 1989, 118). Instead, argues Caffentzis, the global expansion of capital accumulation and the commodity form might just as easily be called 'possessive universalism' (Caffentzis 1989, 118). Caffentzis is right in one sense. As we have seen possession is part of a universalising ethic, but as the abstract form of the individual remains the vector for the universalism he describes the expansion of both of these is constituent of a wider dialectic of abstraction. In other words, the kind of abstract universalism mapped to the capital-relation is a universalism contingent on the figure of the individual as a container for possession.

Accumulation is the key mechanism in Locke's model of individuated subjectivity. Caffentzis describes Locke's accumulative account of consciousness and memory as, 'an act of appropriation of a past action by a present consciousness' (Caffentzis 1989, 53). Indeed, memory and property are wound together so tightly for Locke, that Caffentzis argues the 'labour theory of property' might be more accurately defined as a 'memory theory of property' (Caffentzis 1989, 54). Balibar likewise identifies

memory as key to understanding Locke's theory of consciousness as distilled in 'thought's appropriation of itself' (Balibar 2013, 59). Moreover, the accumulative account of consciousness maintains self-identity by an incremental internalisation of difference (Balibar 2013, 55, 74–77). Thus, differentiation of oneself from all other beings is the accumulation of an identity abstracted into an infinitely repeated recursive form of individuation.

Locke's philosophy has most influenced the history of thought through a persistent form of the subject that collapses the relation of appropriation and being. Balibar observes a complex semantic knot in Locke's use of language, what he calls a deliberate 'play on words' that resolves a 'metaphysical language game' into a conjunction of ownership, possession and self that preserves, 'the relationship between consciousness, identity, property, and citizenship' (Balibar 2017a, 80). Through citizenship, the rest collapse into a formalised relationship with the same economico-juridical structure that underscores the exchange-relation. For consciousness, Balibar argues the terms become entwined in a self-referential chain of signification that iterates on the specific form of subjectivity enjoining 'recognition' and 'property' to the 'moral and juridical doctrine of conscience' (Balibar 2013, 98). Here, we can reflect again on how these themes persist in the forms of moral philosophy formalised by Kant, not only as they are drawn into the transcendental structure of the subject, but even where money becomes a conduit for liberation, peace and civilisation (e.g. Kant 2006). These all issue from a theory of self bound to a semantic game, that Balibar argues, binds different senses of the term 'own' into a

‘constellation that also includes the terms *belonging, imputation, concern, recognition* and *recollection*’ (Balibar 2013, 98).

The term *recollection* comprises all the connotations of collecting and accumulating that merge in Locke’s account of memory. Locke’s empiricism yields a theory of mind that cannot invent thoughts. As Caffentzis adds, ‘Locke’s critique of “innate ideas” is his concern that no one get the impression that knowledge can be gotten “for free,” in a magical manner, and without much effort’ (Caffentzis 2013, 166). As Balibar observes, the mental operation that emerges out of this critique is conditioned on an accumulation of concepts which places a ‘quasi-transcendental function on memory’ (Balibar 2013, 87). Through memory, we also find our way into the conjunction of possessive individualism and Marx’s critique of ‘so-called primitive accumulation’. Already in his contribution to *Reading Capital*, Balibar noted that Marx’s analysis of so-called primitive accumulation, ‘brings us into the presence of the radical *absence of memory* which characterises history’ (Balibar 2015, 452). There is a strange disjunctive sense between these two elements, the explicitly ‘laborious’ (Caffentzis 2013, 166) and acquisitive form of subjectivity imputed to Locke’s theory elicits an image of the world appropriated to the inner sense of an individual, coupled to a process of dispossession that concerns itself with the violent erasure of memory.

It follows that the form of subjectivity I have traced to Locke is constituted in double movement. On the one hand there is the accumulative process of imputation and recollection that aggregates in the individual, and on the other is the erasure of socio-historical memory. As Bhandar argues, ‘the imposition of private property relations’ are premised on the denial in indigenous populations of ‘the living memory of their

relationships to land and place' (Bhandar 2018, 170). Or as Massimiliano Tomba puts it, 'colonial violence not only dispossesses colonised populations of land, water, and future but it also destroys memory' (Tomba 2019, 186; see also Tomba 2016, 367). The dissolution of communal and collective relations that create an individual figure are not only contingent on new relations of dependency, contra Marx, but on the destruction of memory:

The modern individual is not born from a linear process of dissolution of the ancient communitarian relations, but is forged in the centuries-long war against the commons and every form of collective. The individualisation of the property relations are not the result of a spontaneous economic development, but have required a multitude of forms of violence... to impose the rules of modern private property and to destroy any memory of customary right that permitted the workers to take part of the wood chopped or of the goods unloaded from a ship (Tomba 2016, 366–67)

With the expansion of capital's metaphysical basis, material memory is overwritten with a new materiality of abstraction. This overwriting or recoding of material memory onto form bears directly on the discussion of real abstraction, where the latter is not simply the evacuation of content, but the re-ordering of determinations in line with the kind of real subsumption that systematically encroaches on anything that remains intelligible outside the contours of the capital-relation. Locke's prototypical subject provides all the ingredients for the vector of this subsumption through the figure of the individual. As a form the individual becomes determinant within the operation of erasure that bears on the problem of memory.

Balibar is clear about the defining lever in Locke's theory, 'the positivity of individual property is constructed on the denial of an absence, or of a violent destruction' (Balibar 2014, 79). Locke constructs a discourse that merges abstract liberty and

property into ‘the movement of life that descends into things and assimilates them’ (Balibar 2014, 77). In this sense, Locke does more than construct capital’s liberal subject *par excellence*: self-conscious, coupled to self-mastery, vigilant, self-possessive and so on. Rather, by inaugurating an entire history of thought tethering the subject of consciousness to an ideological equation of selfhood, property and capital, Locke drafts the model of the very subject that is overdetermined by the ‘silent compulsion of economic relations’ (Marx 1990, 899). What matters is that the ‘self-accumulating’ and ‘self-improving’ model of the subject is naturalised *a priori*, precisely because the capital-relation internalises the recursive reproduction of subjectivity. Bringing Balibar’s reading of Locke into relation with his reading of Marx’s critique of Feuerbach, we can recall the meditation on ‘habitation, incarnation and possession of the subject’ (Balibar 2017b, 133) discussed in Chapter 1. As Marx argues, capital advances by developing a ‘working class which by education, tradition, and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws’ (1990, 899).

Toscano (Toscano 2019, 296) argues that Sohn-Rethel’s theory of real abstraction aimed to put Kant back on his feet. By considering Locke’s self-possessive individual the way I have here, we can provide a materialist account of Locke that maps his invention of an accumulative subject to the ‘materialism of real abstractions’ (Toscano 2014, 1223). Locke’s thought is a pre-condition for a great number of philosophers that come after him (Balibar 2013, 74), but in his connection to Kant we see the inflection of categories that are formalised in the modern language of philosophy (Balibar 2017b, 24). Perhaps most importantly, when excavating the underlying

ideology of private property, enclosure, accumulation, dispossession — that is to say capital — Locke’s invention of the subject offers important insight into the continuity of forms that overdetermine the individual.

Conclusion

Marx is clear about the danger of naturalising concepts, or reducing ‘social forms’ to singular, linear causes. He explicitly repudiates the methodological reduction to concepts, instead drawing conclusions from appearances which divide form from content (e.g. Marx and Engels 2010, 545). Out of this breach between appearance and content, the coalescent determinations of material practices are often shaded beneath precisely this kind of error. This chapter began by recounting the foundational logic of just such an error, namely the natural individual that forms the basis for classical economics, liberal philosophy, and social contract theories.

Unpacking this logic in detail, I sought to demonstrate elements in Marx’s method that turn on a redeployment of Hegel’s own logic to emphasise the multiple determinations of uneven development, disjunctive temporalities, and obviated contradictions that overdetermine the appearance of naturalised forms. As we move through the different modes of abstraction indexed to legal ideology, techniques of enclosure, dispossession, and the ‘ethic of improvement’, we find the cultivation of an individual subject further shaped to an overdetermined matrix of forms that subtend the capitalist social formation.

Connecting the themes of this chapter to real abstraction, the correlates of these overdetermined mechanisms can be observed in the possessive and accumulative apparatus of subjectivity as it is derived from a conjuncture in which thought itself is

conceived in reciprocal relation with capitalist private property. Marx places property relations in the continuum of social forms that span the transition toward the autonomisation of the value-objectivity explored in Chapter 2 of this thesis (see Marx 2016, 896–98). Accounts of real abstraction that privilege either labour or exchange are not only reductive with respect to capital’s fundamentally relational structure, but they can also overlook other forms of abstraction that underwrite the individual form of the subject. Capital, however, is animated by more than just abstract labour or the exchange-relation. It is premised on a brutal process of expropriation and dispossession, and it abstracts these processes away to bury them beneath forms that deny their memory. Bringing the juridical form and private property into relation with the value-form acknowledges the determinant role of these historical processes in the accumulation of capital and makes it possible to view the individual as an overdetermined form mapped to patterns of enclosure.

Chapter 4: The Derivative Form

Introduction

To this point in the thesis I have focused on two complimentary arguments. First, the determinations of real abstraction that furnish the concrete conceptual reality of the capital-relation, and second, the way this logic unfolds, both in practice and forms of thought that converge on the individual as a form. In the previous chapter I moved from the theoretical matrix constructed around real abstraction and value to explore the overdetermination of the individuated subject through property relations and the legal form. In this chapter I now look to update the account of abstraction by looking at what happens when the levers of capital move from the relative autonomy of discrete and enclosed forms, to the fractured and dissonant logic of forms that appear in parallel with finance.

It has long been accepted that financialisation is not a uniquely contemporary phenomenon. Indeed, writers like Fernand Braudel (1984) and Giovanni Arrighi (2010) have shown that financialisation is an integral part of the cyclical expansion of capital accumulation. Yet, that does not mean there is nothing unique about the mode and intensity of contemporary financialisation, and the categories, forms and experiences that emanate from it. My own concern with finance tracks this intensity to an observation from Fredric Jameson that, 'our own moment of finance capital involves a new type of abstraction' (Jameson 2015, 116). Second-order, speculative and derivative of itself, this new type of abstraction privileges fictitious entities, so is

often most discernible in the arcana of culture (2015, 116). But, above all, derivative abstraction enacts a deepening realism of the abstract. It follows that updating our understanding of real abstraction requires that we look to the derivative circuits of finance.

After Marx, for Sohn-Rethel as for Adorno, the real abstraction underwriting the social ontology of capital is indexed to the lineaments of the value-form. Effects that materialise in the relations of production, exchange and social life are kindled by discrete and individuated forms, from which the veil of autonomy, self-determination, and isolation are constructed. In their social and political emanations, these forms evoke a logic of clear demarcation, the linear progression of time, and clear borders for the appearance of particular objects. However, as Randy Martin has convincingly argued, financialisation is now so wound into the experiences and expression of contemporary social relations that the rationality we have come to understand as coherent with the commodity has shifted to reflect the ascendancy of financial instruments, arguably the most significant of these being the derivative (Martin 2015a).

The derivative nature of financial abstraction is commensurate with the financial objects that take this capacity as their name. Whereas the commodity-form conditions the figure of the abstract individual as an outgrowth of exchange relations, the derivative itself abstracts from what is already abstracted to recondition a disjunctive process that acts upon social relations. A pursuant social logic has led in some circles to theorising politics through the idea of dividuality, thus producing a figure not as negation, or even a sublation of the individual's primacy, but as a contingency of the

individual's nodal position in networks. In what follows, I first trace the shift from the commodity to the derivative, both as preeminent economic form, and as a social and cultural heuristic that illuminates how real abstraction has evolved in an era of financialisation. To close out this chapter, I provide a critique of a theoretical tendency that seeks to generate political forms out of the figure of the 'dividual'. Demonstrating how these political forms are tethered to the logic of the derivative, and ultimately contingent on a spectre of the abstract individual. This will provide the ground for moving, in the next chapter, to the question of the transindividual subject.

Financialisation

Although Marx's own analysis of finance centred on the credit system of his day, we find in his work the kernel for analysing the operations of modern finance through the concept of relative surplus value. The concept itself distinguishes the development of technical innovations for reducing the relative cost of labour for capital (Marx 1990, 432). Relative surplus value is the means for pushing the extraction of value beyond the material limits of labour, at first by revolutionising production, but thereafter by whatever means can be devised. Relative surplus value pushes beyond the adoption of technological innovation, as Arthur observes, to include the development of new concepts adequate to capital's imperative to break down any material limits, 'to make a reality of its ideal world of frictionless circulation and growth' (Arthur 2004, 76).

Arthur's comments are underwritten by the conceptual concretion of value explored in Chapter 2, but this manufacture of concepts by the reality-making engine of capital is integral to the passage of real abstraction. Surplus value is approached within the

context of credit and interest by Marx as a crucial conduit for the autonomisation process. In the form of profit, surplus value is first a ‘free gift’ (Marx 1990, 451) to capital. But once that profit is divided up, an element is untethered from the production process, and given the ‘shape of interest bearing capital’ it ‘completes the autonomisation of the *form* of surplus-value, the ossification of its form as against its substance’ (Marx 2016, 896). Connecting this back to the parallel development of computation and finance (Berry 2014, 81ff), autonomisation prefaces the flow of real abstraction into the practices of financialisation, which in turn acts upon the underlying, algorithmic objectivity that underwrites the extractive sociality of informatic technology (see Joque 2022).

When it comes to finance capital, the reality-making apparatus of value extraction is triaged by the deeply sinuous infiltration of financial processes into all areas of life (Haiven 2014; Langley 2008; Martin 2002). From financialised production and distribution to speculative banking and its vital role in facilitating housing, managing education, and mediating health outcomes (Lapavitsas 2013, 4), finance has effected deep changes in the structure of the capitalist social formation. Reaching so far as to leave virtually no sphere untouched, finance has become a key mechanism for social control in the process (see Joseph 2014).

The path leading from Marx’s observations on credit to modern financialisation winds its way through the primary means for enacting that social control, namely the debt-relation. As a critical tool in the contemporary process of financialisation (Sotiropoulos, Mēlios, and Lapatsioras 2013, 56), debt is a principle means for bending the dimensions of value. Tapping ever-new reservoirs of relative surplus

value, and extending accumulation over time, debt can facilitate a duplicated access to the value already provided to capital for free by social reproduction (Bhattacharya and Vogel 2017; Ferguson 2020; Vogel 2013). Displacing the primarily gendered care work and social practices necessary for the reproduction of the capital-relation onto credit directly, the debt-relation is a means for binding 'hidden abodes' of labour to the valorisation process without ever having to acknowledge them via the wage-relation (see Daellenbach 2018; Fortunati 1995; Vishmidt and Sutherland 2020). Such a short circuit has led some commentators to argue financialisation involves the real subsumption of labour to finance (e.g. Hardt and Negri 2003, 254–56; Bryan, Rafferty, and Jefferis 2015, 319). Moreover, in binding life processes to the debt-relation, finance overlays them with a conceptual continuum that reveals itself as a map for navigating the itinerary of life thereafter. Here, this elliptical form of subsumption allows capital to mine an unacknowledged seam of value via a disjunctive process that indexes social processes to a concrete conceptual reality, while enunciating a habit-forming imperative for actors to read all objects as financial objects.

My own interest in the relation between subsumption and finance is sharpened by Jameson's contention that, 'subsumption is not just a vice of thought, it is real' (Jameson 2015, 119). Debt and credit are not simply modes of subjection (Lazzarato 2012), they are determinate in the reproduction of social-relations, precisely because they enforce a particular way of thinking about these relations. Binding households to the logic of finance makes both the home and its inhabitants a site of investment (see Adkins 2018), but it also provides a conceptual frame, a means of submitting agents

to the abstractions of accounting (Joseph 2014), and enforcing social reality prosecuted by the forms of thought of finance. Often these developments are posited as biopolitical techniques of power that submit all areas of life to regimes of calculation (e.g. Lazzarato 2012, 2015; Marazzi 2011). But the incorporation of all domains of life to the techniques of financialisation also means understanding how the navigable concepts of finance become ‘lived abstractions’ (Bryan, Martin, and Rafferty 2009; La Berge 2014).

Connecting financialisation to the evolution of real abstraction means getting beneath biopolitical imperatives to examine finance in terms of form-determination. Although finance has always been part of the cyclical expansion of capital, mapping financial subsumption to the exigencies of financialised reality uncovers an operation that is socially constitutive both in its mode and in the way it is thought. First, the reality of finance involves a series of epistemological changes that extend the schema of real abstraction, developed in Chapter 1, from the commodity to financial objects. Here, finance itself becomes generative of the ‘purely social, abstract, functional reality’ described by Sohn-Rethel (2021, 50). Further, the overdetermination of functions that fall beneath this dimension become form-determinations in themselves, overlaying the construction of second nature with the concepts and categories of finance.

Fernand Braudel once described financialisation as ‘a sign of autumn’ in the maturity of any capitalist development (Braudel 1984, 246). Under the amplified conditions of contemporary finance capital we have something that is less a seasonal condition than the horizon of dusk and dawn in everyday life. As Randy Martin writes, ‘the

financialisation of daily life' occurs, not as the complete monopolisation of the ethical domain, but when 'its medium and message is heard above the din' (Martin 2002, 10). Amplifying the aesthetic dimension of finance again puts the emphasis on forms of appearance, the noise of finance makes financial forms appear as if the signal is the source. We can put this in context with the germane observation from Campbell Jones that will inform the rest of this chapter, that finance maps the world as if it were the world itself (2016a).

Forms of Finance

Tracking the shift from the logic of the commodity to financialisation involves understanding how the categories of finance, like any of capital's forms, are transmuted into what Marx describes as converted forms [*die verwandelte Form*] (e.g. Marx 2010b, 71). Marx treats the conversion of forms in different ways, but in essence these forms are discerned as the various ways capital is metamorphosed into concepts or forms of thought. Examples of converted form categories include commodities represented by money (Marx 1990, 263), labour-power as wages (Marx 1990, 679), piece-wages as a converted form of time-wages (1990, 692), or surplus value as profit (Marx and Engels 2010c, 71). Converted forms feed into Sohn-Rethel's description of the conversion of real abstractions into ideas (Sohn-Rethel 2021, 50–53). They are a function of translation, or a simplified means of representing in the form of an idea, processes and determinations that come before them. Moreover, as converted forms efface the productive relations that determine them, they become 'the material existence of bourgeois ideology' (Močnik 2014, 76).

For my purposes, the most pertinent example of a converted form appears when surplus value is converted into the form of appearance of profit. The capitalist, writes Marx, 'knows nothing of the essence of capital... surplus value exists in his consciousness only in the form of profit, a converted form of surplus value, which is completely abstracted from the relations under which it originates and by which it is conditioned' (Marx 2010b, 71). Surplus value must appear as profit. Just like value, it follows the logic of essence and appearance, so it can only appear as something other than what it is (Murray 2016, 258). Moreover, while the appearance of capital's forms metabolise into concepts, they return recursively to shape the factors that condition them. Thus, Marx describes the relation between surplus value and profit as a 'triangulation point' (Marx 2010b, 72), a navigable point at which profit becomes a determinate factor in the distribution of value.

Understanding financial subsumption as the development of new techniques for extracting relative surplus value means recognising how new concepts rely in the first instance on mobilising the already existing conscious forms of capital. Finance, for Marx, pivots on that particular form of capital called interest-bearing capital, which he describes as 'the purely abstract form of profit-bearing capital' (Marx 1993, 878). What matters is that profit-bearing capital is already the most concrete form of capital (Marx 1993, 878), so abstracting from it into interest-bearing capital entails another level of autonomisation. Out of this autonomisation, profit enters the consciousness of the capitalist as a 'self-acting automaton' (Marx 2010b, 71).

Marx describes this autonomisation as occurring only when capital itself becomes a commodity. Another example of externalisation, coming face to face with itself,

capital becomes a concrete *idea* (Meaney 2014, 46). Out of this meeting emerges a reflexive loop, an 'automatic fetish' (Marx 2016, 493) that channels the concretion of profit into forms that valorise themselves. As an abstraction from the 'real form of capital', interest-bearing capital conveys the link between capital *per se* and the notional forms of credit and fictitious capital (Fineschi 2013, 91), that animates new modes of sociality, makes claims on the future, and privileges the abstract as such.

Reading the logical substrates of finance in this way adds a further dimension to the spectrality of value objectivity explored in Chapter 2. Privileging virtual, fictitious modalities means occupying a dimension encoded with the ambivalent state of existing without presence, or being present without being there. Contra Derrida, such a dimension is represented by forms neither present nor absent (Derrida 1994, 63).

Grounding this capacity within finance itself, Jameson likewise, argues that fictitious elements share 'the ontological mystery of something which at the same time both is and is not' (Jameson 2015, 118). Acting on the social imagination, this symbolic operation retains a sense of fiction only insofar as finance attenuates the border between the material and immaterial, concretising fictional objects as real.

Financial categories take on this semblance not only because they already derive from the forms of appearance of capital, but because finance itself includes the injunction to make claims on objects, bodies and spaces that it does not already have access to. Where social logic is concerned, these effects are reflected in concrete relations for two reasons. First, finance has become the preeminent mode for concretising and autonomising the categories of capital, and second finance makes real its own conscious forms by overlaying them on material relations. Thus, financial forms

follow the logic of the converted form. They are forms that take the appearance of something other than what they are, however they update this schema with a pattern-matching capacity that inscribes their own logic back onto the materiality that supports them in the first place.

Furthermore, financial forms are self-referential with respect to their own operation. Augmenting the logic of interest-bearing capital, the derivative is a form that enacts a double abstraction. On the one hand it abstracts from abstraction, on the other, it makes incursions into material operations to gather, re-arrange and re-code whatever lies in its path with its own logic. In this double movement, the derivative impacts on the distribution of real abstraction by encapsulating the circulation of what Jameson calls 'second-degree abstractions' (Jameson 2015, 116). Abstractions of abstractions become the force that animates financial objects, at once marking a further distance between the material effects of financial incursions into social relations, and making finance an operation that overdetermines abstraction itself.

In the derivative we can observe another form-determination. While not acknowledging Marx, Edward LiPuma and Benjamin Lee echo the form-determination of value when they describe the derivative as a dispersive articulation of its own production: 'financial derivatives capture their own production through the circulation of a practice in which the category, derivative, creates a totality only retrospectively... it already presupposes the totality of the category as a condition of its own production' (LiPuma and Lee 2004, 112). In this light, the derivative embodies a disjunctive temporality, one that it must act out in order to make real, but in a very real sense it is the result of the multiple determinations that make financial

operations possible in the first place. Wrapped around this form-determination, a further homology can be detected between the fetishism of the commodity and the abstract and immaterial valences of finance. Where finance is concerned, however, this operation appears back to front. Rather than the appearance of forms that obscure their material substrate, as Jones argues, ‘finance draws everything into its orbit then treats those things as immaterial’ (C. Jones 2016a, 42). Via this parallax of materiality, the encoding and re-encoding operation performed by finance iterates over the expropriations of capital.

Returning to the discussion of informatics and computation in Chapter 1, the substrates of finance converge in a layer of mathematic and semiotic abstraction that interacts in the language of price to map over the spatiotemporal contours of the world. These constructions are operationalised in a performative contradiction that grounds itself in the rationalisation and distribution of the necessities of life. As Jones argues, finance involves a political project that reconfigures the world in its own image (C. Jones 2016a, 36). Centring this question of how finance thinks the world within the arguments of this thesis is important for contextualising the problems that converge on an abstract individual that does not think the world. Moreover, invoking finance as an explicitly political regime, as Jones does, is vital for contextualising political projects that see in finance the prospects of mobilising it to alternative purposes.

