

## ON THE TWO METAMORPHOSES OF HUMAN ACTIVITY IN MARX

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ABSTRACT: Since the 1970s, there has been strong resistance to the drive towards a ‘reconstruction’ of Marx. The main objection is based in the premise that Marx’s core ideas are irreparably flawed, and thus, reconstruction is doomed, in that this work must either ignore or downplay political economy (making the reconstruction irrelevant or greatly distant to Marx, as was Habermas’ early reconstruction), or be true to Marx’s contradictory ideas (in which case it is not a reconstruction, but simply a reading, bound to run aground). Helmut Reichelt objects on these terms and demands that a *radical* reconstruction take place: *rewriting* Marx’s critique of political economy with and against his texts. However, the necessity of a *radical* reconstruction is challenged if one takes that position that Marx’s works, though flawed, are not as contradictory as they seem, and in fact Marx is whole, conflicted but not split, writing something fundamentally simple and coherent: human beings are free until their own relations become objective and overpower them, i.e., class struggle is driven by material contradictions that are human in origin.

KEYWORDS: Karl Marx; Alienation; Dead labour; György Márkus; *Grundrisse*; Capital personification.

### ON THE TWO METAMORPHOSES OF HUMAN ACTIVITY IN MARX

In the *Grundrisse* Marx describes the unfolding of human history (though not in these exact terms) as two of the metamorphoses of human activity and the

three phases of human existence. In the first phase of human existence, human beings have local/immediate relations with other human beings, and nothing *external* comes into it. In the second phase, and especially as this phase progresses, human relations become *objective conditions* of life, they are *displaced* into the environment in which human beings live and take on the semblance of natural conditions, i.e., a lower class no longer toils for the benefit of an idle upper class—a relationship between two classes of human beings—but we all become slaves of capital and imagine this very particular relationship to be unchangeable. Some toil comfortably, as personifications of capital; others miserably, as mere surplus-value generators; and a growing number exist somewhere in between, living a life in which one mistakes the freedom of capital for one's own freedom. Feudalism straddles both phases, with the revolutionary transition into capitalism signalling in a sense the end of the reign of living human beings and the beginning of a period in which dead labour is no longer accountable to living labour: we enter the realm of the subjection of the living to the dead. In the third phase, the conditions of modern human life are de-reified, unmasked as being a) contingent, and b) human in origin: they are mastered, and a higher form of human-to-human relations is established, no longer local/immediate (a non-cosmopolitan communism is unthinkable before Stalin's 'revisions'), but again human (as opposed to now, a situation in which objects are social and human beings anti-social), only this time the human-to-human relations will be *beyond domination and servitude*.<sup>1</sup>

Marx does not recant this model. In *Capital* he is still writing about an upside-down world in which things have personality and people do not, and is still motioning towards a communist world where people can be people and things things. And yet the wording of the model in the *Grundrisse* is worth dwelling upon, primarily because it challenges common humanist and

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<sup>1</sup> An explanation as to why present exploitation would not be described by Marx as *human beings* dominating *human beings* is forthcoming. As a general rule, for Marx, human-to-human relations are peaceful, and if there is domination, it is the domination of objectified relations over people that looks like one person dominating another. It is not however clear cut, as the feudal lord dominates as a human being but also as a 'class actor', which is to say on the behalf of objectified human relations, whereas modern exploitation is more completely the subjection of all human beings to their own objectified relations. The more we objectify our relations, the more we become objects, until the final phase is reached.

orthodox readings. There is clearly not a definitive humanist or orthodox position, with as much debate occurring within the ‘schools’ as between them, but *broadly* one may say that orthodox Marxists today are those who think that State-based communism more or less genuinely reflected Marx’s works and intentions, including a belief that dialectical materialism is a legitimate heir to Marx’s materialist conception of history. This orthodox reading (or cluster of readings), which see our thoughts and actions as being (in the last analysis) determined, consequently downplay Marx’s goals of human freedom (to replace the freedom of capital that is only a false semblance of human freedom) and democracy (the unmediated rule of the associated producers), basically following Lenin, who ceased to speak of these after 1917.<sup>2</sup>

Interest in these neglected Marxian concepts is taken up by humanist Marxism, with humanist Marxists fundamentally being those who believe that Marx would have been horrified by ‘really-existing socialism’, and who are interested in ‘liberal’ causes in the present. This reading (or cluster of readings), frequently downplays Marx’s deep mistrust of rights discourses and his ambivalence towards real liberal- and social-democratic movements (Marx still believed that revolution was the one and only answer to the problem of capitalism until the mid-1860s, when he became active in the International Working Men’s Association in London).<sup>3</sup> Such readings (see for example almost any article in *News and Letters*) also frequently hold tight to an ungrounded conviction that Marx was interested in equality,<sup>4</sup> seemingly

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<sup>2</sup> Alain Badiou, student of Louis Althusser, is a good example of what an orthodox reading looks like today, and even he, though he objects sharply to any comparison of Stalin and Hitler, and fetishizes Mao, is ‘humanist’ to the extent that he believes that the Party must *be* the people in more than name.

<sup>3</sup> Stedman-Jones, Gareth, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion*, USA: Penguin Books, 2016, p. 498.

