

## Marx's Meontology

### I

Marx understood what he was doing as conjuring and participating in the emergence of a new historical event.<sup>1</sup> In that event, philosophy itself would have to change. This is already evident in the famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, in which he negates *theoria* as the classical and traditional *proprium* of philosophy: "Philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it" ("Theses on Feuerbach" / 3, 7).<sup>2</sup> Speculation prompted by wonderment concerning first principles and causes, the contemplative observation of the whole of being and of the world, tasks that have always been the essence of philosophical thought, now has to "realize" or "abolish" itself and become an outright activity of transforming the world, which, being a real activity, has its concrete historical and social subject: "Philosophy cannot realize itself without the transcendence (*Aufhebung*) of the proletariat, and the proletariat cannot transcend itself without the realization (*Verwirklichung*) of philosophy" ("A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" / 1, 291).<sup>3</sup> The realization of philosophy is to be understood as a revolution, while the naming of the proletariat as the agent of this new historical event permits us to intuit its full dimensions: for Marx, the proletariat is "the positive possibility . . . of emancipation" ("A Contribution" / 1, 390), of a "radical revolution" as a limitless "all human emancipation" ("A Contribution" / 1, 388). Taking as the departure point for his critique of capitalism the empirical evidence of the difficult social, economic, and political position of the working people in the countries of the

<sup>1</sup> Substantial portions of this essay were previously published in Croatian as "Karl Marx," in: Ozren Žunec, *pripr., Suvremena filozofija I. Hrestomatija filozofije*, sv. 7. Ur. Damir Barbarić. Zagreb, Školska knjiga, 1996, 263-92.

<sup>2</sup> In parenthesis I will give the internet source of my quotations in English. In many instances, however, the English translation does not relay the full weight of Marx's original formulation so that I not only refer the reader to the original but will quote from the original when I think it is necessary. Throughout the text, the numbers after the slash give the number of the volume and the page number from the German original as found in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke und Briefe (MEW)*, 39 volumes, 2 additional volumes and 1 volume of indices, Berlin, Dietz, 1956ss. The additional volumes (numbered separately) are cited as Ergbd. (*Ergänzungsband*) 1 and 2.

<sup>3</sup> The English translation of the word *Aufhebung* does not preserve all the connotations of the German original, which has several seemingly contradictory meanings, including "to lift up," "to abolish," "to cancel or suspend," and "to sublimate." The term has also been translated as "abolish," "preserve," and "transcend." Hegel used the word to explain what happens when a thesis and its antithesis interact. This sense of the term is customarily translated as "sublate."

West during the heyday of capitalism in the first part of the nineteenth century, and believing that the basis of this position is the existence of capitalist private ownership of the means of production, which alienates work and the worker in a fourfold manner (the alienation of the worker from the products of his work, from work as his own activity, from the worker himself, and from other workers, that is, people in their interpersonal relations), Marx hypostatizes the sociological facts of the poverty and the lack of rights of the proletariat and turns them into an all-encompassing anthropological, essential, and utterly decisive world historical truth. The new historical event in which the proletariat has to radically emancipate itself from capitalism is no mere political and social event but rather the active overturning of a system of a world that finds itself in “times of decadence (*Verfallzeit*)” (G, 106/ G, 26)<sup>4</sup>: “By heralding the *dissolution of the hereto existing world order*, the proletariat merely proclaims the *secret of its own existence*, for it is the factual dissolution of that world order” (“A Contribution”/ 1, 391).