Treating abstractions as the actually existing material of the world, moreover, means real abstraction takes on new connotations. Carried out in the disjunction of the material from the immaterial, the speculative operations of finance all but reverse the

operation of real abstraction by speculating on anything and everything. From the juxtaposition of finance driven food insecurity with micro-finance (Mader 2013) to the advance of finance as a means for addressing the climate crisis through speculative trade on the very molecule most implicated in shaping it (Labatt and White 2007). We can even argue that finance becomes a determination of itself when it is no longer simply extractive, but is constitutive in the ideas that shape the organisation of nature (see Moore 2015). This can only reflect back on the theory of second nature outlined by Sohn-Rethel. Whereas, after the commodity, second nature is 'alienated from all contact and interchange with the first nature' (Sohn-Rethel 2021, 97). The financialisation of nature, in turn, presses back on nature itself to perform a radical 'dematerialisation' (C. Jones 2016a, 41).

Our access to, and ability to think the world has a profound impact on our politics. Subjected to this process of abstraction, politics itself folds back into endlessly recursive abstract forms. Financialisation itself is a process of command, where diffuse practices outstrip the so-called commodification of everything (Harvey 2011, 165–72). Moving beyond what we might call the simple form of real abstraction, financialisation submits anything it can to a calculus of price, risk and the appearance of fungibility. Getting beneath the discrete patterns of enclosure and separation, as an epistemological regime, finance collapses the neat Cartesian lines of commodity logic into reticulated price signals of network aesthetics (see Jagoda 2016). As these more diffuse forms reach ever further into life processes, they become part of a sequenced mode of organising and coding relations within a regime that concretises forms of capital as the lived abstractions of finance (see Bryan, Martin, and Rafferty 2009).

Whereas the forms of real abstraction described in the preceding chapters orbit patterns of enclosure and separation, finance reconfigures social forms once conditioned by commodity logic to make them evermore malleable and fractionalised and gives them a semblance of connection. In what follows, I explore this idea by unpacking the social effects of the derivative as the quintessential financial form. The derivative is a kind of catalysed moment of multiple determinations, a hybrid mathematical-semiotic object that can only be cannibalised by the very processes on which it rests. It is important, however, that we do not slide into an analysis of finance as ‘purely abstract’. Financial processes are so deeply imbued in the organisation of social and political life that financial forms have become integral to the social synthesis, but this means they always have real material effects. A social synthesis of finance is determined above all by the emergent character of the derivative form.

Derivative Form

Let us turn now to a closer consideration of what the derivative form means for social and cultural logic. The previous three chapters mapped a figure of the individual to the value-form and the aesthetic of the commodity. Here, I draw on Randy Martin’s claim that changes in the operation of capital accumulation are reflected in a social logic framed by the financial derivative. Martin suggests we view the derivative as a cipher for unlocking the forms of sociality inherent in the present conjuncture:

More so than the commodity of the nineteenth century, the derivative appears as a magical or fictitious object, an ephemeral, chimerical spectre that references a world that has become unmoored from underlying value, that cannot orient itself to what is real, that is obsessed with all that is spectacular and speculative. Yet as a means of

bundling together attributes from disparate values, the derivative holds the key to the most salient mode of sociality of our moment (Martin 2015a, 5)

Although appearing as an unmoored object, the derivative translates this fictitiousness into a constitutive part of reality by producing a social logic. As we have already seen, derivatives follow a logic of disassembly and dispersal, of dividing and re-engineering, they abstract 'capital from its own body' and re-aggregate the most profitable combination of attributes (Martin 2015a, 61). Derivatives signify points along an oblique axis decoupled from a substructure that theoretically comprises commodities of one or another kind. We might think of derivatives as para-abstract objects insofar as they are abstractions that rely almost entirely on other abstractions. However, this is where I want to emphasise this interchange of abstractions as real. Reflecting Martin's description of the derivative as a 'dissonant social relation' (Martin 2015a, 74), this abstract social logic mobilises the capacity of derivatives to operate on a principle of disaggregation. Breaking down constituent properties, derivative sociality divides attributes and drills into the fractional capacities of a transactional aesthetic.

Given the propensity of the derivative for divisibility, we can set this capacity against Marx's formula for the commodity as the 'economic cell-form' (Marx 1990, 90).

Updating this for finance means arguing that the derivative is now the means by which finance divides the cells of capital. As much as a derivative is a recombinant operation, it first relies on creating and exposing a greater surface area for extraction by performing new abstract separations to encode them in reality. The social logic that follows from this division is outlined against the clear lines of an imaginary framed by the commodity.

The commodity, writes Martin ‘appears as a thing in itself, bounded, self-enclosed, something individual’ (Martin 2015a, 76), as a form it is indexed to a ‘social imaginary of individual selves and collective masses as the corresponding units of being on which modern society is to be based’ (Martin 2015a, 76). Shifting to the derivative relies on the same logic, if only to take it apart, ‘derivatives refer not to a fixed relation between part and whole but to a collection of attributes that are assembled together in relation to other discernible features of the bodies, or variables, or environmental conditions they encounter’ (Martin 2015a, 76). As a form, the derivative derives from the commodity both in the way it captures parts of commodity production and in the way those attributes are reconstituted in a kind of commodity-form through contractual exchange. Etymologically rooted to the French word *dériver*, the derivative evokes a sense of drifting along a surface that in itself flows over, or exceeds a certain set of pre-defined limits (Martin 2015a, 121). Martin identifies an immanent possibility within this logic, a generative proposal to mine the resultant social logic for a claim on the wealth that derivatives generates. Such wealth, however, we cannot forget is always already extracted in historically determinate conditions of expropriation and domination.

Again, we come to the question of a form that develops out of a long history that predates its particular use by contemporary finance. Similar to the money-form and the juridical form found in philosophies of antiquity, by some accounts, derivatives can be traced to a price tracking mechanism employed in ancient Mesopotamia (Swan 2000, 279). A pertinent example that connects us to the relation between

speculative thought and financial forms can be found in Aristotle's account of Thales applying theoretical speculation to the acquisition of wealth.

The story goes that he apprehended from his astronomy that a good olive harvest was coming. So, while it was still winter, he raised a little money, and put a deposit on all the olive presses in Miletus and Chios, hiring them at a low rate, because no one was bidding against him. When the olive season came and many people all of a sudden sought olive presses at the same time, he hired them out at whatever rate he chose. He collected a lot of money, showing that philosophers could easily become rich if they wished, but that this is not what they take seriously (Aristotle 2017, 17)

This tale highlights the long historical association of derivatives with the production of specific commodities. By and large they are historically conceived as a contracted price for a future transaction (Bryan and Rafferty 2006, 41). However, this has gradually changed as the proliferation of financial instruments has shifted to reflect a paradigm of both debt and securitisation, one that is ever more reliant on the algorithmic processes of computational trading. Although derivatives theoretically remain a contractual claim on an underlying asset, that relationship is now so attenuated as to mean anything that can be measured in financial terms, including purely fictional assets that are never intended to close in on the underlying object (Lapavitsas 2013, 5–6).

Tracking the inception of fictional objects in the financial realm lends weight to Jameson's observation that derivative logic is anticipated by Marx's concept of fictitious capital (Jameson 2015, 118). Fictitiousness evokes the aspects of representation and speculation, but it is also emblematic of the difference between narrative and calculation. When Jameson remarks that the derivative, 'represents something like a dialectical leap from quantity to quality' (Jameson 2015, 118), he

invokes one of Hegel's key formulas for dialectical change. Hegel argues in *The Science of Logic*, that a 'qualitative alteration' can pass over the underlying quantitative changes, taking a *leap* into something qualitatively different (Hegel 2010, 320). However, Jameson's claim is formulated in such a way that it points within this qualitative change to the category of quality itself.

If this is the case, then our argument goes beyond the biopolitical claims that frame finance as a problem that submits life to a regime of accounting as an outgrowth of neoliberal reason (e.g. Lazzarato 2012; see also W. Brown 2015). Quantification, measure and so on are no doubt constitutive effects of financialisation. But Jameson alludes to a particular change in the character of sociality that emerges when finance subsumes heterogeneity into homogeneity, creating a spectral layer of proliferating differential attributes. A proliferation of attributes means qualities can be invented, replicated and interposed for the creation of yet more qualities and attributes, while at the same time trading on actually existing divisions and differences. The predilection for number remains, but finance performs an elliptical operation, extracting value from differential ground of incommensurability:

[...] the derivative is the very paradigm of heterogeneity, even the heterogeneity at the heart of that homogeneous process we call capitalism... different dimensions... not only quantitatively distinct but qualitatively incommensurable: different spaces, different populations, different production processes (manual, intellectual or immaterial), different technologies, different histories—are brought into relationship with each other, however fleetingly. (Jameson 2015, 115)

Here, we arrive at a reading that undermines the idea of abstraction as a levelling force of homogeneity. Martin demonstrates something similar, describing how

finance hedges a social surplus against ‘the proliferation of difference, variation, and dissemination by which the terms and terrain of the social are expanded beyond measure’ (Martin 2015a, 214). As a conjunction of measurement and measureless, the qualitative difference of finance includes the proliferation of qualities as such. Finance is a plane of abstract difference that cuts across real, extractive differences in a way that outpaces the oppressive divisions that make up the material relations of value extraction. Further, this means that the semblance of difference that appears to finance simultaneously obscures, captures and reconfigures the movement of situated differences that emerge from actually existing struggles.

The derivative is in this sense both the form of appearance of the social relations of finance capital, and a determinant factor in shaping those social relations. Difference has always been integral to capital, but with finance it is tuned to a fine art through the arbitrage principle: ‘a place where a manufactured difference between two sources becomes a generative realisation of some value’ (Martin 2015a, 189).

Derivative logic extracts this value by being both contingent upon and indifferent to difference. Reading difference in this way opens a path to understanding the gap between the struggle over the equality of actually existing difference versus the symbolic forms of recognition that codify difference into their minimal abstractions as rights.

We are not referring to a crude separation between a marginalised reality and its fictitious representations in economic terms, rather finance requires the actual manufacture of difference. The very basis of capital is the exploitation of the differences that cut along the edges of labour, time and property, but the derivative’s

ephemeral operation mines new differences, creating evermore forms of separation. Finance creates the conditions for simultaneously enacting and naturalising inequalities, as Jones argues, 'finance provides a material technology' for effecting 'the separation of bodies across time and space' (C. Jones 2016a, 40). At the same time, the derivative aesthetic gives an appearance of mobility that is not written back into reality. It is a semblance of virtual freedom coded on the actuality of arbitrage.

Another way to come at the leap from quantity to quality in the derivative is to see it as a short circuit of the indifference between the two that already exists within money (Arthur 2004, 144). Where the derivative represents a move to the qualitative dimension, it does so for its capacity to break open further reserves of value, aggregating and assembling attributes into singular, evanescent forms. Derivatives capture and encrypt the breach between the actually existing qualities and differences of bodies and life, to render abstract differentiations as quantities. Such an alternation can only appear natural to a metaphysics that develops out of the socialisation of money. Derivatives are a kind of information layer added to money, which means they can operate along the border of this contradiction of measurelessness and measurement.

Whereas traditional commodities are direct objects of production, derivatives are nominal objects created in the structural relation between differential terms. Returning to the discussion in Chapter 2 around value as a differential relation, derivatives serve to amplify this logic. As we have seen, however, this enacts a particular relationship with real social relations. As an information layer, derivatives translate finance into the world itself. They are a kind of form-determination that

encodes the capricious modalities of financialisation onto the ensemble of social relations.

Arjun Appadurai claims 'the derivative is above all a linguistic phenomenon, since it is primarily a referent to something more tangible than itself' (Appadurai 2016, 4).

Such a claim, however, cannot help but shade into a kind of linguistic idealism.

Framing derivatives in referential terms means overlooking a more structural reading that places financial objects within a continuum that emerges from the expropriation of value and its attendant conceptual reality. Approaching the derivative form within the ambit of language is more accurately captured by an argument from Jones, that finance extends already existing homologies of language and capital into a perverse kind of structuralism (C. Jones 2016a, 39). Rather than a measure of tangibility, derivatives are a form of legibility derived from a system that tracks the gaps between differentials. They are the evanescent content of a converted form that traders regard as 'concrete material objects' (LiPuma and Lee 2004, 112).

Cultural Logic

Tracking real abstraction through finance involves two related dispersals that we can map against changes in social and cultural logic. On the one hand we have the profiles of risk, and the fragmented, volatile and isolating effects described by Martin (Martin 2015a, 52). On the other, we have Jameson's claim that economics always includes an aesthetic dimension (Jameson 2010, 460). Within contemporary capitalism the aesthetic dimension can be read against the speculative turn, which for Jameson entails a kind of realism of the image where the aforementioned 'second-degree' abstractions encode appearance as the primary domain of experience

(Jameson 2015, 116). Via this abstract realism, Jameson observes a 'reflexion' between an emergent reality of finance capital and theories that alternate in the space between speculation and the hyper-realism of the image (Jameson 2015, 116).

Among these theories, Jameson lists 'myriad concepts of the sign, the simulacrum, the image, spectacle society, immaterialities of all kinds...including the current hegemonic ideologies of language and communication' (Jameson 2015, 116). Since the turn of the new century, we can add to this the array of speculative realisms, new materialisms, aesthetic ontologies and network theories evermore attuned to the acceleration of the economy. Often placed under or after the contestable heading of postmodernism, much of the theoretical terrain on the former list is covered by philosophies that are broadly concerned with problems of appearance and representation. Theories of finance that posit derivatives as a referential form can be seen as an extension of this tendency, driving even further into the homologies of sign systems and monetary systems mentioned in earlier chapters (e.g. Goux 1990; Rossi-Landi 1975; Shell 1993).

Reflecting on the conjuncture of financialisation in the era of the early internet, Jameson observed an expansion of financial abstraction into cultural production yielded a dimension of dislocated 'spectres of value' existing in a 'vast, worldwide, disembodied phantasmagoria' (Jameson 1997, 252). Circulating fragments, he argues, are able to 'soak up content and to project it in a kind of instant reflex' (Jameson 1997, 264). Combined with the advance of network and computational technology, this fragmented aesthetic of immediacy gives the appearance that what is happening on the surface is what is really happening. Today, such an aesthetic codes

all politics as a battle within a purely cultural dimension (Haiven 2018, 135), through the marketplace of opinion, or increasingly in the so-called ‘culture wars’ that mobilise the naturalisations of personalised abstractions (Weigel 2022).

We might also think of this aesthetic of immediacy as the staging ground that effects the appearance of the so-called end of history (e.g. Fukuyama 1992). As I have already argued earlier in this thesis, capital is always concerned with uneven temporalities. Finance, however, foregrounds the synchronous effects of abstraction in its own manipulation of time. Articulating a derivative social logic, Jameson argues that the temporality of finance is, ‘a distinction between an object and its expression and an object whose expression has in fact virtually become another object in its own right’ (Jameson 2003, 703). Financial forms are thus translated in to an anxious and urgent rhythm of time that grounds the future in the present, while mediating a certain foreclosure of that future, and simultaneously dissolving the past.

[...] the historically strange and unique phenomenon of a volatilisation of temporality, a dissolution of past and future alike, a kind of contemporary imprisonment in the present...an existential but also collective loss of historicity in such a way that the future fades away as unthinkable or unimaginable, while the past itself turns into dusty images (Jameson 2015, 120)

Here, this temporality effect is encoded in a shifting interaction between economic categories and social relations. Inflected first in the kinds of social control mapped to the debt-relation outlined earlier in this chapter, the infiltrations by credit and debt also effect the perception of space and time itself. Reiterating Jameson’s argument, a collapse of historicity is predicated on the image of the derivative as a prejudicial treatment of the future indexed to a narrow application of the past. As Martin writes,

‘the temporal disposition of finance...assembles disparate time frames past and brings aspects of what has taken place to bear on what can be done in the present’ (Martin 2015a, 214).

Finance discloses this temporality in the subsumption discussed earlier in this chapter, insofar as credit extends an expansive present through the postponement or even the abolition of any actual future for indebted subjects (Berardi 2011).

Derivative logic, however, pushes this even further, atomising temporality by pricing the most productive and profitable attributes of any given process. A ‘temporal disposition’ is inscribed in the technics of the derivative with the Black-Scholes mathematical model. Black-Scholes formalises the future of prices, thereby promising to calculate a reality it can then produce (Esposito 2013, 106). Further still, the derivative is conceived from the outset as a means for invading the abstract materiality of capital, an atomic device described by one of the inventors of the Black-Scholes formula as likened to ‘a package of component atoms and molecules’ (Miller 2000, 13). Derivatives breach the energetic capacities of social production, aiming at nothing less than a change in the fabric of reality.

Black-Scholes infers a disjunction between the appearance of pure calculation that abstracts from the real — thereby reifying an eternalised social world — and the ‘generative uncertainty’ of the actually existing world (LiPuma 2016, 68–69). This disjunction is important as it takes account of the discord between the production of abstraction and the constant evasion of the real; a real that might be discerned as a surplus or excess that can refuse exchange as much as it can be captured by it. On the back of this refusal, reality becomes malleable to the agents of finance.

Returning to Jameson's observations on the themes of quantity and measure, Martin comes at this in more detail to argue that Black-Scholes capacitates a state of 'money-ness' (Martin 2015b, 377). Under the commodity regime money appeared as an expression of value, an appearance of the value-form as a kind of mobilising intermediary. With finance, however, money is infused into the capillaries of financial structures, becoming an informatic capacity for price signals. Martin argues that derivatives perform a kind of surgery on capital, dissecting it and abstracting it from its body, and collapsing the 'distinction between money and capital' (Martin 2015a, 61). If the commodity-form once mediated the formal equivalence of discrete bodies, the derivative collapses equivalence into a diffuse ratio of atoms articulated across the alternations of all capital's forms.

Following this metaphor of a discontinuous body, recent theoretical treatments of finance can be mapped to Jameson's observation on 'reflexion' of certain ideas with the reality of finance capital (Jameson 2015, 117). Franco Berardi, for example, advances a theory of 'semio-capital' to describe a form of production that supposedly severs the social body from its brain via its mobilisation of 'linguistic exchange' (Berardi 2011, 106). An image of the severed head, however, only magnifies the actual dismemberment of actually existing bodies that is so easily obscured by theories of immaterial labour and cognitive capitalism. Indeed, the brain is not the only organ to suffer the theoretical dismemberment that comes from cleaving too close to the real abstractions of finance. Deleuze and Guattari's 'body without organs' offers arguably the highest resolution of the accelerating flows of financialisation, marked as it is by 'conjugated flows' (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 2:161), geodesic

lines, gradients, transitions, vectors and becomings (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 1:19).

Looking further at the signalling capacity of the derivative form reveals finance as an emergent property of network logic, which is why it should surprise nobody that the rise of contemporary financialisation is mirrored to the evolution of new media, informatics, and the advance of computational technology. Here, Beller's reflection on the trajectory of new media is important for recognising that we can no longer admit a meaningful distinction between the digital realm and the advance of computational capital (Beller 2021b, 206). Bringing politics into this conversation, an intriguing contradiction plays out between the parallelism of decolonisation in finance identified by Martin, where derivatives rupture the enclosure of value (Martin 2015b, 377), and Beller's description of 'money as a medium' that has 'colonised' all information and media (Beller 2021b, 206).

Here we find a limit to overtures around the immanent possibilities for politics within the realm of finance. A further disjunction points to an alternation between the datafied, packet-switching, abstract aesthetic of information technology that folds into economic media, and the very same aesthetic that traverses the contradictions of finance to appear in the treatment of financial abstractions as naturally occurring objects. Genuine decolonisation must grapple with the very real materiality that makes media possible. This includes the widespread displacement and ecological impact of infrastructure (Starosielski 2015; Hu 2015), logistics (Alimahomed-Wilson and Reese 2020) and human labour (Chan, Selden, and Pun 2020) which are all imperceptible from the point of view of the screen (see Steyerl 2012). A dissociated

materialism of abstraction follows a familiar refrain that presents a financial world that is at once the only knowable and representable reality of the world (C. Jones 2016a), a supposedly arcane realm of complexity beyond the comprehension of ordinary people. Political projects that do not deal with material preconditions are left navigating social logics expressed in the converted forms of finance capital.

It does not take much to recognise the parenthetical form of derivative logic, transacted through what LiPuma aptly calls a 'monetised subjectivity' (LiPuma 2017, 121), is reflected in the rise of precarious labour and life (Butler 2004; Ross 2009; Standing 2014). Valorising an aesthetic of transience, mobility, flexibility and so on, these forms are emphasised in the code that turns the embodiment of human capital into the figure of 'entrepreneurial man' (Dardot and Laval 2013, 102–19). A great deal of work has gone into tracking these effects against the ideology of neoliberalism as a normative order of reason (e.g. W. Brown 2015, 81). As Martin argues, however, neoliberalism has devolved into a functionalist trope (Martin 2015a, 236 n. 43). Lent a totalising efficacy that reinforces a coherence it might otherwise not have (Martin 2015a, 105), neoliberalism has become a catchall abstraction that elides the real material work of abstraction. Financialisation by contrast, operates with an indifference to the ideological conjuncture, it is mobilised by an imperialism of protocol, an atypical form that arches over the antinomies of the many state forms that capital flows through, and the many and multiple bodies it exploits.

The forms that sustain finance are malleable and plastic, moulded from an inherent superposition of a specific kind of fictitiousness, and refracted through flows, signals and evanescent captures. An analytic of the derivative yields a form-determination of

the uneven and fragmented sociality of contemporary capitalism. Out of this schema we get a social logic that is piecemeal, transient and replicable, embodied in the paradox of an incorporeal expanse against an ethos of single use and continual upgrades. Indexed to its embodiment in 'biofinancial' subjects, finance yields an imaginary coextensive with 'material evisceration' (C. Jones 2016a, 43), oriented to a symbolic erasure, where even the ablutions of human waste can be imagined away (C. Jones 2016b).

Martin's ultimately optimistic articulation of derivative social logic is oriented to discovering what might be excavated from the 'determinate sociality' that underwrites finance. However, as much as these logics point to a 'determinate sociality' (Martin 2015a, 213), their contours can be detected in the counterfactual currents of conspiracy, the liquidation of truth, and the orientation towards ever new forms of domination. Framing these effects the form-determination of the derivative, we open up a logic reflected in the production of second nature, embedding the aggregation of attributes in profiles of the abstract individual. Indeed, the derivative form is reflected in an argument from Jonathan Crary, that fabricated, temporary, and technological arrangements of identities feed into a 'mass dispossession of time and praxis' (Crary 2013, 58–59). Indeed, through volatile subjective displacement, the derivative appears as the most concrete experience of contemporary finance capitalism.

Dividuation

So far this chapter so has offered a sketch of real abstraction in the context of financialisation, tracing an argument that the derivative reflects the form of appearance of social relations under finance capital. My goal now is to demonstrate

how the derivative form is transposed onto particular forms of politics and subjectivity. This will come back to some of the arguments around the abstract individual from earlier chapters, while also foreshadowing the central concern of the last two chapters of the thesis, namely confronting a theory of the subject and the political form.

Following Jameson's arguments around the 'reflexion' between the aesthetics of finance and the itinerary of certain theoretical tendencies, the resonance between the kinds of theories he has in mind runs parallel to Sohn-Rethel's proposal for uncovering the transcendental subject in the schema of the commodity. Updating this proposal, however, means moving from a metaphysics correlated to discrete and enclosed forms to the diffuse patterns of derivative flows. Whereas the former conjuncture maps real abstraction to the commodity form and the individual, after financialisation this schema is tuned to the derivative form and dispersive social logic outlined by Martin. Out of this shifting register, we find proposals for politics that ostensibly depart from the individual subject to coalesce in more dispersive forms of the subject. Mapping the derivative form to such an account, means measuring its logic against the figure of the individual. Contrasted with the enclosed, delimited and autonomous form of the individual, the individual is a fractional, divided and distributed form of the subject. Individuation has been set within derivative logic to suggest an immanent possibility, or what in the lexicon of Deleuze and Guattari is called a 'line of flight' (see Deleuze and Guattari 2005) to probe the liberatory potential of dispersive multiplicities.