<sup>4</sup> This maxim, unsubstantiated yet ubiquitous, is grounded in the old (highly confused) conservative idea that freedom and equality are mutually exclusive entities, and that there was *more* equality but *less* freedom in the USSR, whereas in the USA there was *more* freedom but *less* equality (a very strange idea, in that the USSR was the land of the gulag and the USA the land in which human beings would fight to the death for the right to have markets dictate every element of human life). The usual position, that Marx loves equality and hates freedom, is immensely problematic. Marx does indeed despise what capitalism calls freedom, but only because it is not truly free (it is objects becoming subjects and subjects becoming objects, which is the opposite of freedom). But he also despises what ‘Marxists’ generally call equality, and rarely discusses it without complete contempt. Today, with the

unaware of Marx's savage critiques of 'crude communists' and 'religious ascetics'.<sup>5</sup> In a rant in *The Communist Manifesto* Marx describes many of his humanist followers today in a list of the kinds of people who he despises, including vegetarians and those interested in charity.<sup>6</sup> In short, a passion for equality is *Christian*, not Marxist, something that 'Western Marxism', the first 'humanist Marxism', used to understand well.<sup>7</sup> New humanist readings, as worthy as they are, frequently miss that Marx's emphasis was never on inequality (he sees interest in equality as something objectionable and base, 'universal envy' dressed up as justice), but was rather fixed firmly on freeing the living from the cold clutches of the dead. The humanist move in the end commonly takes us as far from Marx 'the man' as does the orthodox opposing move of ignoring Marx's interest in freedom and claiming that all are equal as long as 'their Party' is in charge.

The orthodox/humanist split should be treated with suspicion in general, based as it is in the mistaken idea that there is a contradiction *within Marx* between two *competing concepts*: 1) we are free (class struggle), and 2) we are

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help of Nietzsche and the mature Adorno, we may call this concept of equality 'liberal', and view it with mistrust as the 'slave morality' or an egalitarian mutation of the 'authoritarian personality' (Habermas called it 'left fascism'), in line with Marx's own distaste for such attitudes. Though one must tread carefully here, for there is a kind of equality that Marx did champion, one that is the *sin qua non* of freedom. Marx hated the word equality too much to call it thus, but it is a species of equality, and simply means that all human beings are free from 'mundane considerations': i.e., food, shelter, and medicine are provided automatically for all. Unlike the 'slave morality' or the 'authoritarian personality' version of this, the motivation is not the destruction of strength and culture and the protection of the weak: Marx called this Christian ascetism with a Socialist tinge and decried it as levelling, and this critique holds even more today. The motivation for Marx is that freedom, the freedom to be an end-in-itself, begins only where necessity ceases. One gives everybody what they need (and this is true equality) so that they do not have to think about survival: here, truly human existence begins, not in everybody obsessing over the comfort of the weak but in everybody having the material basis to grow their own strength. This may sound overly aristocratic for a characterisation of Marx, but Marx is also not 'liberal' in the opposite sense, the 'master morality' sense of believing in freedom *qua* 'self-reliance', this only ever being false freedom, the freedom of capital to feast on human beings who are vulnerable because they 'owe nothing' to one another, being 'mutually indifferent'. Freedom for Marx is anti-liberal: it cannot exist for any 'private individual', but only for a community with a deep comprehension of extreme mutual interdependence.

<sup>5</sup> Marx, Karl, *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844*, Russia: Progress Publishers, 1977, p. 95; Marx, Karl & Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, USA: Haymarket Books, 2005, p. 74.

<sup>6</sup> Marx & Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, pp. 80–81.

<sup>7</sup> Fromm, Erich, *Marx's Concept of Man*, USA: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1972, p. 39.

determined (historical materialism). It is agreed that logically these concepts cancel each other out, and subsequently one chooses the idea that one likes better and hypostatizes it into a person that one then calls Marx. There is thus a Marx for those who support the orthodox position, a ‘mature scientist’, and a Marx for those who support the ‘liberal’ position, a ‘young humanist’. Both are when incautious spurious readings, misinformed about being a ‘return to Marx’, and both are in essence the same misreading, in so far as the vulgar humanist agrees with the orthodoxy, that Marx is split, but chooses the *rejected Marx* and calls the materialist scientist abject. Following György Márkus, this paper puts forward a continuity thesis between humanism and anti-humanism (i.e., it accepts that Marx changes in the 1840s and moves away from humanism, but rejects the thesis that he becomes ‘other’ to himself, a ‘structuralist’).

There is no actual contradiction within Marx’s works, and the pieces deemed to be so alien to one another in fact fit easily together.<sup>8</sup> In short, Marx understands history as being driven by human activity that is *free and constrained* (living labour is free but also in conflict with/subordinated by dead or objectified labour). If one insists that Marx’s works are heterogenous, *either* about one thing (freedom and philosophy), or another (law and science), each of which contradicts the other, and that one must subsequently choose between two Marxes: a young philosopher of autonomy and struggle and an old scientist of impersonal processes that carry us along, one potentially deprives oneself of Marx’s actual body of work, which (though not entirely homogeneous) contains a rich, rewarding, and ultimately coherent emancipatory explanation of how history unfolds.

There are of course critiques of this drive to reconstruction. Ingo Elbe quotes Helmut Reichelt on the failure of various reconstruction efforts prior to the establishment of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*. ‘No longer must one contrast Marx with Marxism and reconstruct an authentic Marxian theory. Rather, Marx’s critique of political economy itself demonstrates irreparable

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<sup>8</sup> Márkus, György, *Marxism and anthropology: The concept of ‘human essence’ in the philosophy of Marx*, Netherlands: Van Gorkum, 1978, pp. 1–2.

“discrepancies and flaws already in the core theoretical arguments”<sup>9</sup>. In short, Marx’s works are posited to have been *defective* before they were *distorted*, and thus it is put forward that it is not enough anymore to a) say that Stalin was an ‘Engelsist’ and not a Marxist, and then return to an untainted Marx, or b) make Habermas’ move, in which one builds a Marxism that does not impede its own aims, free to ignore as much actual *content* as one pleases (especially *economic* content thought to contribute to totalitarian readings) in pursuit of the *spirit* of Marx. However, the indisputable ‘discrepancies and flaws’ in Marx’s works are *not* irreparable, and though this paper concurs with Reichelt’s critiques of standard readings, orthodox and humanist, and agrees that one should not abandon Marx to save him, as Habermas (‘the last Marxist’) does, it does not agree that one needs to *radically* reconstruct Marx (and especially not in such a manner that value becomes ‘a thing of thought’).<sup>10</sup> And thus, this paper will put forward one more argument for a more standard reconstruction: or perhaps it would be better to say in this case *re-membering*.