The aim of the proletarian revolution transcends every political frame; it is not partial, not merely a political revolution because the proletariat is not a political or a social entity—it is a “class of bourgeois society that is not a class of bourgeois society” (“A Contribution”/ 1, 390) because its situation is no longer specific and based on class but an all human situation. We are not here dealing with political emancipation (just as the proletariat itself is not a political entity) but rather the emancipation of man is in reality an emancipation *from* the political because the political in itself is something restricted and finite: “The limits of political emancipation are evident at once from the fact that the state can free itself from a restriction without man being *really* free from this restriction, that the state can be a *free state* without man being a *free man*” (“On the Jewish Question”/ 1, 353). A detailed description of the political and thus of the restricted nature of political emancipation shows that “political emancipation is the reduction of man, on the one hand to a member of civil society, an independent and *egoistic* individual, and on the other hand, to a *citizen*, to a moral person” (“On the Jewish Question”/ 1, 370). Contrary to this, Marx demands unlimited emancipation, which, being without limits, cannot be political: “The only liberation of Germany which is *practically* possible is liberation from the point of view of *that* theory which declares man to be the supreme being (*Wesen*) for man” (“A Contribution”/ 1, 391) because “every emancipation is a *restoration* of the human world and of human relationships to *man himself*” (“On the Jewish Question”/ 1, 370). Thusly, the political disappears in the face of the existence of a “human world” and of man “reduced” to “man himself” as the “supreme being.” Man himself as an absolute, as the first principle and the first cause of his existence, will also, in his unbounded

<sup>4</sup> English text of *Grundrisse*: Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, New York, Penguin, 1973. All subsequent quotations from *Grundrisse* will use the capital letter G. Numbers before the slash give the page number of the English edition, and numbers after the slash give the page number of the German edition: Karl Marx, *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*. First edition. Moscow, 1939–1940; later editions Berlin and Frankfurt am Main, 1953ss.

self-emancipation, in his becoming a “free man,” who in his liberation annihilates the political as the traditional environs of freedom, has to demolish all the institutions of his life up to that point: in addition to private property, as Marx writes in the fourth thesis on Feuerbach, “the earthly family . . . must be destroyed in theory and in practice (3, 6); “all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations,” even “personal worth” (4, 465) disappear and are destroyed as we read in *The Communist Manifesto*. Emancipation means the annihilation of individuality and of the self and signifies the end of every identity, that is, the identity of both the individual and of the nation (“the working men have no country”; *The Communist Manifesto* 4, 479). Man self-created through emancipation is a “species-being” and total man who “produces man—himself and the other man” (“Private Property and Communism”/ Ergbd. 1, 537). This emancipation and “total man” cannot be understood by way of traditional conceptualization and thinking. Furthermore, “total man” comes into being and is only through revolution and emancipation, which presuppose the disappearance and the demolition of the entire up-to-that-point “order of the world”; Marx names this final turn of emancipation “communism” which, since it is conceived as the realization of “total man,” is simultaneously also “fully developed humanism” (“Private Property and Communism”/ Ergbd. 1, 536).

Since the task of philosophy and of the proletariat, according to the aforementioned dialectic of “realization-negation,” amount to the same thing, that is, to the enormous project of the radical effective transformation of the world, it is clear that Marx’s teaching can retain neither the content nor the form of philosophy in the classical and traditional meaning of speculative-theoretical theory. However, Marx retains from philosophy both generality and comprehensiveness just as the proletariat is not only a class within society but the general human condition.

## II

In full accord with the blueprint for transforming the world, Marx’s fundamental methodological position for exploring and thinking the world and history rests on principles that are also contrary to classical philosophy. Aristotle saw philosophy as “a science that investigates the first principles and causes” (*Metaphysica*, 982b8s<sup>5</sup>) and as a desire for knowledge for the sake of knowledge and not for gain, therefore as “the only free science” (b27), which is thusly, according to the time of its inception, according to its object, and according to the fundamental thrust of its desire, posterior to and beyond all accruing of “the necessities of life and the things that make comfort and recreation” (b23–24). Hegel, probably the last scion of classic philosophizing, taking as his point of departure the idea that “to comprehend *what is* is the task of philosophy, because *what is* is reason” (*Elements of the Philosophy of*

<sup>5</sup> Within parentheses, I employ the customary system for quoting from classic works of philosophy. For the English translation, see *The Works of Aristotle*, translated into English under the editorship of W. D. Ross, vol. VIII, *Metaphysica*, Oxford, 1972.