Here, we find parallels between efforts to retrieve an arrested figure of the individual from the clutches of capital with attempts that likewise try to excavate a model of dividuality from the incursions of finance. There are two separate but not unrelated threads to pull on. First, is the attempt to invigorate politics by excavating the concept of 'dividuality' from a history of anthropological thought influenced by Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, one that runs throughs Louis Dumont, Marilyn Strathern and others (Appadurai 2016, 103–4). Out of this broad tradition, the dividual is a device that enunciates the difference between a schematic Western notion of the individual, and conceptions that admit a more organicist, holistic, and situated version of the idea of the person. Here, the dividual is an ethnographic construction, a form documented against a heuristic of the individual to demonstrate the composite plurality of non-Western social formations. Out of this tradition, dividuality is predominantly a category of mutually defined personhood. Strathern, for example, regards Melanesian persons as dividually constructed, they contain a 'generalised sociality within... the plural and composite site of the relationships that produce them' (Strathern 1988, 13). LiPuma, however, rightly points to the irony of this approach, conceived as it is via the negation of an ideological form the individual, it paradoxically essentialises the kind of individual it wishes to escape (LiPuma 1998, 75). In this way, the dividual simply becomes a different way to think about the individual.

A second thread of dividuality is bound to a theoretical lineage that is traced one way or another to the influence of Gilbert Simondon on Gilles Deleuze, both in his own work, and in the constellation of thought that bloomed from his collaboration with

Félix Guattari. Even more than the ideas themselves, the application by Deleuze and Guattari's readers has led to an expansive theoretical tradition that sometimes includes philosophies of the dividual. Although this version in some ways resembles the anthropological version, it is overwritten as a more abstract, mediated figure, specifically inflected with the categories of capital, and even more so by the parallelism of financial forms from the 1970s onward. For the most part, this second tendency is framed around explicitly political concerns and aligned to the apprehensions of subjectivity, whereas the former thread is concerned with a more narrow conception of agency confined within the ambit of anthropological forms. A dividual indexed to the political tendency is modular, repetitive and contingent. It is bound to elemental metaphors of the molecular, and tangentially related to an undercurrent of vitalism.

Further to the comments made earlier in this chapter on Deleuze and Guattari's body without organs, it is not difficult to see how a philosophy saturated with excess, acceleration, virtuality, codes and flows can be mapped to the coordinates of finance. These connections are largely intentional, especially within the double volume project of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 2005). Indeed, we can read that project on the whole as a kind of performative critique of capitalist abstraction. An ambiguity that runs through the project, however, means it is just as likely to be read as a graphological guide for adapting to the territory of finance as an immanent critique of the real abstractions of finance. Such ambiguity delivers a conceptual apparatus that runs across the detritus of modern life to be taken up, without irony, as a financial investment plan (e.g. Isaac 2018), or as a guide to

military manoeuvres by the Israeli Defence Force (Weizman 2006). My specific concern here, is how this theoretical register is invoked as a strategy of minimal resistance. So-called rhizomatic transversals are used by theorists like Richard Gilman-Opalsky to propose, ‘creative resistance to the homogenising tendencies of capitalism’ (Gilman-Opalsky 2016, 133). Pushed further by the ‘molecular’ register of Guattari’s own work (e.g. Guattari 1984), and in his collaboration with Negri, (Negri and Guattari 1990) this tendency is praised by Gilman-Opalsky for the acceptance of smallness for valorising revolt over any attempted coherence of revolution (Gilman-Opalsky 2016, 83; cf Kristeva 2002).

A molecular idiom can be traced not just to the derivative as a means for dividing the cell-form of capital, but to the financial infiltrations of molecular biopolitics described by some as bioeconomics (see Rose 2009). Observing these deeply cellular operations, one can equally claim the molecular revolution advanced by Guattari has already been delivered by finance. More than a mere aside, the relevance of molecular metaphors to the figure of the dividual is fine-tuned in proposals for forms of anti-politics, as exemplified by Gerald Raunig (Raunig 2016), for whom, a ‘dividual-line’ can be traced through ‘molecular forms of organisation’ to accumulate in a kind of subjectless revolution (2016, 182–92). Strangely enough, the subjectless revolution is conceived as a reconceptualisation of personhood that smuggles the classic sense of the subjectum back in as substance by reconfiguring substance as codes and flows ‘completely inseparable from the outside world’ (2016, 161–62). Again, it should not be forgotten that finance already performs a substantial recoding of substance as subject by mobilising the value-objectivity discussed in Chapter 2.

Indeed, Raunig's proposal could even be said to resonate with the 'subjectless' revolution identified by Marx, namely, the one performed by capital via the autonomised subject of value. Reflecting on ideas around expressive and virtual multiplicities issued from the autonomised fetish of interest-bearing capital, we start to see how politics is outsourced in these proposals to indeterminate virtualities, thus negating the possibility of engaging a conscious political project. Here, an important counterpoint is provided by Jones, who insists that finance be framed as 'a concrete political project that seeks to inscribe other worlds' (C. Jones 2016a, 36). As long as we do not see this distinction, financialised politics will remain the only game in town.

In the final chapters of this thesis it will become clearer still why I consider this to be problem. For now, if Deleuze and Guattari's work was directed toward the changing field of real abstraction that bloomed with the rapid expanse of financialisation in the 1970s, it is also clear that a creative ontology that emphasises joyous affirmation is apace with the capacities of finance capital such that a recent call that we have 'reached peak Deleuze' is in no way unwarranted (Colebrook 2020). It is not difficult to see how the conditions read through the analyses of theorist like Fredric Jameson, and Randy Martin, are so readily mapped onto the innovations of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. I want to suggest, however, that a political form motivated by the figure of the dividual is contingent on the use of devices that come out of these texts by certain readers of Deleuze and Guattari, often by relegating the influence of Marx on these texts (see Jameson 2010, 183). Moreover, the dividual is the figure that most obviously translates the contingencies of finance into forms of real abstraction

that are not only exemplified in this theoretical terrain but emerge as a misdirected subject of politics. Put differently, it is because the dividual is an outgrowth of the derivative logic described above that it cannot be the basis for a politics of emancipation from capital.

Dividual

Theories that develop the figure of the dividual into a political form often draw on Deleuze's brief essay, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control' (1992). In this text, Deleuze presents a descriptive, sociological periodisation that highlights new modalities of control. Taking up the word 'dividual' to signify a shift from a conception centred on the individual as an indivisible whole, Deleuze uncovers a modulated figure more akin to an assemblage of divisions. Depicting social relations in monetary terms, Deleuze describes the transition from enclosure to modulation:

We no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals have become "dividuals," and masses, samples, data, markets, or "banks." Perhaps it is money that expresses the distinction between the two societies best, since discipline always referred back to minted money that locks gold as numerical standard, while control relates to floating rates of exchange, modulated according to a rate established by a set of standard currencies (Deleuze 1992, 5)

Equated with a shift beyond Foucault's notion of the disciplinary society, where individual bodies are organised along factory lines, interned in 'spaces of enclosure', Deleuze maps the dividual to a 'control society' that takes the corporation as its emblem. Instead of a body contained in crystallised forms of 'equilibrium', the corporation dissolves relations into a 'spirit' or a 'gas' (Deleuze 1992, 5). Foucault's (1995) analysis of the disciplinary is framed around 'panoptics', the manipulation of

fixed spaces, visibility and internalisation of individuated social relations. Mobilising contractive and inscriptive techniques of power, discipline is an individualising machine (Foucault 1995, 194). Control, on the other hand, disperses a semblance of individuation that is coded and decoded in real time.

Although he centres his analysis on the corporation, in this remarkably prescient text Deleuze clearly has in mind the maladies of contemporary finance and credit.

Capitalism in the control society is discontinuous and fragmented, it is no longer concerned with the Cartesian logic of 'distinct analogical spaces', moving instead toward the dispersal of tensile 'coded figures' (Deleuze 1992, 6). Whereas in the former regime, individuals are designated as numbers, in the control society 'what is important is no longer either a signature or a number, but a code' (Deleuze 1992, 5). Read in this way, the figure of the 'dividual' is nothing if not a derivative form, and real insofar as these codes become the lived abstractions of financial accumulation.

The groundwork for conceptualising the control society can be found in *Anti-Oedipus*, where the distribution of control is presented as the coming together of abstract social machines with literal machines, the distribution and intermediation of technics (Deleuze and Guattari 1983). Machine metaphors in *Anti-Oedipus* reflect the simultaneous reversal performed by finance capital, an iterative process of coding, decoding and recoding bodies in space and time for the purpose of leverage. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, a model of individuation pursuant to these techniques coheres around the constant alternation of individuation and de-individuation, a figure enunciated in relation to the continuous unfolding of new multiplicities (Deleuze and Guattari 2005). Applied in the 'Postscript', the individual is never complete, it cannot

be singularised into a discrete enclosure. Deleuze writes, ‘enclosures are *molds*, distinct castings, but controls are a modulation, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other’ (Deleuze 1992, 4). Despite these changes, the individual remains a vector throughout. No longer an enclosed container, the individual becomes a conduit or aperture, either a portal through which coded flows can pass, or a way of looking at the attributes they transpose.

Although Deleuze frames his ‘Postscript’ with a call to, ‘look for new weapons’ (Deleuze 1992, 4), nowhere in the text does he propose the individual as a political form. At the end of the text he simply poses a question around the efficacy of unions (Deleuze 1992, 7). Nevertheless, we find many attempts to turn the individual into an affirmational political form. Appadurai, for example, claims we might somehow ‘move from predatory individualisation to progressive individualisation’ (Appadurai 2016, 105). Progressive individualisation ostensibly passes through financialisation to produce, ‘a radical change in the architecture of our social thought’ (Appadurai 2016, 118). Curiously, this radical change is to be configured with the very design language elevated in the extractive and expropriative operations of financialisation.

Arguing for, ‘a new form of politics’ Appadurai suggests we can ‘create radically new forms of collective agency and connectivity that can replace the current predatory forms of individualism with truly socialised individualism’ (Appadurai 2016, 101). Here, ‘progressive individualism’ is placed within the ambit of consciousness, and configured to the promissory paradigm of ritual and gift that requires a ‘repair and reconstruction of the idea of the individual’ (Appadurai 2016, 147). Having already discussed at length the ways in which the figure of the individual is overdetermined

within regimes of real abstraction, it is nonetheless worth remarking how Appadurai's argument lends itself to a kind of nostalgia. A longing, mournful account of the past deploys nostalgia to obviate the historically mediated figure of the individual.

Proposing the recuperation of a forgotten 'agentive humanity' (Appadurai 2016, 147–48), Appadurai's paradoxically new political form evokes an expressive essentialism that echoes the problems Marx confronts in his critique of Feuerbach. Moreover, leaning into a nostalgic version of lost dividuality means overlooking how the individual is always already divided within the capital-relation. Not only in a material sense as the product of determinate social relations, but also by the intersections of abstract identities, and as the bearer of relations, roles and rights. Right here, right now the individual is the very form of the subject that exists as an individuation of abstract forms of difference.

Elsewhere, the project of dividuality has also been engaged in different tones by theorists like Gerald Raunig (2016) Michaela Ott (2018), and MacKenzie Wark (2019). A common denominator in all these works is a deployment of Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical framework. For Raunig, the dividual can be rehabilitated through 'molecular forms of organisation' that run through what he calls a 'condividuality' (Raunig 2016, 184–92). Valorising an infinitesimal distribution of mutual divisions, Raunig ostensibly calls for a subjectless mode of politics that insinuates an 'abstract-dividual line' (Raunig 2016, 186) into existing political practices. A tone of disavowal runs through Raunig's proposal. Retreating into a claim for a pseudo-politics of the 'singular-one' (2016, 15), Raunig presents a figure that is nothing less than a new name for the individual, the dividual individual. Here, the

‘singular-one’ backs onto an accumulative, eventual account of subjectivity taken from Deleuze (see Deleuze 1990). It is interesting to note how this form of the subject takes a form that looks very much like the derivative, a conglomeration of divisible attributes coded into moments of singularity.

Ott’s proposal is no less obscure, emphasising a ‘composite of cultural interpenetration relationships’ that are ‘epistemologically relevant’ (Ott 2018, 237). For Ott, dividuation is descriptive rather than normative, yet she follows Raunig’s call for ‘condividuation’ with an indeterminate sprawl of ‘lateral assumptions, transverse capacity connections, subversive knowledge communications and types of participation interruption’ (Ott 2018, 141). Here, epistemological relevance reads like a coded empiricism, a pastiche of existing abstract practices that drift along the surface of finance capital’s concrete conceptual reality. Like a kludge that works around the actual necessities of politics, embracing this political bricolage means leaving untouched the determinate factors that generate domination, exploitation and immiseration.

An image of the dividual, or condIVIDUALITY as a kind of transitory technics, struggles to escape derivative logic. Projecting politics onto the figure of the dividual is an attempt to re-order a social logic that derives from forms of appearance of finance capital, which in their own right develop out of a historically mediated ground that is spirited away. Setting this next to the social and cultural logic of the derivative, the dividual is a figure that gathers the abstractions of finance capital to itself, carving out a form of transcendent hyper-individuation from a volatile social and cultural milieu. Here, the political form of the dividual looks like a strange new form of

abstract subjectivism that doubles down on the very conditions that entrench the most significant political problems we face.

Appadurai makes the link between the figure of the dividual and the aesthetic of the derivative explicit, but only to argue ‘dividuals are temporary products of predatory dividualisation...ranking, scoring, enumeration, quantification, monetisation’ (2016, 117). An antidote to this fragmentation, argues Appadurai, is discharged in a cognisant, communicative regime of promise production in which a form of dividualisation enacts a kind of *détournement* of the hegemony of finance. He asks, ‘why not put our efforts into new forms of relationship, identification, agency, and solidarity that might be as dynamic, as inventive, and as shape-shifting as those of capital itself?’ (2016, 154). Coming back to the articulation of new qualities capacitated by the categorical leap of finance, this proposal can only be the result of seeing half the equation, of ‘wandering through half the world’ (Marx 2010a, 40). Dividuals are the products of derivative logic, they turn these quantifications into the symptoms of the qualitative regime discussed earlier in this chapter. As a subjective figure, the dividual is already encapsulated in a project that aims to distribute its permanence. Like most of these projects, what Appadurai is proposing is to harness abstractions without any consideration of their determinations, which can only make them more real in the process.

Deleuze’s own image of the dividual accurately calibrates the dividual to a monetised subject. Mirrored against the decoupling of currencies from the gold standard, and fractured by the post-Fordist mutations of production, the dividual is a product of money’s own liquidation into an unanchored digital form. Returning to the discussion

at the beginning of this chapter around converted forms, the rationality of the monetised dividual is incidental to the appearance of the money form in the first instance. However, the datafied, informatic divisions described by Deleuze are converted into transitive abstractions that are more readily calibrated to the discontinuities of the price form of value (Marx 1990, 154).

Here, a monetised subject is exemplified in the cybernetic, connectionist model attributed to F.A. Hayek, who maps a model of mind against the continuous exchange of capital (Pasquinelli 2021, 175). Hayek's conceit is nothing if not a version of Locke's accumulative subject discussed in Chapter 3, only updated for the telematic aesthetics of price (Hayek 1945). Indeed, the divisional capacities of price are a key factor in finance's updated paradigm of abstraction. Hayek is the figure *par excellence* here, while his normative constructions of the individual are the basis for the ideology of neoliberalism (Hayek 2016). It is telling that he developed these in a binary with a more distributed epistemology that innervates knowledge from aggregated individuals into the model of a market-mind (Hayek 1990, 182; see also Mirowski and Nik-Khah 2017, 70). In Hayek's telematic, market-mind, we see the reflection of the very same proposals for dividuality that cut across informatic registers to capacitate an otherwise individuated subject. Transactional excess is a call and response of the same process again and again, with only the minimal differential of fluctuating price. Similarly, the dividual is a recursive, iterative grounding of dispersive social relations that converge upon, and are thus oriented to a form of individuation.

Metaphors of mind and money are reflected in the Deleuzian ideas that come through so strongly in theorists like Raunig and Ott. As Isabelle Garo notes, the ‘apologia of flows’ looks a lot like the ‘anarchistic, liberal thematics’ one finds in Hayek (Garo 2008, 612). Moreover, the compatibility of these ideas comes through clearly in the ‘accelerationist’ tendency (Noys 2014) that builds on Deleuze and Guattari’s suggestion that a revolutionary path can be forged not by withdrawing from the world market, but by going ‘still further’ to ‘accelerate the process’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 1:239–40). Out of this claim has spawned an unlikely continuum of co-conspirators, from techno-optimistic automation communists (e.g. Bastani 2019), to the apocalyptic fantasies of theorists like Nick Land (Land 1993), to Xenofeminism (Laboria Cuboniks 2018). A thread runs through these endeavours that embraces speed, technology, alienation, the doubling down abstractions that outpace the vectors of actually existing exploitation and misery.

The injunction to accelerate means embracing the abstract to turn it against the world, fuelling the fire to see what can be retrieved from its ashes. Given Foucault’s (1983) reading of Deleuze and Guattari’s project as an antidote to fascism, it is ironic to find such an accelerating aesthetic most effectively enacted in what Beller (2018) describes as ‘fractal fascism’. A trend that fractionalises, abstracts and commodifies attention via an ambient computational spectacle into an ‘infinite dividualisation’ (Beller 2018, 137), fractal fascism mobilises vectors of abstraction, aggregating individuals as the agents of value in a hyper-production of identities, valorising ‘those who count’ (Beller 2018, 120; 2021a, 243).

Eternal Return

In the context of this thesis, perhaps the most important consideration is the contradiction entailed in dividual politics, namely the contingency of an already abstract figure of the individual. Appadurai inadvertently evokes this spectre with his reflections on resistance:

All current forms of resistance, through unions, class actions, debt refusal movements, regulatory actions, shareholder protests, court cases against insider trading, and other forms of redress against the predatory dividualisation of the regnant derivatives market are doomed to fail because their architecture poses the moral force of the individual against a process of dividualisation that they neither understand nor endorse (Appadurai 2016, 145)

Here Appadurai overlooks the myriad anarchisms that take as their central tenet the very reconstruction of relational individuality that he wants to champion. A more serious problem, however, is how this orientation obviates the many and multiple actually existing forms of struggle that engage directly with the forces that supply the material to this architecture. As a corollary, nowhere in any of the texts I have considered here, that take the dividual as a form of politics, is the idea of communism grappled with; the closest we get is a comment from Raunig that frames communism as a 'dividual communism of capital' (Raunig 2016, 186).

Appadurai is right to identify a political impasse within the figure of the individual, but it remains to be seen how the dividual gets beyond this in any meaningful way. When rested on an anthropological scaffold, the dividual form smuggles in a form of liberal humanism that always already naturalises the individual. This is never more evident than in a proposal for dividuality as a kind of non-contractual promise

(Appadurai 2016, 149–55). Appadurai inadvertently courts a return to the logic of the social contract, disavowing the contractual substrates of the naturalised individual (Appadurai 2019, 52), and drawing his proposal for the dividual into a logic that sets up the conditions for creating an individual it presupposes (see Toscano 2020).

In light of our framing of the dividual around the logic of financial forms, or the conscious forms of capital, the logic entailed in political dividualism suggests a converted form of the individual. As a modular, transient singularity that exemplifies the precarious aesthetic of financial life, the converted form of the individual is enunciated in appearances other than itself, if only to reaffirm its existence. Dividual politics involves a drive to invigorate a politics that can still place the individual at its centre, thus avoiding the need to think the world. However, proposing a shift to the dividual runs the risk of overlooking the determinations of the category of the individual itself. This is particularly problematic when the individual and the subject become conflated. Considering the arguments earlier in this chapter from both Randy Martin and Fredric Jameson on the social and cultural logic of both capital and finance, the forms through which these logics are understood are fundamentally imbricated with the abstract forms of capital. To divide these forms does nothing to render them obsolete, it simply enacts another abstraction, further concretising the abstract material of the computational financial milieu.

In the final instance the individual is the figure that is counted in spite of the division at the heart of dividual individuation. Much like the self-affirming gesture in Deleuze's commentary on Nietzsche that, 'returning is everything' (Deleuze 2006, 72). Even in its minimal degree, the individual is the referent that remains. As if in

Foucault's (2006) famous metaphor for the fading history of man, 'a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea' is always there in outline whenever the tide recedes. Indeed, finance itself has proposed the end of man correlative to the end of the materially inconvenient, unclean and calculative reality of the world (see Jones 2016b), if only to provide cover for the dissemination of its own political forms (see also Daellenbach 2014). Seen in this light, the dividual is not a new figure. It is either an enumerated symptom of the imperative to define the contours of the individual, or worse, a surreptitious, financial imperative to leverage oneself against every available attribute of identity, to hedge, prospect, and speculate on the divisible self. What matters here is that finance admits the impossible, contradictory indivisibility of the individual, but retains its abstract form as a container.

Enacting an uneven temporality of retroactive differentiation, derivative logic is a kind of form-determination through which differentiation is an actualised material effect. A politics that ignores this reality forms a horizon that cuts away from the polluted material of the actually existing extractive operations of capital that make finance possible (see Gago and Mezzadra 2017). Instead, derivative forms impute flows, affects and intensities to experience rather than the socio-economic forms that produce such experiences. If the dividual is a figure coalesced in the 'continuum of division' as Ott puts it (Ott 2018, 37), then the question remains, what imposes these divisions? Moreover, it becomes apparent we can only admit a certain kind of division, a creative ensemble of mutual, permissive separation, or abstract divisions that allow no access to real divisions.

Here, the forms of affirmative dividual politics discussed in this chapter cut against two clear and related problems that converge on the overall arguments of this thesis. Either the molecular, dividualised multiplicity of revolts is either turned inwards to enumerate the production of multi-faceted abstract subjectivation, where subjects can be everywhere and nowhere at once. Alternatively, it is projected outward in an aggregating virtuality of attributes that flow from a singular point, into a new differentiated form of capture. Borrowing an apt term from Spivak, this looks a lot like a financialised form of the subject that is, 'superadequate to itself' (Spivak 2006, 227). Moreover, invoking the kind of concern raised by Jameson for what he once called a 'post-Marxian Nietzschean world of micropolitics', these proposals for dividual politics eschew any attempt to address the social or the unrepresentable political totality ordered by finance capital (Jameson 1988, 355), or indeed to think with, or engage in direct forms of struggle. Here Badiou's reflection on the rhizomatic proposal, from where these dividual forms spring, is instructive:

The multiplicities, subtracting themselves from each other as One, peacefully coexist. To play in one's own corner: such is the maxim of rhizomatic multiplicities... Whoever renounces antagonism and thins in the element of indifferent affirmative multiplicity has the need sooner or later to kneel down, under the cover of the cult of self (Badiou 2012, 200–201)

The proposals for dividual politics I have looked at in this chapter reflect an observation made by Sarah Ahmed (2008) concerning the movement of feminist 'new materialisms'. Like theories of dividuality, these 'new materialisms' are heavily influenced by the flows of matter advanced by Deleuze and Guattari. Appadurai himself draws a similar link when remarking that, 'dividualist cosmologies' are influenced by the kind of 'vitalist energy' found in so-called new materialist

philosophies (Appadurai 2016, 146). For Ahmed, the ‘new’ of this new materialism does little more than cover over or graft onto existing marginalised positions, taking shape by ‘mobility and detachability’ (Ahmed 2008, 35). Valorising matter as a fetish object, new materialism doubles down on the very abstract-materialism bequeathed to us by capital and all the suffering it entails. Turning to a purely theoretical object that is wilfully blind to the very real materiality abstracted beneath these forms, new materialism reduces ‘matter to culture’ (Ahmed 2008, 33).