This move is also not *necessary*. Nick Dyer-Witheford discusses ‘a diagonal move out of this impasse’ (in which one prominent element of Marx is supposed to directly contradict another), that prefers to make the contradictions generate energy rather than solving them, as for example when Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari bring early Marxist themes such as ‘species being’ into staunchly anti-humanist conceptualisations of Marx.<sup>11</sup> However, when one splits Marx or brings together the broken pieces while leaving them fragmented, there is a tendency to be able to read Marx without noting or caring about his key concern: as above, that the past dominates the present, objectified labour dominates living labour, the producer kneels before the product.

The *primary passage* from the *Grundrisse* that this paper will interpret follows:

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<sup>9</sup> Elbe, Ingo, ‘Helmut Reichelt and the New Reading of Marx’, *The SAGE Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, California, New Delhi, Singapore: SAGE, 2018, p. 376.

<sup>10</sup> Elbe, ‘Helmut Reichelt and the New Reading of Marx’, p. 368.

<sup>11</sup> Dyer-Witheford, Nick, ‘1844/2004/2044: The Return of Species-Being’ *Historical Materialism*, Volume 12:4, 2004, p. 5.

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Relations of personal dependence (entirely spontaneous at the outset) are the first social forms, in which human productive capacity develops only to a slight extent and at isolated points. Personal independence founded on *objective* [*sachlicher*] dependence is the second great form, in which a system of general social metabolism, of universal relations, of all-round wants and universal capacities is formed for the first time. Free individuality, based on the universal development of individuals and on their subordination of their communal, social productivity as their social wealth, is the third stage. The second stage creates the conditions for the third.<sup>12</sup>

#### PART I: THE TWO METAMORPHOSES AND THE THREE PHASES OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

In the first phase of human existence, human beings engage in immediate, spontaneous, personal, *transparently social* relations of personal dependence: blood ties and relations of *direct* mastery and subordination.<sup>13</sup> Human beings *appear* to be full and developed in this phase, compared to us, we who have been flattened and fragmented by the modern division of labour, but are in fact, for Marx, trapped in fixed roles determined by the level of development of the means of production—these pre-modern, pre-industrial beings are *immature*, and the semblance of full humanity is false.<sup>14</sup> At a certain point, the first metamorphosis of human activity begins, bringing about the second phase of human existence.

Here, human social bonds have become *objective*, alien, autonomous, and independent.<sup>15</sup> Reciprocal dependency—no one person knows how to make a whole object anymore, as all subsistence means are produced piecemeal and *purchased for money*—*increases* in this phase as *direct* social bonds between ‘individuals’ weaken and each and all become indifferent to the other: here,

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<sup>12</sup> Marx, Karl, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the critique of political economy*, UK: Pelican Marx Library, 1973, p. 158.

<sup>13</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 161.

<sup>14</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 162.

<sup>15</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 162.

*personal independence*, ‘universal relations’, and ‘all-round wants and universal capacities’,<sup>16</sup> all come into being as the germ or precondition of true humanity. Human relations have not *ceased*, but have undergone a metamorphosis, they have been *displaced*, they have become *objective*, and are now enacted by things in a sphere that *stands opposite* thingified and disconnected human beings.<sup>17</sup> Human beings *appear* to be free in this second phase, and direct, personal domination is minimised, but human beings are still ruled by their *abstracted* relations, which have become *social conditions of existence* with the semblance of *natural conditions of existence*.<sup>18</sup> Now, ‘individuals are ruled by *abstractions*, whereas earlier they depended on one another’.<sup>19</sup>

As Marx was fond of writing: a serf knew when he was slaving for a master and when he was working for his own subsistence, his exploitation—his *personal* exploitation, by a human being—was understood, felt, and justified by the *mores* of the social system, and it was felt, just as strongly, when one was working for oneself.<sup>20</sup> The Corvée especially made this clear to everybody involved, for one did work for oneself and one’s family at home, and work for the lord on his property or another place that he designated, and one could at least imagine a life in which the exploitation, which sat *on top* of one’s normal working life, faded away. But today, exploitation appears as an indispensable part of the labour process itself—it has been screamed by capitalists for hundreds of years that giving workers rights—for example, in the nineteenth century, to enough air to live, time to sleep, regular meal breaks, a full consignment of fingers, to enjoy childhood if one is a child—will be the end of industry: today it is often asserted that rights make us ‘uncompetitive’ on the world market and should be avoided. After so many years of victorious capitalism we cannot imagine work except as something awful but necessary, and we have no sense at all of when we are being exploited and when we are not: in short, labour has been

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<sup>16</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 158.

<sup>17</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 162.

<sup>18</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, pp. 163–164.

<sup>19</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 164.

<sup>20</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 346.



homogenised, and *as a whole* made into something ill, as something we do to ‘get a living wage’, and as something that we will avoid at all costs if possible. If one makes one’s own shoes or has a vegetable patch, one is not *labouring*, in today’s understanding: one has rather ‘dropped out’ of the ‘labour market’, has *escaped* the necessity of ‘having a job’. That such thoughts are thinkable shows just how little we understand today regarding what exactly labour is. And Marx of course believed that *labour* was necessary, but, and this is an important distinction, Marx did not believe that labour had to be a hated activity, a means to life, performed under duress for no or little reward. Labour becomes, in communism, ‘life’s prime want’.<sup>21</sup> But much has to change before that can occur. First and foremost, we need to master our tools, so that labour becomes a controlled process of value amassment for *human* benefit, and stops being what it is today, an uncontrolled process of value amassment for its own sake. One misreads Marx (as already intimated above) if one reads him as being upset by how ‘unfair’ or ‘unequal’ capitalism is. Marx is, to be clear, outraged that the ‘organisation’ of the process of value creation is left in ‘invisible hands’, hands that take more than the tangible hands of kings and lords ever could.<sup>22</sup> He is upset, as will be explained, that we have traded in partial servitude to living kings and lords for a more insidious enslavement to ‘dead presidents’.