*Right*, Preface, 21<sup>6</sup>) and that “what is rational is actual; that which is actual is rational” (20), held the object of philosophy to be the realization of the spirit in the real world. For Hegel, the state was “the *rational* in and for itself” (§ 258, 275) and “the spirit *which is present in the world*” (§ 270, 291); in this manner, it is precisely the spirit that is the presupposition, the beginning, the first element, and the source of reality: “The State is the divine will as present spirit *unfolding* as the actual shape and *organization of a world*” (§ 270, 292). In other words, traditionally, philosophy was not interested in thinking about what was immediately present, such as life’s necessities or the politics of a particular state. Philosophy’s interest was a theoretical, primarily contemplative search for more primordial principles than immediate causes, principles that determine the form of the present condition of the world.

Marx took the opposite path:

We must begin by stating the first premise of all human existence and, therefore, of all history, the premise, namely, that man must be in a position to live in order to be able to “make history”. But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history . . . (*The German Ideology* / 3, 28)

This position does not exhaust itself in its interest for a “precondition” as such, that is, that the “production of material life” is deemed the necessary condition for making history, and that it, except being a precondition, has no other meaning or sense. Marx’s teaching could not have achieved its world-historical relevance and weight if it had restricted itself to the rethinking of the “life” and “material” conditions and “presuppositions” of the spirit. This restriction would annul the intended universality of Marx’s doctrine; therefore, by expanding the reach of “the conditions” to what is recognized as conditioned by the condition itself, it will place “material production” as a general principle.

While economy would be the limited observation and exploration of “the condition” and “presupposition” itself, Marx will assign to his teaching, in which the “economic,” “the production of material life,” shows itself as the unconditional that conditions everything else, different names: “a single science, the science of history” (*The German Ideology* / 3, 18) or the “critique of political (national) economy” and “historical materialism” (“the materialistic view of history”). In the framework of this “science of history,” everything that is, including all forms of the spirit, will be deduced from production:

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. For the English translation, see G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, edited by Allen W. Wood, translated by H. B. Nisbet, Cambridge, 1991.

This conception of history depends on our ability to expound the real process of production, starting out from the material production of life itself, and to comprehend the form of intercourse connected with this and created by this mode of production (i.e. civil society in its various stages), as the basis of all history; and to show it in its action as State, to explain all the different theoretical products and forms of consciousness, religion, philosophy, ethics, etc., etc. and trace their origins and growth from that basis . . . (*The German Ideology* / 3, 37–38)

“The critique of the economy” is therefore not merely a new economic doctrine that seeks to replace old ones—as a matter of fact, Marx will directly take over many “classic” economic theories such as, for example, Adam Smith’s conception of capital as accumulated labour—but rather its first task is a critique of the narrow-mindedness of economics and its expansion into a “science of history,” to a science of everything that exists. It proceeds to do so by viewing everything that is as being and becoming in the “real process of the production of immediate life.” In this sense, the “critique of the economy” becomes a new “ontology” whose first statement consists in the determination of the manner of man’s being and his nature: “the existence of men is their actual life-process (*das Sein der Menschen ist ihr wirklicher Lebensprozess*)” (*The German Ideology* / 3, 26). Everything that might bear the appearance of independence disappears and dissolves in this “ontological” substratum of the “production of life” as Being. This is contained in Marx’s famous pronouncement on “the base” and “the superstructure”:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. (“Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*” / (13, 8–9)

Marx was not concerned here with a kind of average sociologism or with establishing cause-effect relations between large spheres of human activity which, truth be told, lose some aspects of their autonomy but not their inner ensemble and their definiteness and delimitation. Rather, he was concerned with abolishing the political as such and all “forms of consciousness,” as can be seen in the aforementioned project of the emancipatory demand for the “realization of philosophy” and the “abolition of the proletariat.” Just as freedom for Marx means a liberation from politics, it also means

a liberation from the economy in the narrow sense of the word, from that which prevents “the critique of the economy” from becoming universal and a “positive science.” The project of emancipation stems from the “ontological” examination of the “social Being,” conceived as the sum of the relations of production and of production itself. Both of these elements make up the unique nature of Marx’s teaching.