The dividual is nothing if not the mirror of a financialised derivative logic, an eternal return of recursive individuations that take the abstract materialism of financialisation as the plane of politics. In a similar vein to new materialism, the dividual is a form that sounds the depths of the differentiations that provide cover for actually existing inequalities (cf. Galloway 2020). The dividual form is thus indexed to a certain kind of empiricism of the virtual, and mapped onto an aesthetic that is internal to the machinations of finance. It is not a way out or beyond the domination that they entail. Instead of engaging a politics that can think the world, the dividual is a pseudo-politics embedded in ‘the world of finance’ (C. Jones 2016a), an orientation of the return of the abstract individual.

Conclusion

Articulating his theory of the overdetermined contradiction, Althusser makes a series of comments relevant to the debate on financial forms. Reflecting on the accumulative effect of ‘survivals’ that buffet against the ‘political practice of Marxism’, Althusser points to the concepts, habits and traditions that are assimilated, memorised and transposed to a ‘law of interiority’ (Althusser 2005, 114–15; see also

Lefebvre 1976). Navigating the always escaping determinations of a structure ordered by its contradictions, we can follow Althusser to frame the abstract individual along the lines of ‘the lonely hour of the “last instance” that never comes’ (Althusser 2005, 113). Leveraged by the derivative formations of the financialised social formation, the abstract individual is the spectre of a last instance that never arrives. A contradiction in and of itself, the abstract individual is overlaid with the virtual, abstract operations of finance that rely on its return as a form. We might even suggest that finance draws all its faces in sand, but shapes the practices and behaviours that ensure we return to the shore after each new tide to find the abstract individual appear again.

In the final few sections of this chapter, I started preparing the ground for the discussion of politics that will orient the remainder of this thesis. Updating the account of capital’s practical metaphysics, I argued the derivative form is a new kind of form-determination, a converted form of the commodity logic that precedes it. Out of this form-determination, theoretical attempts at generating a political impulse from the exigencies of finance turn to a networked, reticulated and divisible form of personhood conditioned by the concept of the dividual. A derivative effect in itself, dividualism is indexed by certain theorists to forms of mutual indebtedness, a promise-keeping principle that might hold the potential for conveying social patterns to a more equatable future. Finance, however, already deploys this principle, but maps it to an axiomatic transience. Promises are only kept insofar as they do not need to be reconfigured. Debt obligations are flexible only from a certain point of view, but

they are always mobilised within a determinate ideological structure that establishes its own conditions of truth.

Appadurai frames his own proposal for derivative sociality around promises that likewise, 'produced in the right conditions, create the conditions of their own truth' (Appadurai 2019, 52). As an ideological form, these idiopathic conditions could hardly be more apt for their reflection in the malleable, real-time inversions of untruth harnessed by the biofinancial agents of capital. A fascistic disposition, this aesthetic is embodied in movements that gather around demagogues who make up the terms of their own promissory notes on the fly. Enacting the financial injunction to make claims on the future, remix and re-signify demands on the world, the *décollage* of financialisation in these regimes turns the whole world into a flexible traversal of anti-truth oriented to a cult of personality, in the ultra-One form of the individual. As a form-determined social relation, the dividual can be detected in these movements as a mode that triangulates cascading and accumulating abstractions of identity and naturalises them by violently inscribing their content onto actual existing social relations.

Between this reversed enforcement of coercive naturalisms and the lived abstractions of financial bio-imperatives, we find support for updating our understanding of real abstraction. However, this is a disjunctive relation with reality. While finance privileges abstract, virtual and fictitious modalities, the attempt by finance to outpace the forms on which it is premised is negated by material struggles that illustrate how financialised regimes are always invested in maintaining configurations of enclosure. Whether in the interdictions that expand or enforce the historically real fiction of the

nation state, in the deracination of native habits and ecosystems for the sake of 'sustainability', or in the militarised policing of bodies. The patterns of enclosure always subtend the semblance of abstract freedom promised by derivative and dividualised sociality. The social logic of finance in this regard enacts a new, more virulent separation. Positing a realm of freedom in financial forms is in turn undone by the actual encoding of programmable inequalities and oppressive abstractions back onto the world, and back into forms of exploitative individuation. For every abstract traversal and affirmation of virtual multiplicity, a singular body is still surveilled on the factory floor. Indeed, there is little that is more pernicious than the view that by fixing the maladies of computational sociality we can fix the world.

Privileging the abstract without accounting for its dialectical relation to the real is what leads to ultimately utopian proposals for politics. Finance itself only ever manages a partial encoding. Struggles that escape financial injunctions are tangible, situated and premised on historically mediated relations that put the lie to finance as the only way of viewing the world (C. Jones 2016a). An instructive admission of what lays outside the realm of finance can be uncovered by attending to what is missing from theories of dividual politics. It is not just capital that can lay claim to 'survivals'. For all that finance coerces the world to speak its tongue, the ideas and practices of communism remain at large.

Chapter 5: The Transindividual

Introduction

The first four chapters of this thesis were concerned with how real abstraction relates to forms of the subject that converge on an abstract figure of the individual. The overarching aim was to consider how the abstractions, categories and forms of appearance that emanate from the practically existing metaphysics of the capital-relation congeal to overdetermine the individuated subject. Underlying this taxonomy of forms, I have presented an argument concerned with the construction of a second nature in the sense advanced by Sohn-Rethel. This is a form-determined, practical relation out of which an individuated form of the subject takes the production of real abstraction for the real as such. The figure in question traverses an array of functional abstractions that cut across the logic of capital such that the individuated subject becomes a vector for the foreclosure of politics.

I have analysed this through two divergent forms that cohere within a broader operation but converge in one of the key sub-themes of the thesis, namely the conjunction of technological abstraction with finance and sociality. In the first three chapters, I illustrated how the value form, property, and juridical ideology overdetermine a finite, individualised and enclosed subject to naturalise the abstract individual. Then, in Chapter 4, I sought to demonstrate how real abstraction has evolved within the ambit of financialisation to produce a further form-determination via the financial derivative, which itself is contingent on the recursive effect of the abstract individual.

In this chapter I turn to a discussion of transindividuality. I do this to further understand the collective production of real abstractions, and to offer an initial gesture for thinking a way out of abstract forms that condition relations within the capitalist social formation. Transindividuality underscores a relation not only between the necessary reciprocity of individuation and collectivity, but also with what exceeds both within social relations. Following the critique of dividuality and condividuality in Chapter 4, this chapter takes seriously the prospects of transindividuality, both as a challenge to the orthodoxy of thinking the individual on the one hand, and as an intervention in the false dichotomy that places the individual on one side and the collective on the other.

To articulate the transindividual approach, in what follows, I work through a demonstration of two modes of individuation. First, I consider a recent self-help renaissance of Stoicism as a strategy of policing individuation. Then, second, returning to Marx's reading of Proudhon in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, I consider how individuation is projected onto social bodies as a 'subjective abstraction'. Finally, I present an account of transindividuality around two divergent philosophical currents. On the one hand, the theoretical tradition inaugurated by Gilbert Simondon, for whom transindividuality is an ontological relation mobilised to challenge the substantialist and hylomorphic metaphysics that dominate the history of philosophy. On the other hand, Balibar's Marxian influenced formulation of transindividuality as an 'ensemble of relations'. Finally, I consider the prospects for turning the transindividual towards the question of politics.

Individuation

As we have seen, the relationship between value and individuation involves a complex knot of ideology, practice, institutions, and social structures. The objective illusion of absolute autonomy that persists in the abstract individual is not only constituted in the wage-relation (C. Jones Manuscript) or in exchange but reinforced in the separating schema of money (Lotz 2016; Seaford 2012), coded against the legal-form (Pashukanis 2002), the ideology of private property (Harney and Moten 2021; Macpherson 1989), and asserted in an array of cultural practices and distributions of power relations (Foucault 1978, 1995). Today, individuation is reticulated through technological and financialised operations where an individuated model of personhood becomes a production site for yet more abstract individuations. In the context of financial dividuation, networked social individuation continuously reasserts a recursive individuated form.

In an odd way, the replicating forms of individuation in the computational milieu pose their own challenges to the supposed ontological primacy of a singular individual. Through interfaced profiles (Bernard 2019; Flisfeder 2021), portfolios (Ascher 2016), digitised self-portraits (Stavans 2017; Storr 2017) and other quantifications (Lupton 2016; Moore 2017), digital identity is a process of constant renewal. Performative replication, however, always retains the form-determination of the individual. It simultaneously affirms the individuated form as a container, while saturating that form with new abstractions. An aesthetic of the individual, thus, becomes a form of practice, a continuous building and reaffirming of intersecting abstractions for the confirmation of individuality. Returning to the spectral effect of

value-objectivity, these practices enact the schema of the value form by abstracting from an abstract continuum to encode particular attributes in a singular form. We have seen how the progression of lived abstraction described in the preceding chapters converges on these practices to naturalise the overdetermined individual subject.

The idea of the individual's ontological primacy informs an ideological mythos constructed around the notion that individuals can pass through life as self-constituted, self-determined, and self-contained, and that the collectives, groups and communities that exist alongside individuals are incidental to individuals themselves, or only occasionally come into contact with them. From such a viewpoint, freedom and autonomy are the primary attributes of individuation, and the collective dimension is never more than a constraint on individuality. Premised on the irreconcilable idea that persons can exist outside of the social relations that constitute them, Jeremy Gilbert illustrates this mythology with a famous epithet from Emily Carr, 'you come into the world alone and you go out of the world alone' (Gilbert 2014, 34; see also Carr 2006, 69). For this pervasive myth to hold, argues Gilbert, it would at the very least need to erase the demonstrably obvious fact that nobody is born without a mother (Gilbert 2014, 34). And, this is not to mention all the pre-existing social relations and material labour that enable the possibility of childbirth in the first place let alone the social forces that go into raising that child (see Daellenbach 2018; J. Brown 2019).

The *prima facie* erasure of the mother by ideology is enough to hint at the deeply held presuppositions of capitalist subjectivity. Here, this again brings to mind Lacan's

theory of the mirror-stage, as discussed in Chapter 2, in which the infant misapprehends autonomy through the perception of an image that obscures its apparatus of support (Lacan 2006, 74). Judith Butler offers a useful application of this formula to suggest that, ‘the founding conceits of liberal individualism are a kind of mirror stage’ (Butler 2020, 42). Why this is the case be traced to the practical abstractions of bourgeois political economy outlined by Marx. Like all economic abstractions, the discrete form of the individual obscures the complex array of relations that make its autonomised appearance possible.

Motivating the discussion of transindividuality in this chapter, then, is a critique of what Jason Read calls the ‘persistent political illusion’ (Read 2016, 82) of the individual that emerges out of these ideological formations. A contradiction at the heart of the abstract individual scaffolds liberal political theory, and how it thinks about the relation of the individual to any community, group or collective. On the one hand, the individual is presented as a naturally sovereign, self-determined and indivisible unit, even if, as in liberalism and neoliberalism, the subject is still profoundly limited. On the other, the identity of an individual demonstrably results from a network of divisions and differences that are simultaneously affirmed and disavowed. As Paolo Virno writes, the ‘individual is the irrelevant remainder of divisions and multiplications which are carried out somewhere far from the individual’ (Virno 2003, 24).

One of the more obvious problems with the individualist matrix is that the individual somehow always contain attributes of individuation that are simultaneously collective. One is never only an individual, but traversed by the categorising

abstractions of race, gender, class, nationality and so on. An ever-present engagement with the individuating real abstractions discussed throughout this thesis means the individuality of the individual is always subject to a recursion, always returning in a pseudo-ontologised form while occupying a space that cannot be ontologised as such. On one side, this interplay of differences reflects on the transindividual reality of the social individual (Balibar 2014, 2020; Basso 2012; Read 2011, 2016), while on the other, we observe the ideological securitisation and policing of individuation, whether normative, or through real and symbolic violence.

An assertion of the form of the individual as *a priori* real requires that we continually invest in forms of closure that obscure a reciprocal reality that exceeds both the individual and collective. Enclosure obviates the conditions for the social and productive relations that underwrite the conditions of possibility for the appearance of any subject. That actually existing material relations are traversed by a transindividual dimension, means that these abstractions are continually breaking down around the edges, so strategies appear that attempt to secure them in their place.

Policing Individuation

One of the great merits of Foucault's critique of the individual was to uncover the ways in which power and discipline are implicated in the construction of individuals via discursive techniques. In his later work, however, he turns his attention to strategies of freedom that invest in methods of self-cultivation oriented to a fascination with Stoicism (see Foucault 1986, 2005; Foucault et al. 2021). Foucault's idiosyncratic reading of the Stoics mobilises the idea of *askēsis*, or self-discipline, to

outline a *dispositif* of the self and bind the subject in an ethic of self-mastery. Here, Foucault's aesthetic of self-formation presumes the individual form of politics, a form he had in his earlier work spent so much time breaking down. Recent commentaries on Foucault have noted how this late turn coincided with an ambiguous relationship to the growing relevance of neoliberalism as an ideology (e.g. Dean and Zamora 2021; Zamora and Behrent 2016). This ideology we should note, not only channels Foucault's own concerns with governmentality and inscription into forms of monetary subjectivity, but has been explored extensively with his own methods (e.g. W. Brown 2015).

Foucault's Stoic strategies are echoed today in forms that chime, without irony, with his insights on the internalisation of discursive disciplinary practices. In what might be described as a reactionary tendency against the individual of the control society (Deleuze 1992), the need to police or self-police the abstract borders of individuation goes some way to explaining a growing enthusiasm today for a self-help version of Stoicism. Self-help Stoicism has been taken up in recent times for a variety of applications that either reflect a monetisation of the self via an ethic of entrepreneurialism, or act as a life raft for the individuated subject to survive an encroaching tide of distress (e.g. Holiday and Hanselman 2016; Johncock 2020; Pigliucci 2020; Robertson 2019; Romm 2015). Where this tendency emerges most instructively, however, is where it provides an armoury for guarding the mystifications, and naturalisms of individualised and specifically masculine identity that motivate contemporary reactionary politics (see Zuckerberg 2018, 45–88).

This disinterested ideology of Stoicism reflects the return to a misplaced concreteness. Earlier, Althusser tracked Stoicism to the very judicial form outlined in Chapter 3 of this thesis. As he describes it, ‘the Stoic consciousness’ attempts to institute a ‘consciousness inherent in the concept of the abstract legal personality, which *aims* for the concrete world of *subjectivity*, but *misses* it’ (Althusser 2005, 102). Emerging out of this ‘image of subjectivity’, claims Althusser, is the reflection of a contradiction that merges with the mystifications of Christianity that come after it (Althusser 2005, 102). We have seen already how this fetish form is taken up by Marx for its inflection in the autonomisation of value and the fetish form of the commodity, but in the return of Stoicism this image of subjectivity can be detected in the desire to reify and police the form-determined individual.

Following the mapping of this development to the evolution of real abstraction explored in Chapter 4, Stoicism is bound up with the kind of securitisation internal to the thought structures of financialisation. Cultural Stoicism relays misplaced concreteness through what Fredric Gros describes as a ‘security principle’. Inaugurated by the Stoics as a means for self-control, the ‘security principle’ is a kind of imaginary or state of mind (Gros 2019, 10). Connecting this to financialisation, we can follow Max Haiven’s argument that securitisation consists in a biopolitical imperative transposed onto a financial imaginary that collapses collective relations and spaces into forms of individuation. Securitisation, writes Haiven, ‘is the biopolitical imperative of financialization. Financialised subjects are to relinquish any hope of actual security and, instead, become savvy virtuosi, counter-levering life’s uncertainty into opportunities for self-maximisation’ (Haiven 2014, 78).

Security and self-control are already writ large in liberal political economy, and adjacent moral theories as principles of self-maximisation, securitisation and happiness for civil government (e.g. Locke 2003, 139; Smith 1976, 325). Indeed, as Marx recognised, the question of security and policing has been entwined with individuation from the very inception of the abstract subject:

Security is the supreme social concept of civil society, the concept of police, the concept that the whole of society is there only to guarantee each of its members the conservation of his person, his rights and his property...the concept of security does not enable civil society to rise above its egoism. On the contrary, security is the *guarantee* of its egoism (Marx 1992, 230)

Within the ambit of financialisation, however, these principles are freighted with risk, debt, self-esteem, self-knowledge and so on (Dardot and Laval 2013, 49), which, *pace* Foucault, internalises these governmental capacities within the individual itself. What is important here is how these capacities transfer to an entrepreneurial model of individuation (Dardot and Laval 2013; Jones and Murtola 2012; Jones and Spicer 2009) that has in recent years has taken a forceful leap through the technological mediation of precarious labour (see Ross 2009; Standing 2014). It should come as no surprise then, that the phenomenon of self-help Stoicism has largely been driven by technologists associated with what is generally understood to be the birth place of the gig worker (Rosenberg 2020).

On the surface, cultural Stoicism presents itself as a coping strategy for the demands of precarious work, if not work in general, thus linking forms of individuation to a milieu structured and mediated by computational forms and precariousness. Further, forms of securitisation and individuation structured around technological interfaces

come hand in glove with surveillance, whether in the normative techniques of self-quantification (Lupton 2016), or in the more invasive modes of tracking and surveillance capitalism. Ironically enough, analyses oriented to ameliorating these effects are often framed around liberating the very form of the individual they help to create (e.g. Zuboff 2019).

One way we might look at this is as a kind of inverse cognitive mapping, to take Jameson's sense of the term in which a place might be navigated in a largely unrepresentable totality (Jameson 1988). Instead of an analytic device for navigating the pressure points of political action, the self-positing abstract individual maps to a mathematical point within the virtual layer of a totality that insists upon a dialectic of individuation that continually undoes itself. As a result, the abstract individual must find ways to remap itself to a capitalist social formation that is nowhere, and is never finished with separating, dividing and isolating people.

As Badiou has intimated, Stoicism today provides a '*fatum* of the real', a mobilised wisdom of adapting desires to economic reality (Badiou 2019, 75). Such an adaptation, I argue, is an acclimatisation to the abstract real by the introjection of a securitised form of individuation. We can also see how this connects to the eternal return discussed in Chapter 4, the retreat or inward turn away from the world repeats the message *ad nauseam* to adapt to the form of the abstract individual. It is not simply that one must not try to change the world, this new form of Stoicism aims to avoid any orientation to the world at all.

Uncovering the aforementioned security principle, Gros argues Stoicism is invented as a mental state (Gros 2019, 7–30). The monadic state informing the Stoic philosophy

of mind is what Hegel refers to as ‘the pure abstraction of the *I*’ (Hegel 2019, 117). Sometimes interpreted as support in Hegel for the necessity of Stoicism as an historical stage, this is instead intended to convey an immature stage of consciousness that grasps only a one-sided abstraction. Such an abstraction is what occupies Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where prior to Spirit’s realisation as ‘the ethical life of a people’, previously isolated and individuated forms appear as ‘shapes only of consciousness’ (Hegel 2019, 254–55; 2006, 265–79; see also Balibar 2017b, 132).

Here we can return to Balibar’s analysis of Marx’s sixth thesis on Feuerbach, as discussed in Chapter 1. Balibar credits the work of Ernst Bloch for identifying the importance of a deliberate decision of Marx to use the French word *ensemble* (Balibar 2017b, 125; Bloch 1995, 249-286). It was clear to Bloch that Marx specifically chose the word *ensemble* to set the historically contestable assemblage of social relations against the appearance of Feuerbach’s immutable, ‘generic man’ and his ‘abstract naturalness’ (1995, 252). Between Hegel and Bloch, the axis of social relations turns on the difference between an underlying relationality and the appearance of an abstract form.

Looking first at Hegel, Balibar observes the influence on Marx of the aforementioned passage from *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, where individual forms are described by Hegel as ‘shapes of consciousness’ as opposed to ‘genuine actualities’ that are ‘shapes of a world’ (2019, 255). Key for Balibar is Hegel’s description of the opposition between abstraction and reality, where the latter is a complex operation and the former are moments of separation from it (Hegel 2019, 253–54). As Balibar rightly observes, this formula provides an important impetus for Marx’s critique of

Feuerbach's abstract isolated individual, where it is set against 'the ensemble of the social relations' (Marx 2010b, 4; Balibar 2017b, 132).

With Bloch's reading of Marx's sixth thesis, however, the forms inflected in the revival of Stoicism are explicitly reflected in Feuerbach's abstract individual. Bloch writes, 'with his hollow arc between single individual and abstract Human... Feuerbach is little other than an epigone of the Stoics and of their after-effects in Natural Right, in the ideas of tolerance of the new bourgeois age' (Bloch 1995, 263). Here, the echo of Stoicism is an investment not just in the abstraction of the individual, but in the conditions and circumstances that make that abstraction a reality. Bloch muses on the retreat into individualism, of 'mere individuals and their eternally languishing relationships' (Bloch 1995, 271-2). Such a retreat preserves the paradox of individuated politics, where the individual itself is treated as the political project *par excellence* of liberty and freedom, as in Foucault's project for self-cultivation, while the conditions for such a project can only be obtained in collective political struggle. Stoicism, moreover, evokes Hegel's own claims around retreat or withdrawal, where he remarks that Stoic consciousness is only free insofar as it, 'constantly *withdraws* from the movement of existence' (Hegel 2019, 118).

Bloch's remarks on the 'after effects' of Stoicism hint also at the ground covered in Chapter 3, where I demonstrated the ways in which the individual is overdetermined by juridical ideology and regimes of private property that can be traced to Locke. As Balibar has shown, Stoic ontology provided important ground on which Locke staked his own ideas. It is the Stoic term *oikeiôsis* — most often translated as *appropriate*, or

a sense of belonging to oneself — that provides the ballast for Locke’s own ontology of property:

In accordance with Stoic ontology, which does not separate the subject and the object, but instead privileges the perspective of the agent and its functions, Locke only applies the term *appropriate* to actions: it is the play of consciousness and memory that allows these actions to be claimed as one’s own and thus to be “reconciled with” or “conferred upon” the subject, which is to say, the “self” (Balibar 2013, 71)

Although the relationship between Stoicism and the kind of real abstraction uncovered by Richard Seaford in the invention of coinage remains unexplored, this road is by no means closed. We can trace a line from Stoicism to the Augustinian tradition (Cary 2000) by identifying the heavy influence of the Platonic form that Seaford places within his analysis of money (Seaford 2012, 2020). Balibar identifies the Augustinian *Confessions* as the theoretical grounds on which to understand the inheritance of ‘habitation, incarnation and possession of the subject’ in the conception of ‘human essence’ subverted by Marx’s critique of Feuerbach (Balibar 2017b, 133–35). Across both Stoicism and Augustinian theology, the soul is mapped to a concept of the private inner core. However, the unique transcendence of the interior found in Augustine (2017b, 135), is inherited from the concept of *psuchē*, which for Seaford, is homologous with the abstract principle of value that subtends the invention of the subject (Seaford 2004, 261).

Moreover, the influence of Plato on Stoicism (Bonazzi and Helmig 2007; Long 2013) places the latter in a constellation of ideas underwritten by a cosmology passed down from the inventors of monism and the abstract inner self and into the kind of dualism that views the mind-body axis through the prism of abstraction and possession

(Seaford 2020, 304–294). A revival of this tradition mines a deep well of metaphysical presuppositions that have become internal to the capital-relation. A mythos attached to the leftover forms of these traditions is obtained in an ideology that asserts self-sufficiency, isolation, abstract freedom and so on, and sets the armament of naturalisation against incursions that point to their fictional roots. Such a mythos echoes what Marx called the ‘unimaginative conceits’ of the Robinsonades (Marx 1993, 83), as discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis. Today, this figure evinces the tension between a fascistic assertion of individuation mapped to an overtly patriarchal naturalism, and an urgent need to think a politics of the world.