To return more immediately to the idea of the phases of human existence, where once, in the first, spontaneous forms of human existence, one human being dominated another, now, in the second, all human beings are dominated by human activity that has taken on a *material life* of its own, and in this incarnation, congealed and inscrutable, old human activity, much more than the sum of its parts—and much greater than us, the living—turns work into what it is: robbery, the dead thieving life from the living. We are

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<sup>21</sup> Marx, Karl, ‘The critique of the Gotha Program’, *Marx and Engels: Basic writings on politics and philosophy*, UK: William Collins Sons & Co., 1969, p. 160.

<sup>22</sup> The Party taking control back from capital is *not* an improvement. That Lenin said that the Party is the people did not make this so. Only when the associated producers take over does anything change, for only then do the living begin to work *freely* toward their own betterment, finally making their own history under conditions of their choosing, unbothered by the dead. Lenin, in the end opposing what he called ‘syndicalism’ (i.e., associated producers taking over production), was as distant to Marx as Stalin or any other dictator before or since.

no longer ‘trapped in roles’,<sup>23</sup> because the form of the means of production has moved on, and can no longer abide *living labour* being tied or fixed in any manner—nothing but ‘formally free labour’ will do for it, which requires that no human being ‘own’ another—but *we are not free*, because production is organised around the freedom/liberty of capital, which is only mistakenly identified with our own, and the goal of capital, its ever increasing self-valorisation, becomes the primary organising principle of our lives. Although, this is not all bad, as Marx writes, because this great period of unfreedom, of human subjection to metamorphosed human activity—the second phase of human existence—is the germination chamber of the third phase: freedom.<sup>24</sup>

In this final phase of human existence, human activity must go through a final transformation. Human relations, which have *thrived* outside of their original context, have become through the second metamorphosis the material conditions through which human beings *in actuality* can embody the *fullness* that early humanity *appeared* to enjoy before the first metamorphosis and the freedom that modernity *appears* to have attained after this first metamorphosis—the freedom that cannot in actuality exist—the freedom of living labour from the invisible tyranny of dead labour—before the second metamorphosis releases us. We are today no longer trapped *in* our social relations because they now enjoy an objective, independent, alien existence, opposite us: things have lives and we do not. For Marx, this unfreedom that calls itself freedom is really an opportunity for freedom. It may seem dire that the living slave their lives away in the service of the fattening of the dead, and it is. But for Marx, this intensification of subjection is a genuine opportunity for human emancipation, as our relations are only masterable when they exist outside of us. The concept of *alienation* is thus the key to human freedom, and is certainly not an unimportant folly of the young Marx. Marx never stops thinking about alienation and his clearest elucidations on the topic appear in his mature writings. Take, for example, *Capital*—‘the value-relation of the products of labour ... is nothing but the

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<sup>23</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, pp. 163–164.

<sup>24</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 158.

definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things'.<sup>25</sup> The reason that this paper will propose for the denial of the importance of alienation—and even that it exists—in Marx's later works is that 'Marxism' became an alienated mode of thinking, and Marx himself became a danger to it.

We are still in the second phase of human existence: we still cannot see that much of what looks solid in our world is in fact objectified/metamorphosed human activity, and since Engels and Karl Kautsky, 'Marxism' has ceased to be a suitable means for overcoming alienation. The reason is clear: it has been forgotten that the *essence* of the materialist conception of history is to understand that much of what looks natural is in fact *social*, and amenable to human influence. Dialectical materialism unlearns this lesson, and makes the laws of history into natural laws. It creates, in Albrecht Wellmer's words, a scenario of: 'a naturalization of history instead of a historicization of nature'.<sup>26</sup> As the materialist conception of history is 'improved' and 'refined', alienation must appear more and more to be a strange and 'unscientific' element of Marx's work: something unimportant and idiosyncratic. Later on in the twentieth century, the artifice of the 'young Marx' was created as a dustbin into which one crams alienation in order to stop this idea from destroying 'Marxism' (and the Soviets did so *before* Louis Althusser, in the 1930s).

This paper does not deny that Marx *changes*. With Márkus I recognise various alterations, from the excision of the highly ambiguous theory of the superman in the 1840s, to the development of a theory of reification that is distinct from his concept of alienation in the 1860s, to a general tendency to think less about *individuals* and more about *processes* as he ages.<sup>27</sup> What does not change, however, is that *alienation* remains of key importance to Marx: that we are objects of history when we ought to be subjects of history, i.e., we are ruled by our products, which means that we are estranged from ourselves

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<sup>25</sup> Marx, Karl, *Capital Volume I: A critique of political economy*, UK: Penguin, 1982, pp. 165; *passim*.

<sup>26</sup> Wellmer, Albrecht, 'Communications and emancipation: Reflections on the linguistic turn in critical theory', *On Critical Theory*, UK: Heinmann, 1977, p. 235.

<sup>27</sup> Márkus, 'Four forms of critical theory: Some theses on Marx's development', *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 1, 1980; 'Alienation and Reification in Marx and Lukács', *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 5/6, 1982.

(my actions, will, knowledge, strength, sociability and abilities exist outside of me, as ‘things’) and dominated by ourselves (my congealed, external/objective activity uses me as a means: a source of surplus-value).<sup>28</sup> There is not a single text post-1844 in which this attitude cannot be clearly seen, though with Isaak Rubin<sup>29</sup> (and Márkus), this paper sees the later formulations as being more focused.