### III

In deciding whether some teaching is a philosophy or not, one can apply the criterion of whether that philosophizing asks the basic and common question: “*ti tò ón*—what is being (or what does being mean)?” Nowhere does Marx ask this question, traditionally subsumed under the rubric of “ontology,” nor does he give an answer. However, although, as it relates to philosophy, Marx’s teaching is destructive and through its destructive thrust finds its grandiose philosophical mission, his doctrine builds and derives many of its insights from traditional philosophical concepts, ideas, and categories. Marx’s relationship to philosophy is the same as his relationship to economics—in Marx’s thought, the two are in any case the same, so that he will say that “Hegel’s standpoint is that of modern political economy” (“Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy in General”/ Ergbd. 1, 574). In both cases, Marx gives us a “critique” which in reality is both a critique of economics and of philosophy, a critique that wants to retain the insights of extant economics and philosophy and abolish their narrow-mindedness and, first of all, their “theoretical nature.” Within the framework of this “critique,” Marx develops his insight into what “is” and offers a relatively integral, although unsystematic “meontology” (*mè ón*, “not-being”).

According to both his own self-assessment and those of his commentators, with his doctrine Marx introduced a decisive “ontological” and “anthropological” novelty: sensuousness is here viewed as praxis, praxis as sensuousness and both conjoin as “sensuous human activity.” Marx’s own understanding of the historico-philosophical suppositions of the central place of praxis and its identity with sense rests, as we read in the first thesis on Feuerbach, on the one hand, on “hitherto existing materialism” wherein “the thing (*der Gegenstand*), reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in “the form of the object or of contemplation but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively (*die Wirklichkeit; Sinnlichkeit nur unter der Form des [Object] oder der Anschauung gefasst wird, nicht aber als sinnlich menschliche Tätigkeit, Praxis; nicht subjektiv*)” (*MEW* 3, 5). The second source for the identity of praxis is “idealism,” which, as we also read in the first thesis on Feuerbach, “developed” “the active side” but of course not “real, sensuous activity as such” (*ibid.*). “Idealistically” comprehended activity, as “the will” that “consists in cancelling (*aufzuheben*) the contradiction between subjectivity and objectivity” (Hegel, *Elements*, § 28, 57) or “dialectic” as the “development of the Idea as the activity of its own rationality” (§ 31, 60), ended up in *representations* (*Vor-stellung*, that which is brought before). Marx now wants a “materialistically” conceived activity which objectifies itself in the object (*Gegen-stand*, that which stands opposite to something): “human activity” is “activity concerned with

things" (*MEW* 3, 5; English translation altered). Here, praxis is not one of the ways the human stands before or relates to reality, as was the case with Aristotle's "threefold" of the theoretical, the practical, and the poetical life; here, praxis is reality. Furthermore, praxis is reality not only as the sum of the empirically existing, sensuousness understood in "the form of object or of contemplation" but is simultaneously also the reality of thought. Encompassing, therefore, both the "perceptively objective" and "thought," praxis is the sum of everything that exists. Praxis as activity, movement, and happening is not that something which is mere being ("ontic") but is its coming into being, its becoming, its happening, and its movement: what has come into being through praxis, the object (*Gegen-stand*), is being in the proper sense. It seems that praxis assumes the traditional place of "the Being of being." Here is the second thesis on Feuerbach: "The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question" (*ibid.*) or, put differently, the manner in which being is and how it shows itself to be true is praxis as "sensuous human activity." The exclusion of theory does not merely argue for the "primacy of praxis" as the highest and best mode of human life and habitus but stems from the "ontological" decision concerning what being as such "is." Furthermore, praxis is not the manner of man's standing before and relating to reality but is reality itself, its coming into being, and its movement and the identity of that becoming and movement.