Person Society

Having looked at the self-policing of the form-determined individual, let us now turn to the projection of this form onto collective social bodies. The impulse to project onto collective bodies the form and attributes of an individual appears in anything from nations to the market (Read 2016, 74, 128). Perhaps the most pernicious appearance of this project is found in the corporation as an individual (Ripken 2019; Winkler 2018). This impulse, however, is always fundamentally entwined with the metaphysics of capital. If we return to *The Poverty of Philosophy*, we can unpack some of this logic with Marx’s critique of Proudhon’s ‘person-society’. Set against the metaphysics of political economy, Marx’s intervention pivots on Proudhon’s characterisation of society as a ‘collective man’ given the name Prometheus (see Proudhon 1888, 96).

This is the same abstract logic that leads Proudhon to advance a metaphysics of machinery familiar today, in a claim that, ‘machinery is the antithesis, the inverse

formula, of the division of labour' (Proudhon 1888, 174). Foreshadowing similar arguments that emerge in the contemporary discourse on automation (e.g. Bastani 2019; Danaher 2019), Proudhon sees in machinery an antithesis of labour, and thus, the prospect for a world without toil. However, underscoring both the synthesis of machinery and the image of the 'person-society' is a logic of abstraction and separation. Proudhon overlooks the historical development of machinery, so in turn detaches the social relations embedded in that history from their appearance in machinery (Foster 2000, 128–32). Similarly, as Marx argues, Proudhon's 'person-society', is not 'a society of persons, since it has its laws apart, which have nothing in common with the persons of which society is composed' (Marx 2010a, 152).

Marx takes apart the dialectical logic deployed by Proudhon by explaining what a synthesis entails. At stake is an exposition of the 'scaffolding of categories, groups, series and systems' that make up 'the metaphysics of political economy' (2010a, 165). In an effort to demonstrate a surplus left by labour, Proudhon pushes the form-determined individual abstraction to its logical conclusion when, as Marx argues, 'he fuses all producers into one single producer, all consumers into one single consumer, and sets up a struggle between these two chimerical personages' (Marx 2010a, 119). As a result, Marx argues, Proudhon negates the various vectors of competition and struggle that take place in an actual market society.

When applied to machinery, Proudhon's arguments orbit the same problem. Any latent capacity of machinery has to negotiate the historically mediated reality of its development for the benefit of capital. According to Marx, 'only in the imagination of economists does it leap to the aid of the individual worker' (Marx 1993, 702).

Instead, Marx argues, ‘the worker is converted into a living appendage of the machine’ (Marx 1990, 614). Thus, machinery is not a negation of the division of labour, it is the result of a process mediated and form-determined by the need of capital’s valorisation process:

Nothing is more absurd than to see in machinery the *antithesis* of the division of labour, the *synthesis* restoring unity to divided labour. The machine is a uniting of the instruments of labour, and by no means a combination of different operations for the worker himself...The concentration of instruments of production and the division of labour are as inseparable from one another as are, in the political sphere, the concentration of public powers and the division of private interests (Marx 2010a, 186–87)

As John Bellamy Foster argues, Proudhon’s projection of economic abstraction onto a ‘metaphysical view of machinery’ is a reification that, ‘discards its historical origins and conditions’ (Foster 2000, 131). Marx returns to this same logic in both the *Grundrisse* and *Capital Volume I*, to argue that Proudhon creates a ‘subjective abstraction’ out of the object of society (Marx 1993, 264; 1990, 1001). Abstracting society in this way, sets up a conceptual standpoint from which all differences are erased. From this standpoint there are ‘no slaves or citizens’ only abstract ‘human beings’ (Marx 1993, 265). As Marx puts it, ‘the standpoint of society means nothing more than the overlooking of the *differences* which express the *social relation*...society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of interrelations’ (1993, 265). While the resonance with Marx’s argument in the sixth thesis on Feuerbach is clear, instead of the idea of an abstract human essence expressed in the ‘ensemble of social relations’ (Marx 2010b, 4), Marx’s rejoinder to Proudhon applies the same reasoning to the projection of a crystallised society.

Between these texts from Marx we have more evidence of the transindividual perspective Balibar attributes to Marx, as the rejection of both the individualist and holistic viewpoints (Balibar 2017b, 30). Conjuring a typically spectral image, for Marx the mystification of productive relations in an abstract totality is the image of a phantom without limbs. Contrasted with a society composed of ‘social relations based on class antagonism’, a society projected from the ‘subjective abstraction’ of an individual appears like a dismembered ghost:

What then, ultimately, is this Prometheus resuscitated by M. Proudhon? It is society, social relations based on class antagonism. These relations are not relations between individual and individual, but between worker and capitalist, between farmer and landlord, etc. Wipe out these relations and you annihilate all society, and your Prometheus is nothing but a ghost without arms or legs; that is, without automatic workshops, without division of labour—in a word, without everything that you gave him to start with (Marx 2010a, 159)

Marx is arguing that a speculative account based on the market exchange of ontologically prior individuals leads logically to their projection onto the individuated figure of society. That figure, however, can never be anything but a dismembered ghost. Here, Marx’s critique contrasts two different approaches to individuation, first Proudhon’s model of an aggregated social abstraction that multiplies relations between ‘individual and individual’, and second, the ensemble as a multiplicity comprising diverse relations of struggle. Latent in this formulation is an illustration of the difference between an intersubjective and transindividual theory. Intersubjectivity is an interchange between enclosed forms. It follows that a logical aggregation of these abstract relations necessarily results in an abstraction of society. As Vitorrio

Morfino observes, intersubjectivity is a purely metaphysical category, whereas transindividuality traverses the entire complexity of relations (Morfino 2017, 152).

The link between the phantasm of 'person-society' and the metaphysics of economic categories also takes us back to some of the ground covered in Chapter 2.

Commenting on Marx's account of the exchange process, Derrida remarks that it is not only the spectrality of the commodity form that Marx analyses but 'the phantomalization of the social bond' (Derrida 1994, 199). Here, not only does the 'subjective abstraction' of the person-society express itself, in this instance it is the figure of society that appears as a reflected form of the individual. Personification of society means that the social is conceived not just as an abstraction, but as any aggregated form of the abstract individual.

Transindividual

One of the more promising routes for establishing the fundamentally relational character of individuation is the analytic of the transindividual. Having looked at strategies that ignore this relationality, either by internalising the individual or projecting it outward onto social bodies, let us now turn to the concept of transindividuality in more detail. Much of the conceptual terrain of transindividuality is passed down from the heterogeneous tradition of French philosophy. Introducing key thinkers who have influenced the analytic dimension of the transindividual, Balibar offers the names Alexandre Kojève, Gilbert Simondon and Jacques Lacan (Balibar 2017b, 30), to which Jason Read adds the contemporary figures of Paolo Virno, Bernard Stiegler, Maurizio Lazzarato, and Yves Citton (Read 2016, 9). On top of this, we have a list of canonical thinkers characterised as transindividual *avant la*

lettre including Spinoza, Hegel, Marx, and Freud (see Balibar 2020b; Morfino 2014; Read 2016).

It is undoubtedly Simondon, however, who is most readily associated with formalising transindividuality as a concept. For Simondon, the transindividual is oriented on a dual critique of hylomorphic and substantialist metaphysics, and thereafter adapted to a subsequent reformation of ontology. For Simondon, as Balibar observes, the transindividual centres on ‘individuation as a universal ontological and morphological category, applicable to all kinds of beings’ (Balibar 2020b, 138). Christened with the biological moniker of ontogenesis, Simondon’s ontology of relations is a complex process theory that communicates ‘phases of being’ (2020, 348). Mapped across informatic and biological science, Simondon’s ontogenesis rejects the individual as a fixed being, and instead posits individuation as a phase that unfolds in a never complete process of becoming. Thus, for Simondon, ‘the individual is not a being but an act’ (Simondon 2020, 208). Out of this, Simondon imagines a transgressive account of subjectivity as a reformation of well-established categories of philosophical discourse:

The subject being can be conceived as a more or less perfectly coherent system of three successive phases of being: the pre-individual phase, the individuated phase, and the transindividual phase, all of which partially but not completely correspond to what is designated by the concepts of nature, individual, and spirituality (Simondon 2020, 348–49)

Seen in this way, individuation is an incomplete but nevertheless coherent emergence from a ‘pre-individual’ field, a field that comprises the condition of possibility for individuation (e.g. Simondon 1992, 301). Perhaps the most distinctive formulation in

Simondon's theory, however, is the notion of 'psychic and collective individuation' as a form of reciprocity (Combes 2013, 25). Introducing the pre-individual field as a constant state of renewal, not only does the reciprocity of individuation act back upon the forces from which it emerged, for Simondon, the transindividual is a relation of two constitutive individuations, psychic and collective (Simondon 2007). As Combes explains, 'the transindividual appears not as that which unifies individual and society, but as a relation interior to the individual (defining its psyche) and a relation exterior to the individual (defining the collective): the transindividual unity of two relations is thus a relation of relations' (2013, 26). Simondon's individual is thus a recursive being, a 'relative reality' that continually phases through modalities it effects in the process marking the individual and its milieu as co-determinate:

The individual would then be grasped as a relative reality, a certain phase of being which supposes a pre-individual reality prior to it and which, even after individuation, does not fully exist all by itself, for individuation does not exhaust in a single stroke the potentials of pre-individual reality, and, moreover, what individuation manifests is not merely the individual but the individual-milieu coupling (Simondon 2020, 3)

This reiterates the distinction between transindividuality and intersubjectivity, where the former is 'a relation between the constitutive conditions of subjects' which by definition includes the relationality of the collective (Read 2016, 113). According to Thomas LaMarre (Lamarre 2013), Simondon's concern for the relation between individuation and 'how knowledge constructs its objects' places him in a silent dialogue with Foucault (2013, 89). Whether in the model of society, or in the various forms presented by technical and social sciences, modern individuation is seen by Simondon as a tendency towards separation and isolation, a process that relegates the possibility of thinking relationality as such (2013, 89).

Perhaps a more pertinent parallel between Foucault and Simondon, however, emerges in the displacement of humanism. While in Foucault's case excavating the discursive practices that construct the human foreshadows the 'end of man' (Foucault 2006, 373), for Simondon, displacing existing structures of humanism is a gesture of affirmation and renewal (Simondon 2017, 117). Humanism more generally demarcates a line than runs through two dominant strands that emerge in contemporary transindividual theory. The first strand runs from Simondon through Deleuze, while the second is an explicitly Marxist current developed by Balibar and taken up by Read and others. Both tendencies take the question of the anthropological as central but diverge in their various treatments. With Simondon, the humanist debate emerges in his self-declared aim for ontogenesis to liquidate the 'facile humanism' reflected in the arbitrary dualism between man and nature (Simondon 2017, 9). This last point is particularly important, not just for the status of nature within Simondon's project, but for how the latter frames the transindividual as embedded in social relations that are equally formulated through and with technical relations. Addressing the aforementioned patterns of isolated individuation in relation to technics, Simondon proposes to resolve a claim that man is alienated from technical objects by way of a 'technical schematism' that, 're-attaches man to nature' (Simondon 2017, 251). Thus, for Simondon, just as individuation operates as a mediating term of relations in general, so the technical object operates between humans and a general field of technicity:

Above the social community of work and beyond the inter-individual relationship not supported by an operational activity, a mental and practical universe of technicity establishes itself, in which human beings communicate through what they invent. The

technical object taken according to its essence, which is to say the technical object insofar as it has been invented, thought and willed, and taken up [*assumé*] by a human subject, becomes the medium [*le support*] and symbol of this relationship, which we would like to name transindividual (Simondon 2017, 252)

The transindividual for Simondon, is a complex field enveloping the physical, biological, psycho-social and technical fields that enact forms of individuation through modes of organisation and information. Indeed, the central role of information can account for the growing interest in Simondon's work in recent years (e.g. Chabot 2013; De Boever, Murray, and Roffe 2013; Mills 2016). Between an advancing technological milieu and the ever-increasing significance of informatics, Simondon's work on technics has been received by some theorists as a conceptual framework from which to build a metaphysics of technology (e.g. Hui 2016), just as it is the latent reference point for a catalogue of so-called 'new materialisms' (see Bardin 2021).

Muriel Combes has argued that the success of Simondon's work on technics, however, has tended to impede the uptake of his interventions in ontology (Combes 2013, 1). However, there is good reason to argue that it is the intersection between technics and ontology where the implications and limits of Simondon's ideas can be most readily identified. First, the influence of Simondon's theory of the transindividual on Deleuze bears on the discussion at the close of the previous chapter where I outlined attempts by theorists like Ott and Raunig to construct a vision of politics out of dividuality. Perhaps more importantly, though, is Simondon's attempt at resolving technics and nature in a manner that sidelines capital. The borderline idealist projection of thought, will and invention onto the technical object, comes only after

rejecting the influence of the division of mental and manual labour on the technical object (Simondon 2017, 252). Indeed, diminishing the imbrication of capital and technics means never accounting for how the resolution of nature could not already be channelled through the form-determinations and real abstractions created by capital.

Moreover, the more dispersive forms of derivative individuation are facilitated by financialisation and computational means, the more something like Simondon's process theory is recognisable in contemporary processes that attempt their own resolution of nature. Here, we can draw lessons from the various works I have already mentioned in previous chapters, from writers like Beller (Beller 2018, 2021) and Franklin (Franklin 2015, 2021) who outline the imbrication of value with informatics, and the resultant modes of discriminatory abstraction that are themselves a kind of resolution of technics into life. Captured within informatic inputs and outputs, the energetic dynamics of communication already deals in a certain conception of naturalisation that emerges in the extractive operations of both computation and capital.

As Toscano puts it, Simondon attempts to shift individuation from dialectics to energetics (Toscano 2007, 6). Such a shift places the entire ontological frame of the transindividual within the metaphorical register of biogenic electrochemistry. It is worth noting then, just as the flow of electrical currents is measured by conductance and resistance, such a move obliges Simondon to incorporate resistance as a natural property of the energetic 'transduction' that capacitates his theory of individuation (Simondon 2020). Viewed through this lens, resistance becomes ontologically

necessary, either as stabilising force, or as a means for kindling the emergent changes intrinsic to the existing productive conditions. Simondon's philosophy intends this capacity as a properly ontological force, but not only does capital have no difficulty incorporating emergent properties, or resistance, it tends to rely on them for its constant innovation.

The problem here is Simondon's reading of Marx and of capital. Brushing over Marx in a genealogy of the individual, with only the barest mention of capital Simondon projects onto Marx a mixture of historicism and reification (Simondon 2020, 628). As Combes explains, Simondon reduces Marxian analysis to economism, bracketing, and thereby relativising the relation of the socio-political to the extractive domination of capital (Combes 2013, 74). Effacing the mediating role of capital in shaping relations through and with machinery, Simondon reduces Marx's own account of alienation beneath what Jones refers to as 'a vulgar conception of work' (e.g. Simondon 2017, 253–54; see Jones 2020). Simondon then proposes an account of alienation as a 'discontinuity' between individuals and technics itself (Simondon 2017, 133). What results from this account of alienation from technics is an analysis that, not unlike Proudhon, misreads the relation of labour and machinery. Simondon illustrates this most clearly by alluding to the Luddites:

Man's frustration starts with the machine that replaces man, with the automatic weaving loom, with the forging press, with the equipment of the new factories; what the worker destroys during a riot are the machines, because they are his rivals...the factory is a technical ensemble that is comprised of automatic machines, whose activity is parallel to that of human activity (Simondon 2017, 131)

Instead of recognising the historically mediated development of machinery as fundamentally entwined with the valorisation process of capital and the labour-relation, Simondon inadvertently projects the abstract moment of Marx's own account onto machinery as whole. As a result, historically determinant struggles are obscured beneath machinery as if it had a life of its own. As Combes offers, Simondon's premise is that any social conflict that entails attacking technics is conceived as 'a misunderstanding of the intrinsic normativity of technics' (Combes 2013, 75). Encoding a normative dimension in technics ironically effaces the determinate relations that have shaped their development. In the example of machines as the rivals of labour, Simondon presents his analysis within the historically false caricature of Luddism (see Linebaugh 2012). Thus, Simondon fails to recognise that the Luddites' aim was not the destruction of machines, but a determinate political program directed at revealing the social relations embedded within that machinery (McNally 2011, 85–88; Thompson 1991, 472–575; see also Mueller 2021). Hinting at a wider tendency within this branch of transindividual thinking, Simondon remains bound to the domain of appearance. Here, the reading of alienation highlights Read's concern that Simondon 'lacks the attentiveness to the changing historical, economic, and political forces that shape and change individuation' (Read 2016, 6).

The point is that by displacing forms of economic domination onto a more general schema of alienation of technics, capital is given a silent alibi. As Toscano intimates, where it comes to capital, Simondon's treatment of technology is stranded at the level a formal subsumption:

By treating the subsumption of technology to capital as formal rather than real or ontological, Simondon loses the means of thinking the contemporary convergence of invention and work, an indiscernibility that still requires an understanding of the sociogenetic function of exploitation. In other words, the configuration of ontology and politics cannot evade the manner in which the ‘real abstractions’ of capitalism – money, value, abstract labour – mould the very being of machines, inventions and subjects (Toscano 2007, np)

Instead of recognising the role of capital in shaping these relations, Simondon conceives the technical relation on the grounds of reformulating the human being’s relationship to nature (Simondon 2020, 349). As highlighted by Balibar, this indicates the pivot of an antinomy in Simondon’s theory of phases that emerges from the ‘increasing complexity’ of physical and vital orders, that indicates something like a slip back into the classical schema of ‘determinism and freedom’ Balibar 2020, 139).

Balibar frames his critique of Simondon around the risks that arise in the latter’s refusal ‘to situate himself on the terrain of *philosophical anthropology*’ (2020, 139). Although a latent humanism comes through in Simondon’s theses on technicity (see Lamarre 2013), a certain irony plays out in the reformation of a figure that overlooks the forces that have shaped it. As Balibar argues, by overlooking the determinate factors in ‘antagonistic political configurations’ (2020, 139), and by treating individuation as ontology, Simondon ‘risks...returning to the metaphysical antithesis of the individual and the collective which we had sought to escape’ (Balibar 2020b, 139–40). Moreover, for Balibar, a ‘lack of critical mediation’ between ontology and politics can result in flow between ‘a normative *foundation* and an anarchic *indeterminacy*’ (2020, 140). Adding significant weight to these criticisms is Read’s

more direct critique that finds Simondon's theoretical framework is an 'apolitical and ahistorical account of individuation' (Read 2016, 14).

For Balibar, situating the transindividual within a political relationality means grounding it on the terrain refused by Simondon by framing it within the philosophical condition of 'the anthropological question' (Balibar 2017a, 16). In the final section of this chapter, I turn to this question in more detail by framing it around Balibar's formulation of the transindividual as an 'ensemble of relations'.

Ensemble of Relations

Read opens his monograph, *The Politics of Transindividuality*, by arguing that, 'the current historical moment can be described as the predominance of the individual over the collective' (Read 2016, 1). Read's project navigates a critical path beyond the binary logic of individual and collective through a reading of transindividual literature oriented to an Althusserian gesture, strongly influenced by Balibar, that posits transindividuality as 'a concept for Marxism' (Read 2016, 6). Which in Read's own words, means presenting the transindividual as a 'supplement to the objectives, problems and concepts of Marx's thought' (2016, 6–7; see also Althusser 2006, 258).

Balibar's influence on a Marxist application of the transindividual issues from his argument that, 'the social or *social being* must be grounded in the category of the *relation*' (Balibar 2020b, 142). Moving to the relation as primary elicits a field from which both relations and non-relations bear on the category of the transindividual as a 'double rejection of the "abstractions" that force anthropology to locate the essence of man, be it in the individual...or be it in social being' (2020, 141). Drawing upon

his expansive reading of Marx, Balibar constructs his own account of the transindividual around an ontology of relations (Balibar 2017b, 32; 2020). While informed to a large degree by his deep reading of Spinoza, and to a lesser extent Freud, it is invariably Marx who guides the political orientation of the transindividual for Balibar.

Returning to the anthropological question, for Balibar this turns on a subtle shift from theoretical anti-humanism as anti-essentialism to instead ground the notion of human essence back in the ensemble of social relations derived from Marx's critique of Feuerbach. Moreover, by framing the transindividual within his wider project of philosophical anthropology, Balibar proposes to address 'the anthropological question' as a critical orientation to the 'necessary but ambivalent relation that exists between philosophical or sociological concepts and modern politics' (Balibar 2017a, 16). Thus, like many of Balibar's concepts, the transindividual is a primarily analytic category, or a strategy of critique.

Grounding this critical dimension within the transindividual, the ensemble of relations hinges on the structural conditions that inform the particular character of its effects in any given conjuncture. Here, for Balibar, as much as the transindividual signifies the traversal of interconnected relations, it also comprises a deconstructive dimension that furnishes what he proposes to call 'a *quasi-transcendental* function' (Balibar 2020b, 183). Understood as a transgressive relation within the set of relations (2020, 190–191 n.54), the *quasi-transcendental* is a kind of uncertainty principle or undecidability, a simultaneous condition of possibility/impossibility (2020, 183; see also Derrida 1988, 152). Applied to Marx, this suggests that a

necessarily transindividual structure represents both the socially mediated set of relations that produce an ‘alienated’ individuation, and a ‘new type of social relations’ that can emerge out of the abolition of the current organisation of any given ensemble. Balibar illustrates this with a metaphor of ‘the edge’, rendering an immanent threshold within the transindividual relation:

Both the relation and the variation as two aspects of the same problem, because they put in to question both what institutes the individual or the collective in ‘relation’ with one another, and what never ceases to *denature* them, or to make them unrecognisable through the transgression of limits or the invention of modalities...which may be original, and for which it remains each time to evaluate their productiveness, or even their liveability (2020, 183)

Balibar’s reading of an undecidable dimension within the transindividual-relation ultimately arrives in the form of critique. His reading of Marx emphasises a ‘utopian transindividuality’, in which the variation is not the imagination of ‘another world’, and nor is it, ‘the restoration of a lost origin’; it is a regulative idea that navigates a path through the transindividual via a ‘praxis’ oriented to communism as a form of struggle (Balibar 2020b, 180). However, he pushes no further than this when framing the transindividual around politics.

To take seriously the idea of a transcendental within the transindividual relation, we would do well to remember how the capitalist social formation is structured less around a quasi-transcendental, than it is around the pseudo-transcendental of value. Indeed, this is the same transindividual schema Marx refers to as the ‘real community’ of money (Marx 1993, 225). Balibar is aware of this. Mapping the transindividual relation to Marx’s ‘counter-phenomenology’ of ‘fetishism’, he highlights how a

substantialised subject, for Marx, is ‘transposed...onto the field of objectivity, of the *world of objects*...as intermediaries between subjects’ (Balibar 2020b, 147). As I discussed at length in Chapter 3, for Marx, this transposed objectivity circulates in the money form, not just as a universal equivalent, but as the concrete form of value’s autonomised abstract objectivity.

The transindividual relation as it is configured in the capitalist social formation traverses the relations and forms that overdetermine the individual as an isolated figure. In Balibar’s reading of Marx, the most immediate experience of this individuated transindividual appears in the ‘double fetishism’ of commodity and contract (Balibar 2020b, 179). With this, the interchange of forms is transposed through a real activity that comes to figure in practical thought-forms, or what we have been calling real abstractions. As Balibar intimates, the transindividual relation with respect to exchange is transposed via fetishism into a social contact between commodities (Balibar 2017a, 185–201). The dissociation, commensurability and genericity of commodity relations are enacted in abstract relations of ‘equivalence’ that unfold in a structural ‘anteriority’ that gives the semblance of a social contract (Balibar 2017a, 194–95). In Chapter 3, I describe this anterior relation as the autonomisation of value’s abstract objectivity. Balibar’s supplement only adds to this by further illustrating how such a transindividual schema factors into the semblance of a social contract as a relation between individuals. Bearing on his own discussion of the transcendental within the transindividual, Balibar frames this relation as, ‘a transcendental essence, which, nonetheless, also figures as such within “empirical” reality or within the field of perception’ (Balibar 2017a, 194).