The essence of being alienated is to believe that the laws that bind us (which *are us*, in Marx’s understanding) have nothing to do with us and cannot be changed by us—and thus our future cannot be freely chosen by us. Marx’s message was always that we can become free, if we come to realise that the conditions of our unfreedom are our own actions in an objective form. The young György Lukács discovered how deeply this alienation had become entrenched within *Marxism* early in the twentieth century when he began to write about alienation as it is defined here *qua* ‘reification’. The response is well documented. ‘If we get a few more of these professors spinning out their Marxist theories, we shall be lost. We cannot tolerate such theoretical revisionism of this kind in our Communist International’.<sup>30</sup> The message was clear: in ‘Marxism’, the laws of history have nothing to do with us or our activity. This Engelsism was declared to be Marxism in the USSR, and unfortunately much of the world still teaches Marx as if this misreading was correct.

*For Marx*, laws of history are not like the laws of gravity or magnetism. History unfolds because human relations are capable of escaping their local context, are capable of being transformed into the material backdrop of our inhuman relations, are capable of robbing us of will and volition, and becoming our master—the position that Leninism-Marxism and post-structuralist Marxism sees as being not a phase, but rather, as being eternal. Communism is not about studying these laws as things apart and seeing what

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<sup>28</sup> The reference to the ‘superman’ refers to this, that Marx initially believes that all of the elements of myself external to myself can be brought into me. This is of course a utopian notion, and Marx softens this to a position in which it is fine for my activity to exist outside of me and to surpass me, as long as it does not govern me.

<sup>29</sup> Rubin, Isaak, *Essays on Marx’s theory of value*, USA: Black Rose Books, 1990.

<sup>30</sup> Korsch, Karl, *Marxism and Philosophy*, USA: Monthly Review Press, 2008, p. 16.

is possible within them, as today we study how far we can bend the laws of gravity. Communism is about seeing the laws that guide our history as being abstracted or objectified human relations, and *consciously* moving into the third phase, ‘free individuality’.<sup>31</sup>

## PART 2: HUMAN ACTIVITY *QUA* PERSONAL RELATIONS

The personal relations of reciprocal dependence of the past were a) *more human*/personal than our own are, and were b) *less human*/personal than they appeared to be. For Marx, eventually capital ‘explodes’ these personal, social, spontaneous human relations and supplants them, becoming the social bond that we carry in our pocket,<sup>32</sup> increasing our personal independence. The problem is that capital does not give this gift freely: as it increases our personal independence it also a) begins to live our lives for us, outside of us, and b) takes (a varying level of) control of human lives, directing our daily activity and the destiny of the species. One may object here that there are still powerful human beings exerting control over human lives, but this is primarily for Marx an illusion.<sup>33</sup> Any relation of domination

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<sup>31</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 158.

<sup>32</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 157.

<sup>33</sup> Marx, Karl & Friedrich Engels, *The Holy Family: or, critique of critical critique, Russia*: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956, p. 51. ‘The propertied class and the class of the proletariat present the same human self-alienation. But the former class finds in this self-alienation its confirmation and its good, its own power; it has in it a semblance of human existence.’ This is the element of alienation that Ollman focuses on. On this element, there are two caveats. Firstly, there are exceptions. If I dominate you out of sadism, for example, capital has nothing to do with it. Marx is talking about something specific here, about people—good or bad, it does not matter: Marx notes in *Capital* pp. 351–352, that Quakers are no less vicious than anybody else as soon as they become capitalists—who make others suffer for the sake of profit. They must do it to ‘survive’, and ‘surviving’ eventually provides material rewards. But they are not human for Marx, and do not dominate as (living) human beings. Marx says more than once that capitalists are capital personified, *Capital*, pp. 254; 298; 342; 423; 424; 739; 989; 991; & 1015, which means that when your employer dominates you, you are being dominated by the walking dead. Marx is optimistic about (living) human beings on the whole being kind to one another after they stop exploiting each other at the behest of the dead. ‘If citizens could not achieve their own private good without achieving the general good, there would be no vicious people except fools.’ Marx & Engels, *The Holy Family*, p. 178. The second caveat is that I am talking about ‘modernity’, where capital is (in the final analysis) in charge. Not all nations and peoples have entered ‘modernity’ to the same extent (if one posits that there is only one modernity). The less ‘modernised’ one is, the more likely it will be that human beings will be dominated by human beings and not by objective relations.

between two human beings is *no longer* a relation of human-human domination, but is rather two beings being subordinated to capital, one by being its mouthpiece/personification—capital cannot in actuality rule us without the use of agents—the other by being reduced to bare life, a bearer of labour power, turned into a thing that produces value, and more importantly for capital, *surplus-value*, all day long. As Marx writes later, in *Capital*, the whole of the life of the worker is confiscated, in order that the period in which he creates surplus-value can be immoderately extended.<sup>34</sup> She is a slave to capital, but the capitalist is a slave too, exploiting not for himself, but for his own master, capital. However, before this second phase of ‘objection domination’ there is a first phase, in which a human being could still dominate *on his own behalf*, within what Marx calls the first social forms, relations of personal dependence.

Direct or personal relations in the past were more human than our own—a person could still be a master to some extent *in his or her own right*—but less human than they appeared to be. Marx is in no way advocating a return to old forms of spontaneous dependence.

In earlier stages of development the single individual seems to be developed more fully, because he has not yet worked out his relationships in their fullness, or erected them as independent social powers and relations opposite himself. It is ... ridiculous to yearn for a return to that original fullness ...<sup>35</sup>

These relations, ‘a merely local connection resting of blood ties, or on primeval natural or master servant relations’,<sup>36</sup> are thus limited. Marx does not once write of the *personal nature* of these relations without stating the caveat that they only *seem* personal. He does however also make it clear that these relations, these first social forms, are still—despite severe limitations—more personal and human than our own. In earlier stages human relations have not yet been divorced from human beings, they have not metamorphosed into a ‘real-social life process’, and thus the following can be said about them, that a) human beings are not yet fully human, as they are ‘imprisoned within a certain definition, as a feudal lord and vassal, landlord

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<sup>34</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 544.