The concept of praxis was introduced and elaborated after Marx's early works were published and "discovered" in the 1930s. It became a habit to see in these works a philosophical, "humanistic," and revolutionary phase of Marx's thought with powerful utopian elements. His later works, devoted to "economic" analyses of the economy and the society of capitalism were held to be, if not "dogmatic," then at least "objective" and "scientific" studies. The way the two phases interconnected remained unclear. It was even argued that a sharp "epistemological break" (Louis Althusser) divided the two phases and what they focused upon. However, Marx's "critique of the economy" as a unique "critical" assemblage of philosophy and economics shows a unity already by the fact that it provides exceptionally influential teaching on praxis, as an emancipatory desideratum. Praxis is a constituent part of the insights of the "scientific" studies of capitalism.

Through praxis, individual beings present themselves as objects; this includes man. For Marx, to be an "objective being" means "to have an object outside oneself" and "to be an object for a third being"; the objectness of being most decisively determines its ontological status because "its Being (*Sein*) is objective," whereas "a non-objective being is a not-being (*Unwesen*)" ("Critique of Hegel's Philosophy in General"/ *Ergbd.* 1, 578). Objectness is therefore that determination which expresses the manner in which everything that is as such is; that mode is in its essence relational because objectness presupposes that the being exists only in an interrelated relational multitude and as an interrelated relational multitude. A non-objective being, a being outside the interrelatedness in the multitude, would be absolute, absolved of everything and separate, identical to itself and therefore not determined by any difference and essentially an unindividuated being: "For as soon as there are objects outside me,

as soon as I am not *alone*, I am *another*—*another reality* than the object outside me” (ibid.). Thus, being presupposes two conditions: that it is part of the many and that it is reciprocally interrelated—in an “object” relation—with other parts of the many.

The objectness of being signifies that being does not exist for itself but that it relates to others, which yields to us the system of the “objective multitude”; however, this system is not only a mere arrangement and placing of beings. Marx writes, “The sun is the *object* of the plant—an indispensable object to it, confirming its life—just as the plant is an object of the sun, being an *expression* of the life-awakening power of the sun, of the sun’s *objective* essential power” (ibid.). Beings are in relations in such a way that they work on one another in a sensuous manner as “objects of sense” and “sensuous objects” in which process they both suffer and act: “Man as an objective, sensuous being is therefore a *suffering* being—and because he feels that he suffers, a *passionate* being. Passion is the essential power of man energetically bent on its object” (Ergbd. 1, 579). Objective being externalizes itself as the power of being so that the interrelation of the many represents a network of acting and suffering one’s own and other beings’ power; however, beings are not only thought and observed within these relations but they achieve their survival, their reality, their “life” precisely through the externalization and the activity of the power of their being. Marx illustrates this relationship using hunger as his example: “*Hunger* is a natural *need*; it therefore needs a *nature* outside itself, an *object* outside itself, in order to satisfy itself, to be stilled. Hunger is an acknowledged need of my body for an *object* existing outside it, indispensable to its integration and to the expression of its essential being” (“Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy in General”/ Ergbd. 1, 578).

The system of the relation between all beings, that is the arrangement of everything that is or, put otherwise, “the world” establishes itself as a system of needs: everything that is, every being, is in such a manner that it externalizes itself by its power as object and sense and thusly integrates into itself this other being and in such a manner survives, endures, and exists. To be sensually and as an object means to externalize oneself in another being out of need and to make that other being one’s own integrated life, to satisfy one’s life need by negating other beings and making them one’s own suffering object. The system of needs is the externalization of being through power and appropriation, and the “world,” a system of relations of all beings and their needs to be, is a system of constant and incessant movement of becoming and passing away or destruction, a system of reciprocal appropriation, expenditure, and object-sensuous destruction.