After Marx, getting beneath the properly transindividual dimension means identifying ‘the ensemble of relations’ in the spaces between the abstractions of exchange, and the cooperative character of productive relations obscured by the exchange-relation. Never reduced to either, the transindividual relation is overdetermined by the ensemble of relations that exist across the totality of the social formation. Moreover, Balibar’s undecidable dimension turns on a constitutive relation presented simultaneously as the axis of capital’s exploitation, and the immanent possibility for generating political possibilities that can overturn it. Balibar finds this most adequately expressed in Marx’s fundamentally ‘anti-Lockean proposition of the transindividual character of productive activity’:

Not only is labor socialised historically, so that it becomes transindividual. Essentially it always was, insofar as there is no labour without cooperation, even in the most primitive forms, and the isolation of the productive labourer in relation to nature was only ever an appearance... as more modern, socialised production develops, it is increasingly manifest that the collective subject of production, consisting in the solidarity and complementarity of all labor activities, including those crystallised in machines and past knowledge, realises exactly this cooperation whose instruments have been forged against this collective subject, with a view to its exploitation (Balibar 2014, 85)

Echoing the same passage from the *Grundrisse* discussed in Chapter 1, the crystallised capacity of relations, knowledge and machinery in the general intellect are placed in relation to the figure of the social-individual that Marx argues is ‘the great foundation-stone of production and of wealth’ (Marx 1993, 705). As long as capital treats this foundation as ‘mere means’, it is a force for the immiseration of labour. Marx is clear, however, that this ‘foundation-stone’ also contains within it ‘the material conditions’ to explode the relations of domination that claim this social

wealth for capital (Marx 1993, 706). As Read explains, the question of discovering this capacity turn on how capital translates the transindividual relations of cooperation into forms of individuated appearance:

Between the sphere of circulation, which is made up of isolated individuals, and the sphere of production, which represents their co-operative relations as the relations of capital, transindividuality, everything that exceeds the individual, cannot appear. Isolated individuals appear, the power of capital itself appears, but social relations, the way individuals shape and are shaped by their relations, producing themselves and their social conditions, do not appear (Read 2016, 77)

Writing on this theme in *Capital*, Marx explains that co-operation forges multiple workers ‘into one single productive body’ (Marx 1990, 449), however, by a dual operation that simultaneously connects and separates workers as organs within that body. For Marx, this is one of the ways in which the social-individual produced under the capital-relation appears as an isolated individual. Or as Balibar argues, it is the modality rendered in the mutually generative forms of individual and ‘society-effect’ (2020, 183). Returning to Balibar’s formula of the quasi-transcendental then, only by breaking down the actually existing transcendental of value can we prise apart the form-determined modes of separation that turn the ensemble into an engine of individuation.

Balibar’s critical proposal is to probe the possibility of opening up ‘the edge of the transindividual’ (Balibar 2020b, 180). Invoking Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of a ‘line of flight’, Balibar argues that the immanent possibilities within the transindividual compel us to ‘proceed to the edge of the transindividual, where it “decomposes”, or tends to exceed itself, by destabilising the figures of individuality

and of community it instituted, to identify the possibility for its transformation without importing an ideal alternative from outside' (2020, 183). Balibar's reading of the transindividual provides a compelling analytic that stresses the immanent nature and necessity of politics. Not only is the reality of the capitalist social formation generated in fundamentally transindividual processes, but a praxis oriented to these relations is necessarily dialectical. Nevertheless, by limiting the political question to a critique of the edges, Balibar's analytic approach does not push far enough, thus leaving open the question of the political form.

Conclusion

Throughout, I have pursued an argument that our current conjuncture is characterised by the individual as a recursive form-determination that can be detected in both individual and collective bodies. This chapter began by contextualising that argument by presenting two different applications of individuation. First, I recounted how a flourishing industry of self-help Stoicism is fundamentally rooted to policing forms of individuation around a constellation of naturalised abstractions. Second, through Marx's reading of Proudhon, I demonstrated how the individual form has underscored the application of a 'subtractive abstraction' to social bodies.

From the demonstration of individuated social forms to an analysis of transindividuality, I uncovered a subtle link between Proudhon's metaphysics of machinery and the growing reflection between Simondon's ideas on transindividuality and the rise in the informatic liquidation of technics and life processes. Simondon's attempt to resolve a schema of alienation by reconfiguring the

relation between human beings and technical objects tends to overlook the deeply imbricated processes of technics and life I have explored earlier in this thesis, especially where computation, informatics and financialisation come together in the lived abstractions of capital. Simondon's reading of Marx, moreover, ultimately effaces the political dimension within the transindividual.

Turning to the Marxist reading of the transindividual, by contrast, allows us to address the question of politics. One answer to the political question might be to suggest the transindividual perspective is already inherently political because it serves to undermine the ontological primacy of the individual. However, simply declaring the transindividual as political *tout court* ironically undermines the force of the concept by attempting to settle the question as one solely addressed to critique.

Returning the transindividual to the question of real abstraction means that while social forms are founded, practised and reproduced transindividually, the separating and autonomising configuration of the capital-relation means they are presented as individuated.

Even if transindividuality provides a useful analytic framework for uncovering the relational nature of social forms, we must ask whether in deploying Simondon's thought we can get beyond its suspension of politics (Read 2016; see also Stiegler 2019). This problem goes beyond the oscillation between individuation and de-individuation that, as Balibar suggests, runs the risk of returning to the structure it wishes to escape. Rather, it is captured within the deeper problem of moving beyond the material reality that manifests itself in the circulation of dominant abstractions. This means we must turn first to the necessity of interrupting, overturning, and

reconfiguring the very relations that reproduce the dual form-determinations of value and the individual. Holding critique together with politics means supplementing the transindividual with the reclamation of thought as a determinate political practice.

As an analytic, Balibar's use of transindividuality remains essential. Despite the explicitly political orientation of Balibar's own work, however, without addressing the efficacy of determinate political practice directly the transindividual has the potential to end up in something like a half-way house between political idealism and realism (see Kelly 2017). As an analytic perspective, the transindividual, as read through Marx, has the merit of identifying and uncovering the determinate relations that underwrite forms of individuation, but the question of the political form remains open. It is to that question that I turn to next.

Chapter 6: The Political Form

Introduction

Having mapped the various ways in which the individual is rendered within the real abstractions of capital I have sought to show how we can expose the material and epistemological impediments to political change. Politics as it is generally understood is channeled one way or another through a cipher of individuation, either by the prescriptions of individual liberty, the invocation of abstract rights, or more generally in the framework of representative democracy. However, not only does the form-determined individual prescribe politics within the exigencies of capital, but patterns of individuation more generally become a contradictory limit within political organisation itself. In the previous chapter, I turned to an analytic strategy for thinking how forms of individuation are rendered within a particular arrangement of relations. Evaluating the political connotations from Balibar's reading of Marx as a transindividual thinker, I argued that transindividuality offers an essential critical perspective that, nonetheless, leaves open the question of political form.

In this final chapter, I take up the question of the political form as an orientation to modes of thought and practice that holds the potential to break down the limits imposed by the dual form-determinations of value and individual. Politics comes after the individual as these forms must somehow be addressed and negotiated without continually reaffirming them. Such a conception of politics, I argue, is set within a

long trajectory toward the possibility of a communist temporality, but marked within the disjunctive sequences of determinate and conscious political practice.

I start by considering what an orientation to politics might mean. Then, synthesising concepts from the work of Alain Badiou with the theory of self-abolition central to communism theory, I consider the political form as a mode of praxis that necessarily includes both a critical, analytic dimension, and a determinate, material practice. To help theorise this form of politics, I engage with an important intervention from Nathan Brown (2021), whose formulation of rationalist empiricism breaks with a false dichotomy between speculation and critique to offer a perspective on political intervention as a mode of experimentation. The idea is to conceive a theory and practice of politics as a modality that holds together a conscious and critical mode of thought with a speculative and material practice oriented to the world. Holding this praxis together is the idea of communism.

Orientation

Returning now to the question of the political form. At the end of the Chapter 5 I argue this question is one left open by theories of the transindividual. Read, for example, contextualises his reflection on transindividual politics by citing Badiou, in order to frame the transindividual as a counterpoint to any renewal of the subject (Read 2016, 288). Read's criticisms are notable for holding to a common criticism of Badiou, namely that the latter's idea of politics amounts to waiting for an event or rupture to occur (e.g. Read 2016, 289; Gilbert 2014, 15; Bensaïd 2004). More important, however, is how these comments are framed within a context that hints at the marginal status of communism within philosophies of the transindividual. On the

one hand, projecting this faith based reading onto Badiou overlooks important elements in his work, both in his conception of the subject and the event. But the absence of any significant engagement with the idea of communism is a potentially more important obstacle.

Setting up the transindividual as an analytic framework provides an essential perspective on the fundamentally relational production of the capitalist social formation (Read 2016, 74ff). In his meticulous mapping of the interlocking dimensions between the different abodes of transindividuation, Read highlights the relationships between the underlying determinate relations of capital and their appearance. Articulating the capitalist structure of the transindividual, Read demonstrates how capital inverts social relations to make them appear, as Balibar writes, ‘in the form of a relation between autonomous individuals’ (Balibar 2020b, 154). There remains, however, a sense that when applied to politics, the transindividual indicates its own limit by framing the political question around this very form of appearance.

Some interesting phrasing alerts us to the missing idea of communism in Read’s reflections on the transindividual. Hinting at Marx’s formula for communism as ‘the real movement’ (Marx and Engels 2010b, 49), Read nonetheless avoids mentioning communism when he argues the analytic content of transindividuality is keyed to ‘the real movement of the current conjuncture’ (Read 2011, 288). Having framed the transindividual as a critical practice of refusing the binary between individual and collective (Read 2011, 286), Read follows this up by intimating that a transindividual political practice can only be revealed in the negative, they are demarcated by what

they are not (2011, 288). Accordingly, the kinds of militant, axiomatic politics we find in Badiou are deemed unnecessary for transindividual politics:

Politics then has as its condition not the event, not some ruptural break with the existing order, but the tensions and divisions within the existing order. Every conjuncture, every historical moment is defined by different individuations, political and economic, as well as tensions between the different elements of these individuations, as affects, habits, gestures, and knowledges combine in different ways in each. Politics is not a matter of waiting for some epochal event, or rupture, but is always taking place (even if disappointingly so) in the tensions and pressures that define every metastable articulation of individuations (Read 2016, 289).

Elsewhere, Read's work is concerned with an almost Foucauldian practice of revealing the production of subjectivity 'through structures of language and power' (Read 2011, 114). There can be no doubt politics is an immanent practice, indeed, it is Badiou's position on immanence that calls into question the idea that his political theory amounts to waiting for an event. Politics, Badiou argues, 'is a matter of immanent subjective determination, an axiom of the collective' (Badiou 2005b, 104). Perhaps more pertinent, is that a negotiated approach to politics that centres on the effects of language and power verges on what Badiou refers to in *Logics of Worlds* as 'democratic materialism' (Badiou 2009a, 1–9). Democratic materialism equates the negotiation and circulation of communicative techniques, the mobilisations of affect, biopolitics, as a regime of finitude that codes all politics as the litigation of bodies and languages (Badiou 2009a, 1–9). A common anthropological variant of democratic materialism centres on a presupposition that, 'there are only individuals and communities' (Badiou 2009a, 8). While it would be incredibly reductive to claim the

transindividual is captured solely within these poles, the analytic capacity of the transindividual nonetheless rests on a critique of relations that are already with us.

Badiou wants to argue that the impasse of politics is ‘a global halting point’ found within a faux-political plurality that relies on expanding the recognition and representation of modes of identity (Badiou 2009a, 2). Identifying the retreat of politics into a communitarian exchange that fixes abstractions in their place, Badiou argues that politics must be rescued from its strict correlation with social relations:

The social names the place of relationships. Its thought organises itself on the basis of social relations, exploitation, and oppression. But relations touch upon politics only by fixing it. The mobility that is politics does not find its truth in the social relation. It is that which testifies to a nonrelation, to the slippage of a de-linking. This is what matters in politics, even though the visibility of this nonrelation depends on a tightening of the conceptual screws around the relation itself (Badiou 2018, 37 *translation modified*)

Among a number of theoretical innovations, tightening these conceptual screws yields Badiou’s theory of ‘the inexistent’ (Badiou 2009a, 321–24). A minimal structuring element in any given world, the inexistent is a paradoxically determinant factor in the logic of how things appear in that world (see also Badiou 2009a, 358–59). Panagiotis Sotiris compares this to Althusser’s problematic of conceiving an ‘underdetermined’ element of social reality that exists but ‘cannot — within a historically specific conjuncture — pass a certain threshold of effectivity or “threshold of determination” and therefore cannot influence social reality’ (Sotiris 2021, 74; see Althusser 2011). Badiou’s own conception of politics is fundamentally bound to the question of how the inexistent can reach this threshold. Coming again to a question of transcendental

logic, Badiou gives the example in the political domain of the proletariat as the in-existent peculiar to capital.

The proletariat is completely subtracted from the sphere of political presentation... according to the rules governing the appearance of the political world, it does not appear... It is there but with the minimal degree of appearance... This is obviously what the Internationale proclaims: 'We are nothing, let us be all!' What does 'we are nothing' mean? Those proclaiming 'we are nothing' are not in the process of affirming their nothingness. They are simply affirming that they are nothing in the world as it is, as far as appearing politically is involved... Becoming 'all' presupposes, then, a change of world, which is to say, a change of transcendental (Badiou 2011, 61)

If today the proletariat seems an anachronistic political formulation, Nathan Brown's proposal to remap the borders of the proletariat to include the disparate array of separations and extractive domains is an appropriate supplement for filling out this formula. Bearing on the prospect of politicising the proletariat as a form, the intersecting modes of gendered and racialised labour, the homeless and displaced, and the ever-expanding forms of precariousness (Brown 2021, 220) indicates the sheer number of forces that act upon the proletariat to ensure its political inexistence.

Here, it is also worth thinking again of how Marx is always concerned with a dialectic between the way things are, and the way things appear. For Badiou, the entire philosophical endeavour that marks the way we think about the passage from being to appearance is legislated against the central insight that anything that appears as One is only the effect of an operation (Badiou 2005a, 23–24). Applying this formula against the logic of individuation within the world of appearances, or the materialism of bodies and languages urges the consideration of political universality that, in Badiou's words, 'cannot be either individual or communitarian' (Badiou 2009a, 9).

Instead, for Badiou, we need a theory of the subject that, ‘subtracts itself from every community and destroys every individuation’ (Badiou 2009a, 9). For this reason, Badiou claims ‘politics, which is a measured thought of the social and its representation, is not chained to the social but, rather marks its exception’ (Badiou 2018, 37).

For all their analytic force, when theories of the transindividual grapple with politics they are necessarily bound to the organisation of social relations inferred by the transindividual. Even including the obscure determinations of appearance, or refusing the binary of individual and collective, the transindividual is a descriptive paradigm that lends itself to critique. Indicating his awareness of this, Balibar remarks on Marx’s ideas around communism *vis-à-vis* transindividuality by suggesting, ‘the idea of communism now represents not an achievement of the idea of the transindividual, but an exception or even a vanishing point in relation to its logic’ (Balibar 2020b, 153). In other words, the transindividual is a way of accounting for the arrangement of relations that needs to be overturned, just as it will represent any new arrangement of relations. Here, this oscillation returns us to Balibar’s metaphor of the ‘edge’ (Balibar 2020b, 178ff), as discussed in Chapter 5, by centring the transindividual on a mode of ‘undecidability’. Undecidability necessarily raises the question of what kinds of political decisions can be undertaken to change the configuration of the transindividual.

Revisiting Read’s criticism of Badiou, if the goal is in some sense to problematise the subject of ruptural or evental formulations of politics, then we must consider what appears to be its antithesis, namely the impasse that arises when politics is framed

within existing forms. Read rightly takes apart the dual mythology that says, ‘individuation can only be a separation from collectivity’, or that, ‘agency...must be predicated on something, some essence, that is prior to or outside of its determination by social and political conditions’ (Read 2016, 249). By turning back into individuation, however, we end up stuck within an already established transcendental limit. Oppressive abstractions are always operationalised in a relation between two related individuations. First, categorial abstractions like race, gender, and sexuality are applied at the collective level as forms of discrimination, but these discriminations take on their full force as they are concretised via a subjective individuation that is enforced and policed both internally and structurally as a form of individuation. There can be no doubt the relay between these individuations invites the necessity of politics, however, a problem emerges in political forms that paradoxically reinforce the relations of domination they wish to escape.

The question becomes how we think about political form. How do we think the kind of politics that can properly exceed a situation that is mediated by the form-determinations of capital? Jacques Rancière reminds us that since Aristotle depoliticisation is, ‘the oldest task of politics’ (Rancière 2007, 19). Reconstructing the metaphysics of the capital-relation reveals how an overdetermined figure of the individual is essential to this very depoliticisation. In the first instance, this is a problem of orientation where politics is oriented to a calculus of individual choice and opinion so that it becomes part of the very practice that entrenches the figure as a limit to thought and a foreclosure of politics. Framing this around terms set by Badiou’s seminar on Kant’s famous question of, ‘what does it mean to orient oneself in

thinking?’ (Kant 1996b), the subjective figure of the individual is ‘a disorientation of thought’ (Badiou 2005c, np). Mapping this disorientation to prescriptive and fictive modes of politics prompts Badiou’s injunction to, ‘orient ourselves toward politics’ (Badiou 2018, 36).

As I have tried to demonstrate in the preceding chapters, this is not simply an ideological problem but one that is produced within the concretisation of abstractions internal to the metaphysics of the capital-relation. The articulations of individuation and the appearance of separation under capital are constitutively real because they are central to historically mediated capitalist social relations. The individual is an idea reinforced in practice in such a way that it negates the recognition and productive capacity of the relations that make it appear as a social form. In this way, not only does the individual become the very means of obscuring its own relations, but it becomes the site of what Jones refers to as the ‘vulgar conception of resistance’ (C. Jones Manuscript) where the individual as a locus of resistance makes systemic challenges to capital impossible.

This is where I see interventions like that of Bernard Harcourt (2020). Harcourt rejects what he sees as the dated marxist-leninist question of ‘what is to be done’ to instead adopt the *laisser-aller* frame of ‘what more shall I do’ (2020, 15). Such a decision turns the question of praxis into a bad infinite resolved through the proxy of self-reflexive choices that invoke an otherwise important ethical commitment to a cause, but a commitment nonetheless that can only be measured against oneself. Here, politics is conceived as an enumerating multiple of One, and only ever underwritten by multiplicity insofar as that multiple is equated with a series of

individual choices, or the hoped-for collation of ethically motivated individuals into what Jeremy Gilbert has called a ‘meta-Individual’ (Gilbert 2014, 70).

Moving beyond the reduction of politics to individuated rationality is not a simple orientation beyond the individual, however. It necessarily recognises that any politics coming after the individual must take seriously the relations that produce the abstract individual, and the halting points signified by individuation as a general form. One strategy may be to argue for the kind of always incomplete individuation put forward by theories of the transindividual, but here it is only in the determinate refusal of completion, and of finitude, that anything like a political orientation can be found (e.g. Harney and Moten 2021). Framing individuation as a more general problem of form-determination allows us to go beyond political figurations subordinated to liberal doctrine or humanist conceptions of being to also consider the patterns and thresholds of enclosure that drag political forms back into the valorising process of capital. In what follows, I propose a theory of politics that first, holds together the embodiment of political forms with analytic and critical strategies, and second, orients this praxis to the idea of communism. Through a critical account of key ideas from Badiou, I argue the undecidability of the transindividual relation invites the necessity of a political form centred on decision itself.

The Thought of Politics

Returning now to the question from the very beginning of this thesis, ‘can politics be thought?’ (Badiou 2018). I want to reframe this within the specific problematic of theory and practice as it relates to real abstraction and the metaphysics of the capital-relation. A profound consequence of Sohn-Rethel’s critique of abstraction, as thought

itself is subject to abstractions that originate outside the mind, those practices on which abstractions are conditioned are immanent to the social formation in which these forms of thought continue to operate. As I have argued in preceding chapters, this means that forms of thought and the practices that support them enter into recursive, feedback loops. Both the structure and its contingent thought-forms are part of their own reproduction, not only because they are internal to the social formation, but because they are both reproduced in practice and internalised in a system that becomes second nature. To recall, Sohn-Rethel fashions a material schema from the correlates of the exchange abstraction to ‘pay transcendental idealism back in its own coin’ (Sohn-Rethel 2021, 31). In so doing, however, Sohn-Rethel inadvertently invokes his own version of Kant’s problem of exteriority, namely the problem that occurs when a set of transcendental conditions mark the limit of what can be thought (see N. Brown 2021, 2).

Kant’s (1996a). self-professed aim was to construct a philosophical system that could short circuit the limits of both empiricism of rationalism by synthesising both the empirical and the rational in the transcendental subject. If we take Kant at his word, it follows from Sohn-Rethel’s materialist reversal of the transcendental subject that the relay between empiricist and rationalist constructions is reflected in social forms that reproduce their own conceptual basis. Forms of separation and autonomisation animate transcendental categories and concepts through a self-affirming, practical relation, they are thus caught up within the limits of that relation.

Identifying the exchange abstraction as the basis for philosophical abstraction itself, means Sohn-Rethel’s intervention also has the effect of undermining the autonomy

and privilege of philosophy (Toscano 2019, 292). The categories and concepts of philosophy are not forms of invention; they are intimately bound to the social practices that produce forms of thought. This raises a spectre of inadequacy for modes of philosophical critique and contingent political practices. Nevertheless, the very fact that real abstraction is foregrounded in material relations leaves open the possibility of challenging the conditions that govern abstraction at the level of practice. In this way, we can pose the political question without reducing it to Enlightenment style corrections of reason or relying on hidden essences embedded in repressed forms of subjectivity. Instead, the question of political thought is framed around the question of what forms politics might take to address the recursive form-determinations and re-incorporations of real abstraction.

A key to this question lies in understanding that the forms of thought which govern the conditions of possibility for politics are rendered in a dialectic between the material practice of everyday life and the habitual projection of those forms into an epistemological framework for the world in general. Any political orientation that brings with it the problem of countering or intervening in this dialectic thus carries the necessity of reflecting on immanent forms of praxis. Kant, and by extension Sohn-Rethel identify the limits of possibility within a transcendental horizon, structured for Kant by the manifold of the transcendental subject, and in return for Sohn-Rethel by the Kantian schema that is reflected in the commodity form.

Returning to Kant's attempted short-circuit of rationalism and empiricism, Nathan Brown's proposal to subvert the relation between rationalism and empiricism holds some important insights for how we might address this question. Setting up a relay

between critique and speculation, Brown (2021) argues after Althusser, for a program of ‘rationalist empiricism’ (Althusser 2003) as a materialist practice of ‘speculative critique’. Empiricism here is not a vulgar or positivist practice that naturalises the world of appearances. Instead, rationalist empiricism is mapped to a conjunction between methods of analytic and critical empiricism on the one hand, and strategies of speculative practice and thought on the other:

While *empiricism* engages the experience of the “sheer actuality” through which we are embedded in the external totality, *rationalism* delimits the selective emphasis by which our consciousness is constrained. Thus both are required, countering and amplifying one another, in order for philosophy to pursue its speculative labor in concert with critique (N. Brown 2021, 31)

If we come back to the analytic capacity of the Marxist transindividual, we can identify one such form of critique. Applying this to politics can direct our attention to the prospects for theorising a political form that holds critique together with forms of experimentation. Brown’s guiding concern is to think how these two poles of thought can be held together while remaining apart so as to identify both the limits to thought and practice, and their extension (N. Brown 2021, 3–31).