<sup>35</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 162.

<sup>36</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 161.

and serf, etc.’,<sup>37</sup> but that b) these relations are still more personal than our own, because it is still human beings living human social life, not things, and thus human beings still here relate and enter into observable social relations: they can still interact in ways not reduced to buying and selling, which, as Marx does not tire of pointing out, is a social relation between things that drags mutually indifferent human beings behind it, into insipid, uninterested, impersonal contact. As Marx writes: ‘the objective relation on which they [human beings in the earlier forms] founder has still a limited, primitive character and therefore *seems* personal, while, in the modern world, personal relations flow purely out of relations of production and exchange’.<sup>38</sup> Thus, though relations are to some extent objectified, they have not yet lifted off and flown away, become ‘sufficient unto themselves’.<sup>39</sup> People are still personally dependent on other people, and are ruled by them. Human affairs are still human, although, as Marx stresses, they are not yet *actually* personal, as they will be in communism, and cannot be for as long as people are imprisoned in the social roles in which they live, which are, at bottom, determined by the level of the development of the means of production.

### PART 3: THE DISPLACEMENT/METAMORPHOSIS OF HUMAN/PERSONAL RELATIONS

In the money relation, in the developed system of exchange (and this semblance seduces the democrats), the ties of personal dependence, of distinctions of blood, education, etc., are in fact exploded, ripped up (at least, personal ties all appear as *personal* relations); and individuals *seem* independent (this is an independence which is at bottom merely an illusion, and it is more correctly called indifference), free to collide with one another and to engage in exchange within this freedom; but they appear thus only for someone who abstracts from the *conditions*, the *conditions of existence* within which these individuals enter into contact (and these conditions, in turn, are independent of the individuals and, although created by society, appear as if they were

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<sup>37</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 163.

<sup>38</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 165.

<sup>39</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 165.

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*natural conditions*, not controllable by individuals).<sup>40</sup>

It is pertinent to now study *how* human activity and roles become a) things living social lives, and b) actual conditions external to and facing human beings as something alien and autonomous. Marx is very clear about this: that the personal independence enjoyed by modern human beings is flawed thrice, in that it is a) *in actually* mutual indifference, b) is rooted in *increased* objective dependence, and c) there is *less* and not more will attributable to human beings. Marx is very clear about how the freedom in this phase is not in actuality increased, though it appears to be.<sup>41</sup> Human beings are not free *for* self-determination, for they are not living human lives, but are *things*, discrete *things* that are servants of interconnected/interrelating objects that contain our alienated humanity and our alienated sociability, and thus, human beings are not free *from* domination. The weak rule of people over people based on strength, personal charisma, and other tenuous forms of authority, has been turned into the more insidious shackle of the rule of *things* and *abstractions* over human beings.

As for how social roles and relations become erected opposite human beings, the matter is fairly simple. Labour is *always* the objectification of human activity: this is the basis of the labour theory of value. However, regarding the first social forms of labour, 'human productive capacity develops only to a slight extent and at isolated points'.<sup>42</sup> The magnitude of labour that can be objectified in these systems is thus limited by the undeveloped nature of the means of production: all the dead labour *already* objectified. The tools that we use, in other words, in the lower forms a) can only help human beings objectify a limited magnitude of fresh activity, and thus b) the magnitude of human activity absorbed into the external environment cannot reach the required level where human activity itself actually becomes sensuous and *objective*, and where capital, dead labour, begins to organise human activity, living labour, to the benefit of its own ends.

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<sup>40</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, pp. 163-164.

<sup>41</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 164.

<sup>42</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 158.



In the form of production that we call capitalist, we labour under the tutelage (not the control) of capital, at first to a small extent, and then unequivocally. Capital begins *tentatively* by making alterations to historical labour processes in order to make them produce more surplus-value, as it did in the age of manufacture, in its hunger for absolute surplus-value, and ends by *revolutionising production* to such an extent that it no longer takes into account the *form of the human being* and what it is capable of as an entity, physically and mentally, as it did in the period of large-scale industry with the advent of machines, in its *new* hunger for relative surplus-value. In the end the human being, his skill, his arms and legs, his art and mind, is purged from the idea of production, and production becomes a process in and of itself, able to develop exponentially.<sup>43</sup> Marx later calls this the *real* subsumption of labour under capital.<sup>44</sup> Once this has occurred—it does not happen all at once, of course, but bit by bit—the human being is no longer the centre of the production process—although, as Marx is very clear, machines *do not and cannot create value*, and human beings remain the secret source of all profit in production—and now each human being in the altered labour process faces his own objectified activity as an alien object, and does not see it as his own congealed activity, just as he does not see the machines and raw materials around him as the objectified activity of yet other human beings. What the modern worker sees is an object that has *value*, some magnitude of exchange value, but for the alienated worker, this value is a property of the object unrelated to his own activity, its value is *just there*, it is a property of the thing like its mass.<sup>45</sup> Likewise, the manner in which objects relate, in a market, is seen to be *natural*, things have relations that exist outside of the willing and thinking and human beings, and we just take this for granted, without understanding that such relations have no part in ‘nature’, i.e., that the things are engaging in *displaced* human relations. We do not understand that the entire environment around us is alive with *human relations*, human relations that have slipped free and have actually become

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<sup>43</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 505.

<sup>44</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 645.