Objectness and sensuousness are universal and continuous; not only are they inclusive of all beings, including inorganic and organic nature as well as man himself, but the “world,” as a system of the movement of becoming and destruction, is in this movement eternal and without limits. Man, however, differs from other beings because of the mode of his objectness and sensuousness, which includes an object relation to itself, and it is because of this that the man is a “species-being (*Gattungswesen*)” (“Estranged Labour”/ Ergbd. 1, 517) and a “free being” (Ergbd. 1, 515). This means that man integrates himself into his life and thusly spends and negates; man is there-

fore a being who is in such a way that he negates himself, a being who self-creates, who maintains and confirms himself through negation.

“Freedom” here does not mean unboundedness to, separatedness or independence from the other but object-freedom. For Marx, freedom means that man “owes his existence to himself” (“Private Property and Communism”/ Ergbd. 1, 544); that “free objectness” is “labour, *life activity, productive life*,” that is, “free activity” (“Estranged Labour”/ Ergbd. 1, 516). Therefore, “it is just in his work upon the objective world that man really proves himself to be a *species-being*. This production is his active species-life” (Ergbd. 1, 517). “Estranged Labour” is not a free activity. In such labour, activity takes place only as a means for the satisfaction of physical existence, while in free activity and production, “man proves himself as a conscious species-being, i.e., as a being that treats the species as his own essential being, or that treats itself as a species-being” (Ergbd. 1, 516–517). In other words, the object of human production is not the product towards which it is essentially indifferent but production for the sake of production. Human production does not produce a product for the satisfaction of this or that need but for the highest need: that man relates to himself as to his species, therefore productive being. The purpose of this production is the production and the satisfaction of its needs (the needs of production itself).

#### IV

These observations are characteristic of the young, “philosophizing” and “humanistic” Marx. In the later, “economistic” works, especially in *Capital*, Marx does not start with the determination of the essence of man but with an analysis of the product, that is, the commodity, and with production, but reaches similar conclusions concerning production as the subject of the process of becoming.

Marx commences by saying that, within the circle of consumption and production, production is merely “the inner moment of productive activity”: in true human production, in production for the sake of production, consumption, or the satisfaction of some specific need, is only a derived or unessential moment, while production is the “predominant moment” (G, 94/ G, 15) from which “the process always returns . . . to begin anew” (G, 99/ G, 20). The objects of this production for its own sake are commodities; they serve to satisfy human needs and have “use value and usefulness” (C I, 126 / 23, 49)<sup>7</sup> wherein “value” signifies the possibility of them being transformed from a thing into various processes of human life. In production for the sake of production the satisfaction of human needs is not primary; that is why the commodity, as the product of human production, alongside its secondary use-value also has an “exchange-value” which is a “quantitative relation” (C I, 126 / 23, 50). The division of society commands that the products of concrete useful labour, which

<sup>7</sup> In subsequent quotations from Marx’s *Capital*, the sign C I will be used for references from the first volume, and the signature C III for references from the third volume. The numbers after the slash give the volume and page number in *MEW*.

produces objects with a use value, be exchanged; this exchange of commodities is characterized “precisely by its abstraction from their use-values” (C I, 127 / 23, 51-52). The commodity can be used in one or several ways, but it can be exchanged in countless ways. This is why its use value is annulled in exchange. Exchange-value is the expression of the nullity of forms and characteristics of the object in production for the sake of production. Use-value is the expression of the possibility of transforming objects from one form to another. For example, we have the transformation of light and warmth into the growth of a plant. On the contrary, exchange-value is the expression of the general fluidity of an object which does not change its form because it is already assumed to be null. The totality of production for the sake of production, in which objects appear as commodities, encompasses what is moving, in transformation, in transition (usage), and what is in principle without form (exchange).