With this, we are on similar terrain to that detected by Balibar after his proposal to read Marx through a ‘materialism without matter’, as a reformation of idealism (Balibar 2017, 23–25). Balibar (2017) places Marx at the edge of a philosophical conjuncture that, ‘strives to think its own limits, whether to abolish them or to establish itself on the basis of a recognition of those limits’ (Balibar 2017, 19). These limits are established for Marx based on his critique of the appearances of the capital-relation, and the procedural method of abstraction that interrogates the concrete

conditions of possibility from within those appearances. It is this speculative boundary no less, that for Balibar, propels the political propositions in Marx's work against the 'edge of the transindividual' (Balibar 2020b, 178–79). Moreover, at the threshold of Marx's own investigations, we find the speculative grist for milling the contradictions and antinomies of the capital-relation in order to uncover the immanent means for overturning them. Marx thinks the conditions of capital in order to identify the prospects for going beyond them, from within them.

Brown's work demarcates a general intervention of a properly dialectical operating principal that is at once immanent to the conditions of a situation, but not bound to them, as a strategy for thinking the threshold of different kinds of formation. For this reason, Nick Nesbitt rightly argues that Brown's project would be better characterised with a name that it avoids, 'rationalist materialism' (Nesbitt 2021). Nonetheless, what interests me here is Brown's effort to reposition the relationship between critique and speculation, precisely because of the implications it holds for a materialist intervention into the metaphysics of the capital-relation.

By marking out the territory within a set of empirical coordinates to map the potential road of extension, Brown's proposal holds the potential for illuminating the kinds of mobilisations that can overcome the epistemological impediments that interrupt the possibility of change (N. Brown 2021, 1–9). Grappling with the relationship between the analysis and critique of epistemic limits is clearly important in the context of real abstraction. Not only for tracing the contours of theory and practice, but as a strategy for bringing together the conjunction of thought and politics to recognise the limits of organisational forms and break through those limits

thereafter. This is a question that becomes particularly acute when political forms immanent to the capitalist social formation, like the proletariat, or structurally mediated forms of identity, are mobilised to abolish themselves.

The political implications of this are not simply bound to the problems of formalisation, they are grounded within determinate political operations to understand the productive power of contradiction that arises in the process of self-abolition, therein aligning politics to an injunction to experiment with conditions at their threshold. This opens a breach for someone like Badiou, whose political theory is bound up with extending actually existing struggles through formal procedures of what he calls a construction of truth (Badiou 2005a, 2009a, 2022). For Brown, the significance of Badiou's political theory is found in the conjunction of thought and politics in concrete political situations. By experimenting with determinate political forms, sequences of encounters and decisions are grafted onto a process that can change the composition of a world (2021, 195). Brown is right to argue the efficacy of Badiou's political theory lies in the link between speculative forms of thought and their immanent relation to practice. As we will see in the following section, Badiou's vision of subtractive politics can be thought of as an experimental formalisation that tests new ground out of existing conditions.

Badiou is important also for the ways in which his own philosophical endeavour displaces the Kantian schema via a critique of the transcendental subject. If Sohn-Rethel has shown the importance of turning the transcendental structure on its head to illustrate a construction of subjectivity immanent to the metaphysics of capital, then it remains to rediscover the form of the subject that can go beyond this. The

subtractive operation of Badiou's theory of the subject holds a lot of promise in this regard, precisely because it is not bound by the foreclosure of existing logic. Instead, the subject is invoked as the bearer of irruptions that signal the overcoming of this logic. Against a broadly post-Kantian register of subjectivity, Badiou argues, 'a subject is not, in any manner, the organisation of a sense of experience. It is not a transcendental function' (Badiou 2005a, 391). There is no subject, for Badiou, where something has not happened to precipitate a change in the order of being. Indeed, a subject is not an invariant substance, or constructed around a categorical form, for Badiou it is an axiomatic articulation bound to a specific transformation in the logic of an ontological multiplicity (2005a, 391–92). From this ground we can start to consider a political form that can avoid the limits of an individuated subject.

Subject

Badiou's displacement of the transcendental schema is anchored to a theory of subjectivation that maps the formal contours of actual material change to a sequence of decisions by a collective body. To start, it is important that we make a clear distinction of usage here, as the concept of subjectivation as it is intended here can be easily confused with the different translations and other uses of the term. Sometimes rendered as subjectivisation or subjectification, the term *subjectivation* is chosen here to delineate it from usage of the former terms when they are concerned with forms of constructed, produced or negotiated subjectivity. Variations on the latter form of subjectivisation have been used in different ways to navigate the conflation of the two constitutive latin expressions that bequeath their meaning to the traditional use of the

word 'subject'. As Balibar clarifies, this is an 'objective "play on words", rooted in the very history of language and institutions' (Balibar 1994, 8).

We translate as *subject* the neutral, impersonal notion of *subjectum*, i.e. an individual substance or a material substratum for properties, but we *also* translate as *subject* the personal notion of a *subjectus*: a political and juridical term, which refers to *subjection* or *submission*, i.e. the fact that a (generally) human person (man, woman or child) is *subjected to* the more or less absolute, more or less legitimate authority of a superior power, e.g. a sovereign (Balibar 1994, 8)

Balibar describes how the collapse of these terms into one another has troubled the entire history of Western philosophy, thus leading to an endless reflection on dualism that links the individual with the transcendental subject, or what Foucault calls the 'empirico-transcendental doublet' (Balibar 1994, 4; see also Foucault 2006, 347). The imbrication of these terms, between the subject as individual substance and its double in abstract form is the same schema that Sohn-Rethel traces to the real abstraction of the exchange-relation. The relay between substance and inscription, however, has been taken in different ways to map various forms of subjectivisation, for example, through power (Foucault 1978, 1986, 1995, 1980), gendered performativity (Butler 2015), or ideology (Althusser 2014). Invariably these accounts are marked by a negative figuration that embodies the paradox of a subject that bears the marks of ostensibly collective, but invariably discriminatory abstractions of difference in class, race, gender, and sexuality.

While much of this work remains important for uncovering multiple reinforcements of the individual effect, it is hard to escape the way theories of subjectivisation run in parallel with the figure obtained in the form-determination of the individual. In

response, the use of subjectivation as I intend it here follows Badiou through two significant orientations. First, a move away from any reduction of subjectivity to connections with self, individual, or experience and substance. But more importantly, subjectivation is an axiomatic form, a radically procedural conception rooted both to the thought, and the organisation of emancipatory politics under concrete circumstances. In short, subjectivation is concerned here with the political form. Subjectivation designates a decisive political sequence that follows from a critical application of the formal theory of the subject from which Badiou derives his subtractive metapolitics (Badiou 2005b). Such a formulation of politics relies not on the production of subjects internal to the capital-relation, but on the constitution of political subjects under determinate conditions. After Badiou, this form of subject is not a 'register of experience', 'a moral category', or an 'ideological fiction' (Badiou 2009a, 47–48). Rather, subjectivation is an inventive, decisive, and determinate form of politics that is both immanent to the political situation but is also carried forward by what has already happened, and the possibility of what will happen. In Badiou's own words, the subject of politics is 'the interval between the past event and the coming event' (Badiou and Tarby 2013, 13).

Badiou's at times arcane and austere formalisations sometimes confound a clear definition of the event, but that is only because an event cannot be reduced to any single thing. Rather, it is something that is not, a constitutive trace around which multiple material encounters cohere into the name of an event (Badiou 2005a, 201–11). When something has happened politically to establish a new idea, a new temporality, or a demonstrable material change, one cannot point to a single,

individuated atom to claim it as a cause. Instead, Badiou argues, all that remains of what an event is, is a trace (Badiou 2009a, 50). It is the job of a subject to work that trace into the truth of an event. Subjectivation is the form that politics takes, but what animates that form is a series of decisions that, ‘point by point’ (Badiou 2009a, 399), work the consequences of an event into a new configuration of being. Given the central role of thought and decision, it is a leap to suggest that Badiou wants us to wait for an event.

An event is something that brings to light a possibility that was invisible or even unthinkable. An event is not by itself the creation of a reality; it is the creation of a possibility, it opens up a possibility. It indicates to us that a possibility exists that has been ignored. The event is, in a certain way, merely a proposition... but there, then, has to be an effort - a group effort in the political context...for this possibility to become real; that is, for it to be inscribed, step by step, in the world (Badiou and Tarby 2013, 9–10)

For Badiou, a subject is always formal because it ‘formalises the effects’ of an event, but moreover, because it ‘designates a system of forms and operations’ produced in the ensemble of a political process (Badiou 2009a, 47). Moreover, Badiou’s theory of the subject is specifically concerned with the form in which it appears (Badiou 2009a, 49). What should interest us in light of the problem of form-determination, is rather than adhering to forms of appearance that are already incorporated within the structures of valorisation and individuation internal to capital, Badiou’s subject *must appear* in a form not already given. As Badiou argues, a subject coheres around ‘what has no place to be’, both in the sense that its cause is barred from the logic that structures any given situation or world, but also in the way that it subtracts itself from a world to make something new (Badiou 2009a, 45).

Subtraction is always a problem of thought; it is an operation that delimits something new from the inertial field of what exists. For Badiou, this is a process of ‘induction’ (Badiou 2009a, 493–503), however, this is not the thought of an individual, the ‘induction’ of a subject cannot be carried out in the first person. Instead, we must think the political form as an ensemble; the collation of effects, encounters and decisions that accrete in the unfolding sequence of a political event to establish the truth of that event. The induction process is what holds a political form together, not only between the people involved and the decisions undertaken, but in holding together the disparate, heterogeneous elements of a political process. Induction is a process of inferring, collectively, from an ensemble of actions, decisions and so on, what the truth of a political sequence is. A political truth, writes Badiou, ‘is a concrete time-specific sequence in which a new thought and a new practice of collective emancipation arise, exist, and eventually disappear’ (Badiou 2010, 231).

Subjectivation is a localised and immanent political form grounded within specific political sequences. Here we can connect the construction of the political form to the aforementioned theory of the in-existent (Badiou 2009a, 321–24; 2011, 58–63). As Badiou explains it, an in-existent element ‘renders it necessary for events to occur which drastically change the relation, at the local level, between the multiples of a world and the transcendental legislation of their immanent identities and differences’ (Badiou 2011, 59). Much of this turns on Badiou’s definition of a world. There are many worlds within the world, but each one manifests with a particular ‘transcendental logic’ (Badiou 2009a, 102). Contrary to the ‘world’ of capital that presents itself as a ‘unity of objects and monetary signs’ (Badiou 2009b 58), a political

orientation to the world starts from multiplicity to acknowledge that the world itself is made up of differences (2009b, 62). Whether or not these differences are deemed to exist can bear on the necessity of politics.

Let us call these people, who are present in the world but absent from its meaning and decisions about its future, the inexistent of the world. We shall then say that a *change of world* is real when an inexistent of the world starts to exist in this same world with maximum intensity (Badiou 2012b, 56)

As Brown argues, Badiou's theory is more a description of what happens in political sequences than any kind of guide of what to do (N. Brown 2021, 195). A moderated account of this admittedly grand project (Read 2016, 288) can bring this to bear on a multiplicity of political situations to think an accumulation of subjectivations that could marshal the kind of overdetermined contradiction that can result in serious material change (see Althusser 2005). Thinking politics in this way is always anchored to the kinds of exceptions that can potentiate already existing, but diminished and marginalised relations into new configurations. If there is a problem here, it is that Badiou does not address the form determinations of capital directly. However, as we have seen in Marx's own arguments, concrete change requires the force of multiple determinations. Mobilising the political power of difference by definition means engaging in political practices that are grounded in forms and relations that escape the separations, divisions and individuations of the capital-relation.

The need to both think and act politics as an exception is stated particular clearly in the history of radical feminist thought by the well-known epithet in Audre Lorde's (2007) essay 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House'. For

Lorde, the capacity for emancipatory politics is immanent to the ontological field of difference. Striking a remarkably transindividual tone, Lorde writes:

Within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being. Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged (2007, 112)

Recognising, as Lorde does, the powerful vector of politics that centres difference as a locus of possibility, means taking up the challenge of diverse struggles on multiple fronts so as to situate the numerous political experiments, proposals and sequences that can play their role in mapping a disjunctive universal to political change. Badiou is often criticised for his treatment of difference, but he is at least minimally consonant with these claims for outlining the materiality of the collective that determines whether a situation is political in the first place. He writes, ‘an event is political if its material is collective, or the event can only be attributed to a collective multiplicity’ (Badiou 2004, 153). We should be clear that qualifying the collective material as a multiplicity implies more than an ordinary group subject. A multiplicity goes beyond a mere group subject to incorporate the spectrum of real encounters that accumulate either side of an event. This is where criticism of Badiou’s Messianic or miraculous inclination starts to fall apart (e.g. Bensaïd 2004). Not only is he clear on the need to situate politics within determinate situations, but the decisions involved are not outsourced to a transcendental automaton they are provoked at every step by the need to struggle against the reactionary forces that deny anything has happened, or that anything can happen, and by the necessary fidelity that decides the consequences of a political event (see Badiou 2005a, 201–61).

The Idea of Communism

If the political form is sustained by a subjectivated form in its local temporal sequences, it is also connected to an idea that exceeds these forms. For Badiou, our present political conjuncture is characterised above all else by the injunction ‘to live without idea’ (Badiou 2009a, 511). Through his idiosyncratic account of ideation, Badiou taps a kind of trans-temporal, transindividual dimension to supplement the theory of subjectivation with his idea of communism. Communism, for Badiou, is a hypothesis intimately bound to emancipation that has undertaken various tests, a hypothesis that despite historical failures should not be abandoned. As an idea, communism persists over different temporalities, holding diverse by complementary practices and sequences together by anchoring them to a common historical trajectory (Badiou 2010, 229–60). It is not despite Badiou’s insistence on communism as an idea, but because of it that he has very little to say about what communism might entail. He does, however, enlist the overarching principle of communism to the withering of the state, *pace* Marx’s notion of ‘free association’ (Badiou and Lancelin 2019, 30). A qualification for this comes from an interview with Aude Lancelin, where Badiou consider the scope of communism.

The term “communism” — and to an even greater extent “communist revolution” can only mean something that, because of its magnitude, its destiny, and so on, can only really be compared with the Neolithic Revolution. Communism isn’t what Marx may imply at times. It’s not a short-term solution resulting from the unfettered development of capitalism. It is actually a figure of the existence of humanity as a whole, one that breaks with the state of affairs that has lasted for thousands of years (Badiou and Lancelin 2019, 123–24)

If this raises the prospect of teleological spectre in Badiou's thought, it is really a measure of the enormous stakes of a communist movement. Badiou consistently frames political sequences as held together by their speculative connection to the idea of communism, while at the same time urging the militant politics of communist movements (Badiou 2012a). Addressing a more thorough account of the meaning of communism involves putting aside Badiou's strangely reductive suggestion that Marx considered the idea to be short-term solution. Throughout the course of his work, Marx derives a motif of *association* from actually existing labour organisations to prescribe a formula of 'free association' that can express the communist relation. In the *Manifesto for the Communist Party*, for example, the famous list of measures for communism starts with the abolition of private property but culminates in, 'an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all' (Marx and Engels 2010a, 506). Underlying this condition is conscious organisation of social needs that can reorient the metabolic relation of life beyond the mediations of value.

In *Capital*, Marx imagines a de-fetishised social life of free association in which the means of production are held in common, remarking that, 'the veil is not removed from the countenance of the social life-process...until it becomes production by freely associated men, and stands under their conscious and planned control (Marx 1990, 173). With a couple of notable exceptions, including a thought experiment in his 'Critique of the Gotha Program' (Marx 2010), and in *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx famously wrote very little about what communism might look like (Balibar 2011, 16; cf. Hudis 2012). However, the consistent tendency to frame the prospect of a

communist relation within the language of association is indicative of the difference between a social formation of capital structured around abstraction, separation and radically unequal outcomes, and a transparent organisation of freedom and necessity envisaged in the idea of communism. We should note also that Marx addresses himself to the question that Badiou routinely avoids, by never forgetting the formula for communism necessarily includes the conscious production and distribution of the necessities of life.

On a philosophical level, it is clear that association as a concept is as important to the material realisation of post-capitalism as the idea of communism is to its imagination. Etymologically rooted to the Latin *socius*, we find connotations of partaking, of companion, and unsurprisingly of comrade. But the root of the word also means ‘to follow’ or ‘to see’ (Kroonen 2013, 420). We can think here of what is to follow, however, both partaking and the connotations of visibility and transparency speak to the kind of demystification contemplated by Marx. We might also extrapolate from this to think of a politics through which we can return to the aesthetic dimension of capital to see through its appearances. One approach to this might be to look at it through Jacques Rancière’s idea of reconfiguring the ‘distribution of the sensible’, which means to intervene in an aesthetic structure of intelligibility (Rancière 2006, 12). But conceiving politics in this way is not just about changing the ‘distribution of the sensible’. Rather, as Brown argues, it is about attending to the insensible conditions of possibility that order the distribution of appearances as they are (N. Brown 2019). Or to put this another way, it is about addressing politics to the

material practices from which the appearances of capital are derived, and not to the re-arrangement of those appearances.

To envisage a form of free association that we might call communism, there is a need to disintegrate the asocial — or anti-social— variant of the social formation that abides in the disaggregated and recursive forms of separation and individuation that foreclose politics. However, the limit to conceiving the idea of communism in this way is it can become suspended in a form of critique, thus evoking the possibility of an ever-retreating trace of the idea itself. Balibar, for example, presents an idea of communism as commitment that nonetheless rests on a ‘negative function’ of deconstructing existing organisations (Balibar 2013, 34). While this signifies a limit for conceiving communism, there remains something productive where Balibar’s formulation elucidates an inherent tension in the relationship between Marxism and anthropological difference (2013, 32–33), a tension that we can say exists also in Badiou.

One way to resolve this tension is to point to Marx’s own argument that communism would aim to reverse the actual inequality of bourgeois right into a recognition that equality itself can only even be differential in kind (see marx2010w). Balibar’s formulation of difference, however, is conceived as an excess that goes beyond concepts like ‘productive forces’ and ‘biopolitics’ to excavate an ‘order of multiplicity’ from determinate struggles which might engender ‘a diverse interpretation of the transformation of the world’ (Balibar 2013, 32–33). Thus, echoing Marx, communism is coded by Balibar as the ‘paradoxical unity of antinomic modes of existence’ (Balibar 2020b, 180). Moreover, the prospect of communism itself is rendered in Balibar’s

reading of Marx as an immanent transgression realised in an incremental movement that opens the possibility of thinking a determinate form of abolition.

Here, Balibar raises an important question in the right context. Difference should indeed be considered within the ambit of communist thought as its critical grounding (see Jones Forthcoming). Placing difference within the context of this thesis, what if anything can be more antithetical to the problems of separation, misplaced abstraction, and individuation than a thoroughly grounded conception of difference mapped to the idea of communism. I want to argue, however, that difference is at its most productive when thought within something like a disjunctive synthesis with the concept of abolition, so as to properly identify and overturn the contradiction that sees difference become a route of oppressive individuation under the capital-relation. Moreover, to position the problem of difference as one immanent to communism is to undermine a common ideological caricature of communism that pictures a violent levelling abstraction that abolishes all difference (Toscano 2010, 199). This is captured nicely by Toscano where he writes,

From the standpoint of its most dogged opponents, communism is a political pathology of abstraction, a violent denial of worldly differences and customs, paying no heed to the density of history and the inertia of nature. It is the doomed attempt to philosophise the world into something other than what it is (Toscano 2010, 195)

Thus, it becomes necessary for a conjunction of politics, thought and communism to interrogate the rift between the kind of exploitative differences produced and enforced within the capital-relation and the ground of difference that always escapes that logic. Difference holds a contentious place in Badiou's work, owing in many ways to his formula in *Ethics* that designates a process of truth as 'indifferent to differences'

(Badiou 2001, 27). Critics like Elizabeth Paquette have taken this to mean that Badiou's conception of politics trucks specifically with indifference, indeed Paquette nominates Badiou's theory of politics as a 'politics of indifference' (Paquette 2020, 65ff). This is an unfortunate phrase, not only does Badiou never claim that politics itself is indifferent, but he also claims a political process is intimately bound to the demands of fidelity after an event (Badiou 2009a, 50–54). There could hardly be a greater gap between the concept of indifference and that of fidelity. Indeed, here we might say that Badiou's politics is not simply structured around subjects that demonstrate fidelity to an event, but an underlying fidelity to the fact that difference is what there is.

This is not to say, however, there are no tensions in Badiou's treatment of difference. However, these can be addressed more acutely in his reticence toward the specificities of the capitalist social formation. To undermine the real abstractions of exploitation does involve subtraction, but in a way that can overturn the gap between the differences constitutive in the multiplicity of being and the extractive displacement of difference onto hierarchies that categorise, taxonomise and exploit the spatial, temporal and material lags (see Bhandar 2018, 8) upon which finance capital is able to endlessly expand its operation.

Mobilising the tension identified by Balibar beyond the purely negative dimension of critique requires something more than an aporetic empiricism, and this is where I come back to Brown's proposal for a speculative critique that underwrites theory and practice. Brown emphasises the extension of thought by formal and experimental imperatives of materialism that demonstrate the efficacy of a subtractive, formal

procedure of political experimentation when mapped to a hypothesis. As Brown argues at length, both critique and speculation are bound together as the ‘codetermination of the material and the ideal’ (N. Brown 2021, 29). Without the speculative device of a political form, there is no means for testing the hypothesis of communism (cf. Bernes 2021). Thus, as Brown parses Badiou’s communist hypothesis, it is a regulative idea that can hold together a diverse set of political processes without returning to saturated forms (see Lazarus 2007, 2015). Brown writes:

The idea of communism would orient a disparate collective toward a normative ideal in the absence of a given political form (the Party) so as to sustain the question of communism (rather than some other question) while holding that question open to the necessary and arduous recomposition of a politics without a party (N. Brown 2021, 254–55)

The idea of communism cuts across the vectors of politics to ground itself in the sequences that have at their heart the common goals of social transformation. To be coherent it must hold together the demand of decolonisation, the differential reality of equality, and the productive tension of anthropological differences through material experiments with forms of communism.

Communitising Second Nature

In the first chapter of this thesis, I position the question of the individual with respect to Sohn-Rethel’s thesis that real abstraction translates into a relation of ‘second nature’, not only to give the appearance of the independence of the intellect, but to filter any direct relation with the world through this second nature (Sohn-Rethel 2021, 47–48). Grappling with real abstraction, however, means understanding that

forms of thought are determined within the deeper complexities of material and social relations as they appear in any given conjuncture. One of the key themes of this thesis has been to demonstrate the extension of capital's metaphysics through a technological, informatic and financial conjuncture. In an epoch mediated by the expansive powers of abstraction, it is not enough to quarry the formal properties of the capital-relation for its effects. These effects are conveyed in an informational matrix that confounds the production, mediation, and habituation of second nature. Beller's argument around information and second nature makes this clear, 'as with exchange-value before it... information, as a seemingly natural appurtenance of all things, a second nature, is, in fact, an extension, symptom, and means of the expansive logic of commodification—an extension of its operating system' (Beller 2021b, 38). Only by recognising the ways in which second nature is channelled through the communicative and technological extensions of capital's categories can we see how deeply the form-determinations of real abstraction have penetrated, and how far the horizon of the individual reaches.