<sup>45</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 160.

alien and objective—those who want to invent ‘artificial intelligence’ are too late, it is already done, and it already is in control.<sup>46</sup>

In the more famous formulation of *Capital*: ‘Hence the rule of the capitalist over the worker is the rule of things over man, of dead labour over the living, of the product over the producer’.<sup>47</sup> Dead labour, having become a system in its own right, converts human beings into two classes of beings: the capitalists are zombies, because they are capital personified, they are shells animated not by a soul, but by the dead; and living labour that becomes just that, beings reduced to their ability to have—without even their knowledge—value sucked from them, and forced to do so in order to be given enough to live, so that they can keep having value sucked from them.<sup>48</sup>

In short, large-scale industry in two ways facilitates or culminates the process in which human activity undergoes a metamorphosis and becomes an independent world (it is still *in actually* connected to us: but enjoys *de facto* independence until alienation is overcome): 1) the human being has her ability to objectify her own activity *greatly* enhanced; and 2) the specific form of this exponential enhancement very efficiently hides the fact that the labour process is about human beings objectifying their own activity; the

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<sup>46</sup> Though of course not unequivocally. If one imagines that these forces have complete control, then one has slipped into the anti-humanist/determinist position, drifting away from Marx in imagining the forces that rule us as being greater than they are. For Marx, and this is rarely discussed: only those who are capital personified have no hope of breaking free of being determined (Marx does not bother to address them directly). Those who are abused by capital are ready to break free and begin to live and self-determine (and the emancipation will be ‘universal’—by which Marx means everybody who survives the revolution will be free). As in Hegel’s dialectic of recognition, the ‘slave’ is better situated than the ‘master’.

<sup>47</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 990.

<sup>48</sup> This is of course a tension in Marx’s writings, in that capital is on the one hand maiming and diminishing us, and on the other making us ready for freedom. It is however a tension, and not a paradox. Nietzsche had the same idea in relation to Christianity, that it made us worse and better simultaneously, and that it could be good for us, as long as we broke free at the right time (i.e., before we are ground down completely). As Marx said in 1847: ‘the very moment civilisation begins, production begins to be founded on the antagonism of orders, estates, classes, and finally on the antagonism of accumulated labour and immediate labour. No antagonism, no progress.’ Stedman-Jones, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion*, p. 230. The fight between the living and the dead has benefited both, however, we have now reached a point where capitalism *qua* the rule of accumulated labour over living labour is no longer a positive agonistic relationship. We must either end the fight now, and vindicate all past suffering, or let it go on, and make it (and ourselves) worthless.

machines, the constant capital, which are impotent without variable capital, *appear* to do everything, when in fact all they are doing is slowly releasing a portion of the value that was put into them in an earlier labour process, value that cannot be preserved and transferred except by living human beings, who create fresh value as they preserve and transfer the stored value. The two hundred years of the age of the great manufactories is the prehistory of this final phase in which objectified labour takes almost complete control of living labour. Marx imagined that large-scale industry was the pinnacle of this relation: the domination of the human being by its product would be maximised and then overcome.

However, this did not occur, and we still live in this second phase, though we are post-industrial. In any given two-party system, *both* parties say that jobs and growth are what matters: which just means that as many people as possible should be in a position to alienate their labour-power so that it can self-augment. True capitalists still greedily despair over money being spent on education and hospitals: people should be just educated enough to be able to work, and just healthy enough to be able to work, and any more than that is a waste. More sophisticated capitalists understand that fit and educated workers can help the system—negatively, they fight it less, and positively, they are eager to please, and have energies and abilities to do so to an extent that no amount of whipping will ever elicit from a slave. Only those who are not capitalists value the health and happiness of living labour as an end itself: though in the second phase even this distinction is blurred, for as human relations become a world, and take on the semblance of nature, work itself is confused with the specific form that it takes under capitalism, so that even those who fight for living labour fight against it, when they a) fight for ‘jobs for all’—more equitable wage slavery—or b) advocate the death of industry—a return to human subjection to ‘mundane’—for Marx—considerations of daily survival, to the necessity that negates freedom. The first side cannot see that labour in its present form is inexorably damaging to human beings, and the second cannot see that they are caught up in the same misconception of the capitalists regarding technology and jobs, i.e., that ‘[a]ny other utilisation of the machinery than

the capitalist one is ... impossible'.<sup>49</sup> For Marx, the trick is to use machinery, dead labour, in a manner that is good for human beings, a process that begins when human beings stop mistaking their own congealed activity for a natural world. Once this is done, once we begin to see the world differently, we will stop seeing the exploitation of human beings by their own past activity as being a natural way of 'living'. Instead, we will see our own externalised relations as a set of conditions, made by us, but purely accidentally—i.e., nobody ever knew that they were manufacturing a world—in which we can begin to live, as human beings, as free individuals. As Marx writes:

The alien and independent character in which it [human activity] exists *vis-a-vis* individuals proves only that the latter are still engaged in the creation of the conditions of their social life, and that they have not yet begun, on the basis of these conditions, to live it.<sup>50</sup>

If one objects to the idea that we are still in this phase, that the London of today and Dickensian London are worlds apart—or if one says that *all* exploitation now happens in 'the third world'—one need only look at the commodification of 'life' at home, and the manner in which enjoyment and experience is something that we purchase. Marx's statement, that the whole of the life of the worker is confiscated, could be said to apply to us *more* than to the folk in a Dickensian work-house: for at least in that context there was an end of the day at which one was booted into the cold night, to live or to die. Today, capital owns us around the clock, as we alternate between bleeding and drinking value—and, as Michel Foucault noted in a different context, the powers that rule us today would never be so wasteful as to let us die.<sup>51</sup> As Marx complained in 1848, as today, the dead dominate the living, the past dominates the present, the machine dominates the worker.<sup>52</sup> We consume the dead as the dead consume us, all of us having by now learned

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<sup>49</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 569.

<sup>50</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 162.

<sup>51</sup> Foucault, Michel, *Society Must be Defended*, USA: Picador, 1997, p. 241.

<sup>52</sup> Marx & Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, pp. 61–62.