A key problem in addressing politics to the capital-relation is the necessity of prising apart this process and production of second nature. Beller's own proposal for approaching this is addressed within the ambit of media and information directly by prospecting for political possibilities within the money form itself. Attempting to think an opportunity of recoding 'economic media' with alternate forms of value, Beller argues we might be able to decolonise money using blockchain technology (Beller 2021a). Here, Beller recognises the resonance of his own project with Martin's ultimately optimistic assessment of the prospects for repurposing the 'mutable

discourse' of derivative logic as a means of 'aggregating difference' (Martin 2015, 223–24; see Beller 2021b, 247). Although this proposal attempts to grapple with the complexity of capital's subsumption in a computational and financial conjuncture, it is addressed to forms of mediation. Beller is acutely aware of the problem faced by individuated politics, he argues, 'the individual as agent of value aggregation is a fractally fascist form' (Beller 2021a, 242). However, while he concerned with how value is produced collectively, Beller's political proposal is addressed to changes in social mediation that take up alternative forms of money. As Jasper Bernes points out, Marx himself warned against the dangers of forms of market mediation that could restore the law of value (Bernes 2021, 19).

Decolonisation contains the deconstructive impetus of undoing and unbinding patterns of enclosure and separation, but if it is to contain any political meaning it can only be conceived based on practice and struggle (see Barber 2020). This has a direct bearing on how we might measure the efficacy a materialist politics attentive to the demands of real abstraction. For this, we can look to a key formulation derived by Althusser from Marx. Setting the conditions for a materialist dialectic, Althusser writes, 'materialism expresses the effective conditions of the practice that produces knowledge' insofar as it asserts 'the primacy of being over thought' (Althusser 1990, 9). While Althusser's concern is primarily with the knowledge base of theory, the same dialectical formula applies in the political field. He argues further that the dialectical relation is expressed 'not as a relation of two simply distinct terms but as a relation within a process of transformation, thus of real production' (1990, 9). Theory and practice must always be treated together. There is always a temporal lag between

what happens in a political sequence, so the apprehension of its consequence must always be thought. Turned back on real abstraction, this deceptively simple formula for materialist practice can be used to map the idea of communism to a conscious political practice to intervene in the production of individuated second nature.

If the forms of thought that converge on the individuated subject are engendered in the metaphysics of the capital-relation, then the forms that can take it apart must be obtained in the material practice of communism. Social practices are fundamentally linked to the generation of the thought-forms used to navigate a social formation, so the formula for politics must always include its relation to thought. However, a coherent political trajectory requires a third term, a speculative idea that holds a movement together. Any prospective communist orientation must emerge from within practices that hold together the idea of communism with the experiments, sequences and events that emerge out of it, while always maintaining a relation to critique. Critique retains an essential place in communist praxis as the consequences and effects of political sequences are not always immediately apparent. They must always be thought, practices must always be adapted, shaped, and renewed to avoid being captured and incorporated back into capital. The communisation of second nature in this sense is not the process of replacing an abstract relation with a new mediating form, but a process of revealing at each encounter the edges that must be scaled away.

A concise formula that can be applied in this way is advanced by *Théorie Communiste*, who argue that communisation is an immanent revolutionary practice. They write, ‘revolution is communisation; it does not have communism as a project

and result, but as its very content' (Théorie Communiste 2012, 41). Rather than deferring to a programme of transition or negotiating with the state, communisation comprises an immediate program of 'communist measures' that are revolutionary in themselves (e.g. Simon 2005). Thus, communisation is continuous with the dissolution of private property, the division of labour, the abolition of the value-form (Théorie Communiste 2012, 53; Simon 2011; see also Endnotes 2010). Bearing directly on the dual form-determinations of value and the individual, as the Endnotes collective explain, communisation involves dissolving 'both the social form of things...and the atomised, empty and separated out subject-form of the individual' (Endnotes 2010, 81). Here, we have practices directed to changing the underlying arrangement of relations from which these forms emerge, which can only mean practices that address the problems of the world by thinking the world.

Conceived in the wake of the wage-relation's post-Fordist disaggregation into modes of dispersal and flexibility, communisation for Théorie Communiste is a response to forms of 'programmatism' that once bound communist politics to unions, parties, councils, and parliament adjacent organisations (Théorie Communiste 2008a, 155). This fragmentation of labour that prompted the conception of communisation can be contextualised by Marx's argument that capital is a 'moving contradiction' (Marx 1993, 706). For Marx, the 'moving contradiction' is capital's recursive compulsion to expand surplus value by minimising, reducing, and expelling the source of its own value while expanding subsumption ever further into the pores of life:

On the one side... it calls to life all the powers of science and of nature, as of social combination and of social intercourse, in order to make the creation of wealth independent (relatively) of the labour time employed on it. On the other side, it wants

to use labour time as the measuring rod for the giant social forces thereby created, and to confine them within the limits required to maintain the already created value as value (Marx 1993, 706)

Not only can we detect in this formula the embers of value that are kindled into second nature, we can link communisation to real subsumption by understanding it as a response to capital's autonomisation process (Marx 1993, 709; Marx 1990, 943ff; see also Endnotes 2010b). Communisation recognises that life's radical subsumption within the form-determinations of value means only a determinate political practice of 'revolutionary undoing' can overcome these forms (Endnotes 2012, 33). Moreover, a revolutionary trajectory of this kind can only be acquired in political practices that are able to recognise the limitations of their own form where they meet with capital's relentless subsumption. Here, communisation theory can help to place Badiou's subtractive political form in a new light. By supplementing subjectivation with a conception of self-abolition, and always addressing politics directly to capital, Badiou's own formulations can be considered within a continuum of communisation.

Central to the dissolution of social forms is a praxis internally structured by the contradiction that political forms exist to abolish themselves. As Roland Simon argues, 'organisation is the first act of the revolution; it then becomes an obstacle which the revolution has to overcome' (Simon 2005, np). This the very contradiction identified by Marx and Engels in *The Holy Family*, where they observe that the proletariat is a class that is 'compelled to abolish itself' (Marx and Engels 2010b, 36). We can extend this formula to think of the political form as I have outlined it after Badiou. Bringing the elements of the subjectivated political form, the idea of communism and the notion of self-abolition together, we can think a conjunction of

politics sustained by the idea of communism, obtained in contradictory political forms that must necessarily abolish themselves, and held together by a disjunctive process that must overcome the forms of capital's actually existing metaphysics to establish new relations out of the decomposition of capital's second nature.

Brown develops the relation of self-abolition to communisation further through a reading of Paul Mattick's 'Problem of Organisation' (Mattick 1978, 120). Mattick, Brown argues, demonstrates the necessity of self-abolition for political forms derived from within the capital-relation, as they always bear their 'counter-revolutionary' form within them (N. Brown 2021, 212).

In order to do something socially significant, actions must be organised. But insofar as they are organised, actions tend to accommodate themselves to capitalist channels. Within capitalism, no organisation can be consistently anticapitalist, and organisations that do not disturb prevailing social relationships grow and persist more easily than those which do. We see this in the historical accommodation of unions and parties... or in the tendency of an organisational form like the general assembly toward reformist consensus. Any organisational form is at once a means of class struggle and an obstacle it must overcome (N. Brown 2021, 212)

This problem cannot be reduced to class alone, rather it is more widely signalled in the predatory incorporation faced by all nascent political forms oriented to the effects of capital. Capital thrives on accommodating forms of resistance by subsuming them to the valorisation process. By diverting forms of struggle away from practices of solidarity and difference and accommodating them as abstract forms in the valorisation process, incorporation signals the threshold of a political formation. It is a process of enclosure and individuation where forms of organisation harden in relation to capital and turn inward to contend with the internal necessities of

surviving within a value mediated social formation. This is true not only of organisations, but just as much of forms of struggle oriented to capital's incorporation and arrogation of difference.

Struggles of any kind can only ever be partial where they are based upon modes of recognition that can be accommodated by capital as sites of valorisation. Political forms that hold the potential for countering this problem contain a critical dimension that is not only conscious of its own limits but addressed to radically heterogeneous configurations. In Verónica Gago's *Feminist International*, for example, feminist struggle is grounded in a process of situated self-displacement and collective thought that maps to a dynamic of diverse feminisms that, 'simultaneously displaces and situates them' (Gago 2020, 175). Again, politics is not concerned with individuation, but with identifying the thresholds of enclosure that must be broken down for the sake of building solidarity into a coherent but disjunctive process.

For *Théorie Communiste*, disjunction is a necessary internal principle. Addressing the fragmentation of the proletariat means theorising and identifying the threshold and limits internal to the communisation process (*Théorie Communiste* 2012, 48).

Framing the problem of aggregating political sequences out of a disaggregated form, *Théorie Communiste* argue we must think the rift [*l'écart*] that opens up when these limits are identified (see *Théorie Communiste* 2005). Sometimes translated as 'swerve', the rift is a structuring contradiction that reveals itself in political forms that are constrained by the necessity of overcoming their own forms. As Brown explains, the rift is framed around 'the disjunction between *acting as a class* and *acting against being a class*' (N. Brown 2021, 221). Brown explicitly links this theory of the rift to the

political sequences theorised by Badiou, where political forms threaten to ‘ossify into a limit’ of their own struggle they become fixed as the form they are acting to abolish (N. Brown 2021, 221). Once opened up, rifts invite the necessity of political thought and can only be passed through with determinate decision.

Brown’s focus, like *Théorie Communiste*, orbits the political form of the working class. For Brown, however, communisation is most adequately conceived via the remapping of class composition mentioned earlier in this chapter. Class, Brown argues, must be reconciled to the fact that internal limits of struggles are often directed through ‘fragmentations of class cohesion along lines of race and gender’ (2021, 247). Such a task is anticipated by a critique of class struggle that frames it within ‘differential forms of exploitation’ (2021, 247). Connecting this critical task to the diverse strategies, struggles and revolutionary practices that are held together by difference can offer a view into the multiple determinations that underwrite material change. Brown’s own formulation situates the changing structure of the class relation within a ‘perpetually detotalising structure’ (2021, 205). But, with the help of *Théorie Communiste*, we can return these determinations to the Hegelian register of the ‘qualitative leap’ (Hegel 2010, 320), without letting go of Badiou’s ruptural conception of politics:

From struggles over immediate demands to revolution, there can only be a rupture, a qualitative leap. But this rupture is not a miracle, it is not an alternative; neither is it the simple realisation on the part of the proletariat that there is nothing else to do than revolution in the face of the failure of everything else....This rupture is produced positively by the unfolding of the cycle of struggles which precedes it; it is *signalled* in the multiplication of *rifts* within the class struggle (*Théorie Communiste* 2012, 46)

The gathering of rifts brings to mind Althusser's notion of the overdetermined contradiction as the merger of disparate elements into conjunctural change (Althusser 2005). Perhaps more importantly, by holding together a principle of difference with the multiplicity of rifts communisation can be mapped to 'the real movement which abolishes the present state of things' (Marx and Engels 2010a, 49). Following Brown's claim that the theory of the rift opens a 'speculative space' (N. Brown 2021, 254), the 'real movement' can be obtained in political thought via a plurality of struggles.

Whether indigenous struggles for decolonisation, radical feminist orientations, or black radical and queer interventions, where political struggles address themselves to undoing the capital-relation they are internal to the process of communisation.

Moreover, by staying with movement, we can also direct this formula back to the 'moving contradiction' to keep in mind that confronting capital means always attending to the shifting contradiction of politics every time political forms meet a new threshold of incorporation. Mapping the movement of politics to relentlessly break down the thresholds, incorporations, and enclosures of individuation.

Théorie Communiste draw on the definition of revolutionary practice from Marx's critique of Feuerbach to argue 'Proletarians do not liberate their "true individuality", which is denied in capital: revolutionary practice is precisely the coincidence between the change in circumstances and of human activity or self-transformation' (*Théorie Communiste* 2012, 45; Marx 2010, 4). Rejecting the misplaced goal of unearthing an essential human nature, communisation involves the undoing, disentanglement, and reformation of habit and second nature from the metaphysics of the capital-relation.

It does so by engaging in practices that in their very content think the transformation of the world.

Communitisation, in this way, becomes a critical counterpoint to the metaphysics of the capital-relation. Self-abolition is by its nature a dialectical act, it must extend beyond the conditions as they are to posit the overcoming of those conditions.

Communitisation proposes an intervention as a simultaneous disruption in the field of second nature by stress-testing the real for its weak points. Measuring itself against the breaks, ruptures, and radical discontinuities inherent in the progression of change, habitually refocusing the aperture of struggle to the full expanse of a communist horizon.

Conclusion

This chapter is the culmination of the central arguments of this thesis. In preceding chapters I have argued that the individual subject is a form of practice aligned to a complementary mode of thought. A corollary of the value-form, the individual is a practical abstraction produced within the transindividual relation of capital that forecloses politics by orienting it away from the world. However, if politics is foreclosed by a form fundamentally bound to social practices internal to the capital-relation, then it follows that a political form addressed to capital must be taken up in determinate practices that can overcome this form.

Setting up this chapter in light of Nathan Brown's (2021) concept of rationalist empiricism, I argue that speculative critique can arm political practice with the means for getting beneath the form-determinations of real abstraction. Thinking politics in

this way is twofold. On the one hand we have labour of making politics appear, a process that probes the transindividual reality of capital's social formation to excavate the inexistent elements that can sustain subjectivated political forms. These sequences are subtractive, bound to an ensemble of encounters and experiments but marked by a threshold that must be thought and broken down anew. For this, I have argued a moderated version of Badiou's notion of subjectivation can be brought together with communisation theory for a novel conception of the political form.

A practice of communism is a relay between the materiality of immediate struggles, the critical capacity to recognise their own limits, and the idea of communism that sustains them. Bringing this in line with the extant demands of undermining the production of real abstraction, communist politics consists in a disjunctive formation of political forms that exist to abolish themselves. Holding together a multiplicity of struggles mobilised around differences that escape the capital-relation, politics is the production and practice of material ideas that break with individuated second nature. Badiou's formal theory of the subject can provide the bones for such a praxis, but only if we can hold him to the minimal formulation of a political form that can be fleshed out by a determinate and differential practice of communisation.

Conclusion: Politics After the Individual

From the outset, this thesis has framed the problem of politics around the question of thought and form. The question of political form comes back to the way we think about politics, how we organise political thought. There is little doubt that our political conjuncture is beleaguered with problems of irrationality, dissonant forms of thought, deceptive practices, the instrumental untethering of truth, and the mobilisation of concepts against their intended meaning. Such thought-forms are the chaff and chatter of an ever-present noise pollution that either deflects from the necessity of urgent and difficult political problems or becomes the very form that politics is reduced to. In this thesis, I have presented a case for identifying forms of thought as symptoms of a deeply embedded condition, one intimately connected to practices and institutions that are fundamentally structured by the concepts of the capital-relation. We find instances of this anywhere solutions to political problems are mapped to the language and structure of monetary systems. A particularly stark example today can be observed in growing attempts by global governance structures, nation states, and multi-national corporations to ameliorate the climate emergency with ‘carbon budgets’, framing the frightening prospect of ecological collapse in terms of accounting, and anchoring the idea of climate change to the sustainability of the capital-relation.

Fredric Jameson’s well-worn device for capturing this problem recounts the dissonance between an imaginary that can more easily confront the survival of capitalism than it can ‘imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of

nature' (Jameson 1994, xii). Building on this, Mark Fisher formulates an argument against capitalist realism that characterises capitalism as 'what is left when beliefs have collapsed at the level of ritual of symbolic elaboration' (Fisher 2010, 4). Fisher goes further still, couching the morass of capitalist consumer culture in terms of depression and impotence (Fisher 2010, 5ff). Yet, analysing these effects within the ambit of illusion, belief, or imagination, falls back on idealist tropes that tend to arrest the possibility of directing politics to the material relations that precipitate these problems. Capital's imaginary conceits are triaged by forms embedded in the practically existing metaphysics of the capital-relation that can be traced back to the effects I documented in Chapter 1 around the autonomisation of value as the automatic subject of capital. Viewing the exigencies of capital in this light recalls how the material and abstract domains of the capitalist social formation are freighted together, a reality most acutely observed in the relation of finance to the world that I map in Chapter 4.

Key to navigating this metaphysical operation, I have argued, is understanding the role of the abstract individual. In Chapters 2 and 3, I trace the abstract individual through modalities of real abstraction in exchange relations, juridical ideology, and private property to reveal a figure overdetermined by a subjectivity effect. Mapping the progression from the autonomisation of value to the abstract objectivity that spans the substrates of modern informatic computation and the instruments of financialisation, I anatomised the actually existing metaphysics of the capital-relation (Toscano 2015, 2019), first against discrete techniques of enclosure and separation, and then against the aggregating singularities of financial derivatives.

Marx describes an operation of separation and externalisation that substantiates value in the dialectic of abstract objectivity that constitutes the fabric of capital's technical and social reality. Once value becomes the automatic subject, individuals become objects of value and subjects for capital. The automatic subject of capital haunts both productive and social relations, remaking the world in its own image. Prosecuting social forms through the abstractions of form-determination, capital becomes a pattern matching exercise for mapping new domains, capturing unknown territories, and anchoring differential forms of oppressive abstraction to a valorising structure that must always be grounded in forms of separation, isolation, and individuation. Out of these practical and recursive patterns the abstract individual becomes a secondary form-determination that moves in silent parallel with the value-form.

Holding these form-determinations together allows us to view how the image of a simultaneously unified self, intersected by an array of abstract identities, rights and roles is remarkably resonant with the schema of the paradoxically discrete and divisible commodity form. Drawn within the orbit of finance, this model is echoed in innovations that unify disparate abstractions into the singularities of the derivative form. Indexed to a differential process of extraction, whether through comparatively direct exchange relations or the fractal relations of financialisation, individuals are intersected by categorising abstractions as much as they are overdetermined by the ideological categories of law and property that I explored in Chapter 3. Tracing these forms through the multiple determinations of dispossession, colonialism, the imposition debt-relations and so on, uncovers a continuous recoding of material differences and diverse ideas, the reframing of perspectives, and appropriation of

forms of knowledge to the naturalised abstractions of the capitalist social formation. What we are left with is not merely an illusion, a failure of imagination, or the collapse of belief as in Fisher's capitalist realism, but an individual subject bound up with the form-determinations of the capital-relation.

Abjuring the tendency to attach abstraction to a lament of homogenisation, as I argued in Chapter 1, we must instead be attentive to the discontinuity between differences encoded within the capital-relation and the differences that escape it. This can only mean addressing politics to the gap between the kind of abstraction necessary to thought, and the real abstractions that hypostasise and naturalise historically mediated categories and concepts, thus eternalising oppressive, hierarchical, and ultimately destructive relations. Deploying abstraction against itself as Marx proposed allows us to detect the moments, ideas, and modes of being that escape the capital-relation, without over-identifying with the forms incorporated to it. Underlying this understanding of difference is a conscious awareness of the material struggles and historical mediations of relations that are captured, reshaped and policed by the engine of abstract naturalisation that feeds contemporary capitalism.

In the final two chapters of this thesis, I sought to reorient these questions by taking up two divergent threads that can provide the ground for holding together the labour of critique with the experiments of political sequences. Starting with an analytic frame in Chapter 5, I drew two conclusions from a critical account of transindividuality as it relates to the wider themes of the thesis. First, the marriage of cybernetics and energetic humanism that emerges from Simondon's transindividual ontology contains a remarkable resonance with the valences and effects of the

derivative and its effect on proposals for forms of individual politics, as scrutinised in Chapter 4. Second, although a determinate ambivalence in theorisations of transindividuality struggles to break down the impasse of politics, transindividuality nonetheless is an important theoretical lens for navigating the reciprocity of social relations. Not only does the transindividual provide a framework for uncovering the modes of individuation and closure that capital incorporates to its valorisation process, it alerts us to the collective dimensions that are not yet entrapped within this process. As to what these discoveries might mean for politics, the transindividual analytic leaves open the question of the political form.

Out of the analysis of individuation, what remains is to conceive a political form that can infiltrate the specifically capitalist arrangement of relations that drives the widespread immiseration of life and the anaemic political responses to capitalist crises. On the whole, this thesis brought together a unique fusion of theory to interrogate the abstract individual as a form-determined category obtained in the practical relations of the capitalist social formation. The clearest contribution to the thought of politics, however, comes by addressing this problematic to the prescriptive question of the political form. Turning to the political form directly, in the Chapter 6 of the thesis I proposed a synthesis of Badiou's subtractive theory of subjectivation with the idea of self-abolition coming out of the communism tradition, further framing the political form as a conscious orientation that must include immanent forms of thought.

Abolition has become a fecund political standpoint in recent years, especially for addressing the racialised violence enacted by militarised police. In its most potent

form, abolition is a form of struggle addressed to the sublation of oppressive social forms, whether historically in the case of slavery, directly in the fight against police, or in the orientation of communist practice to the abolition of private property and the value-form. From the standpoint of the political form, abolition is not only continuous with these articulations of struggle, it becomes an immanent practice of thought directed to the threshold of political sequences and the experimental forms that sustain them. Of the conclusions gleaned from an analysis of the links between autonomisation and real abstraction, perhaps the most important is the realisation that any politics worth its name must necessarily grapple with the forms of thought that arise from social practice. Abolition addresses this by thinking the threshold of particular forms such as class, gender or race, that are contingent upon determinate struggles and not fixed, natural categories to defend.

One of the profound implications of Badiou's work is to provide a sophisticated base for undoing the abstract presentation and re-presentation of elements, categories, and concepts that order a given situation. It is not for nothing that Badiou entreats us with the urgency of thinking, or of associating politics with forms of thought.

Mounting a credible account of the political form in the face of regimes of abstraction that continually assert the naturalness of capital's forms means addressing political projects, measures and experiments to the practices and institutions implicated in the reproduction of halting thought-forms. At the beginning of Chapter 6, I positioned this question around the problem of orientation. Asserting with Badiou that existing subjective figures produce a disorientation of thought (Badiou 2005), I argued that

orienting ourselves towards politics means engaging in practices that can think the world.

It has become increasingly apparent that our political conjuncture requires forms that depart from the closures and individuations that direct thought away from the world. From the standpoint of ecological crisis, thinking the world is a conspicuous necessity, but orientation is similarly important when it comes to the tropes of freedom and identity. Where politics is annexed to cultural disputes over categorising abstractions, it is reduced to a battle over how we should perform our roles as agents of capital. Agitation over freedom, moreover, is often dominated by negative forms, turning liberty and equality into zero sum games that ignore the transindividual and structural conditions that abrogate its possibility. Freedom in this way becomes an inverter, fascistic signifier, one that siphons political struggle into revanchist forms that valorise a violent phantasmagoria of heteronormativity and ethno-nationalism (see Haiven 2020; Toscano 2017), and advance a nostalgic image of the rugged, individual man, assailed with the Stoic echoes of securitisation that I discussed in Chapter 5.

Haunting these tendencies, the spectre of the naturalised figure of the abstract individual collapses politics through a figurative mode of experience that must reinforce its own borders against the continual incursions of collective, social reality; one that breaks down under any serious inspection, but one that remains constitutively real nonetheless. As I have argued throughout, the abstract individual is a form of practice, a habit conditioned by the second nature of capital's autonomisations. The individual as a concept is affected by individualised practice

that orients everyday life, but where this becomes most problematic is where it results in speculative forms of political theory and practice that are foreclosed by the very form they defend.

A political project adequate to the urgent needs of our conjuncture must dismantle this form of second nature, and in the process reconfigure the metabolic relation upon which the very possibility of life rests. Conceiving a political form adequate to the disjunctive and fragmented reality of contemporary capitalist subsumption means empowering forms of social practice that can outlast their political vehicles. A conscious politics that can avoid the rot of reincorporation to the valorising structures of the capital-relation. A political form that can draw on a multiplicity of political projects, asserting the power of difference against the abstract congeries of oppressive differentials, to break down the thresholds, limits, and enclosures of the capital-relation. A trajectory that advances politics after the individual, a politics that can rightly claim the name of communism.

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