Nietzsche's trick, to kiss as we bite.<sup>53</sup> It is good to remember, at this time, that for Marx, there was still a phase beyond this one in which we live. It is still not too late to choose it.

#### PART 4: THE FINAL METAMORPHOSIS: FREE INDIVIDUALITY

There is little to say here that Marx does not say himself: '[f]ree individuality, based on the universal development of individuals and on their subordination of their communal, social productivity as their social wealth, is the third stage'.<sup>54</sup> We can only say that it is clear that this free individuality *cannot* for Marx appear as a spontaneous development. There are three pertinent points here. Firstly, we much *choose* this phase. The cosmos is *neither sentient nor benign*, and history will not go anywhere good for us *automatically*. Secondly, we cannot simply become free *ex nihilo*: i.e., we have no 'innate' capacity or desire for freedom (to posit this is a failure of much Western/humanist Marxism). As awful as the condition described above is, for Marx it is *necessary*. The reduction of human beings to puppets and slaves of their own dead, ossified activity is an indispensable condition for creating the free individuality that Marx craves (on two counts, in that 1) capital's abuse is not without some benefits for us, in that it forces us to become punctual and productive—as well as teaching us to want freedom<sup>55</sup>—and 2) in that for Marx, the idea of freedom without technology is nonsense, and capital's hunger for our surplus-value has created technology that can support freedom).<sup>56</sup> Finally, the only way to get from the second to the third phase is material: a change of the mode of labour is the impetus. After the experiments of 'really existing socialism', and considering how late in the day it is becoming, we should be forgiven for saying that all avenues of reaching free individuality should be pursued, material and 'superstructural'. Marx remains for me an excellent diagnostician of the

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<sup>53</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Beyond Good and Evil*, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 62.

<sup>54</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 158.

<sup>55</sup> Note the admixture of determination by forces and voluntary human action, i.e., external, 'self-directed material change 'advances' to the point where human subjectivities can develop needs that cannot be fulfilled, motivating agents to internally-motivated action. This is the hallmark of the reading of Marx that Márkus subscribes to.

<sup>56</sup> Marx, Karl & Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, USA: Prometheus Books, 1998, p. 61.

problems of our age. He is not so excellent regarding solutions. The last thing to note is that Marx returns to this idea of free individuality in *Capital*, in the first chapter, imagining his free, associated producers, using the means of production in such a manner that it is transformed from our master and the source of our misery and ignorance to our tool and the source of our many-sidedness and freedom.<sup>57</sup>

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS:

Many readings of Marx today fall into one of three traps. The first is to become too militant, following the orthodoxy in believing that communism is not a choice among many but rather a good-in-itself/inevitability. One can find and cite passages in which Marx himself speaks in this way, but on balance Marx believes that human beings (though the dead clutch at their brains) are ultimately in charge of human destiny. The second trap is to become too liberal, and to think that communism is *simply a choice* that we need to make (this is based in the illusion that we are presently free and making *bad choices*). Ending capitalism is not just a choice, and the matter is more complex than changing the way that people think (we are at war with our dead, who control to a large extent what we think, do, want and need, though we do not know it). The third trap of modern interpretation is to abandon the search for the ‘real’ Marx, as Althusser did in defence of Stalin (saying, effectively, that this reading is a distortion, but so are all readings), or as Reichelt did in stating effectively that Marx was distorted already before he was distorted.<sup>58</sup> There is of course already excellent work in-between, various theses of continuity/reconstruction that show how Marx changes and how he stays the same,<sup>59</sup> and works that deny the need to even think

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<sup>57</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 171.

<sup>58</sup> The Neue Marx-Lektüre value-form reading of Marx is a paradox in a) its fidelity to Marx’s economic theory, and b) its lack of compunction in having little fidelity to his materialism. The concept of ‘real abstraction’ deserves the charge that Marx levels at the ‘economist who recognises exclusively either things or ideas’: vis, he cannot see relations, i.e., he cannot see that things are charged with a social substance that is activity made objective. To say that is value is a ‘a thing of thought’ is to miss what is unique, interesting, and obvious in Marx: value is congealed activity.

<sup>59</sup> Márkus, Marxism and anthropology; Silva, Nara, ‘Alienation Theory and Ideology in Dialogue’, *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society*, 29/3, 2017.

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about Marx in terms of being whole or split,<sup>60</sup> reminding us that the argument only started because *Marxists* conflated idealism, liberalism, and the bourgeoisie, and thought that they had to disown anything that was not pure, clean, scientific materialism, even if that meant disowning *Marx*, or at least the dirty, Hegelian Marx who died in the 1840s and was reborn a messiah scientist.

However, there is still scope for more discussions of Marx as a changing unity, that can help us on the left of Marxism, where some still think that our problem is rich people being greedy—a *profoundly* anti-Marxist thought—and on the other side of Marxism where areas even today still resist ‘liberalisation’, forgiving bloodshed in the past and preparing for more in the present and future, stained by the old belief of Engels and Kautsky that communism was *destined*, and that no means are off limits if one is on the right side of history. The new ‘diagonal’ readings can founder too, in that they, tending towards seeing the subject position of human beings as always being *subject*(/interpellated), cannot relate to Marx’s angst over human beings being trammelled by external structures, or his desire to *master* them. The problem is not greed or apathy, and its solution no longer needs to be written in blood. Our problem (as a Marx not divided against itself can tell us) is that money *qua* capital rules the world. We all know this already, but that everybody ‘knows’ it conceals what it *really means*: that we are slaves to our own congealed activity. No longer to God—who is in Feuerbach’s influential understanding of alienation a freestanding edifice of displaced human emotion, an object that masquerades as a subject—but to the *almighty dollar*, which today contains our stolen life, personality, and power.

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<sup>60</sup> Dyer-Witheford, ‘The Return of Species-Being’.

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