For the commodity to be exchanged, its fluid identity has to be “reduced to a common element, of which they represent a greater or a lesser quantity” but “this common element cannot be a geometrical, physical, chemical or other natural property of commodities” (C I, 127 / 23, 51). The commodity is produced by some concrete labour; by abstracting from use-value and form one abstracts from the concreteness of labour so that “also the different concrete forms of these labours disappear” and labour is “altogether reduced to equal human labour, human labour in the abstract” becoming a “ghostlike material” (C I, 128 / 23, 52) The expression “abstract human labour” signifies true human production, the production of a “species-being” that abstracts from physical or any other concrete need and thusly from the determinate nature of the product. What is common to all labour, its abstraction, is pure “quantity,” “duration,” “the labour time which is necessary on the average” (C I, 129 / 23, 53). The measure of value is the measure of the time of labour, thusly the measure of flow in general. Therefore, production, by way of the measure of the time of labour that gives value to the commodity, is the “measure” of itself.

In such a manner, the world of labour and of the commodity is in principle without form. Its “substance” is levelled out “human labour-power in its fluid state” (C I, 142 / 23, 65) because “labour itself is the living, form-giving fire: it is the transitoriness of things, their temporality, as their formation by living time” (G, 361/ G, 266). Negating and reducing all labour which is still somewhat differentiated by the social division of labour to a sameness, the society that is familiar with the commodity, “our capitalist society” (C I, 134/ 23, 58), appears as a kind of “ghostlike object.” Enabled by the levelling out of all labour, this society transforms everything into everything else. It finds its final achievement and expression in the classical insight of “historical materialism” concerning the annulment of the self-independence of all spheres of society and the “measure”-giving of production for the sake of production. A society that knows the commodity and that appears in “the world of the commodity” does not have any kind of form, nothing stable and differentiated. That society is interminable flow, transformation, and change, production and exchange, or—the production, exchange, and the “ghostlike object,” a “form” not of something that is, of whatsoever is determined, or of any kind of being, but of what in traditional ontology is opposite to these: of Nothingness itself.

Marx's thought which sees flux and permanent movement in praxis, objectness (*Gegenständlichkeit*) in labour and in the commodity, ought not to be understood as a "philosophy of the economy," as an investigation of what is being in the aspects and the spheres of the economy. The essential argument of this thought is that everything that exists, even man himself, comes into being, "is," and becomes only through production as the "predominant," as the supra-power; all beings survive through praxis and objectness, all come into being through labour, and all are commodities. No distinct human activity or limited happening or sphere is posited by production but rather a general, basic, and all-permeating "ontological event." The society that comes into being and as a whole functions according to the mode of production of "civil (bourgeois) society" is the foundation of the entire history of the world: "This conception of history," Marx remarks in *The German Ideology*, "historical materialism," ". . . depends on our ability to comprehend . . . civil society . . . as the basis (*Grundlage*) of all history" (3, 37).

## V

In production, in labour, and in the commodity, one sees the equality of everything in constant motion and the disappearance of all forms. One sees not only "being" (objects, the commodity) but also all-transforming Being (praxis, production) as motion and Nothing; "differences" in all that is, are here understood exclusively through quantity and the measure of the motion itself. The dissolution of the makeup of society as an ensemble of differences ensues from this, the reduction of the differences of labour and of all men to abstract workers whose mode of being, that is, what they are, is determined by the measurement of linear and empty time. The commodity, like "useful labour," in its "use-value" had a temporary form which is the substratum of change itself and which has always constantly been negated but is not pure change itself. However, in the social process, there is a commodity which is only change: money. Time—undifferentiated, average, abstract—set forth in sequences of countable and measureable "nows," is the general equivalent but in exchange has to appear as a commodity. Money, therefore, is "time in commodity form." Money has no "use-value," nor does it have a form; rather, money is the "common value-form which contrasts in the most striking manner with the motley natural forms of their use-values" (C I, 139/ 23, 62). Since it expresses in a pure manner the essential formlessness of commodities, money is the "*nexus rerum*" (C I, 228/ 23, 145), the "*real spirit* of all things" ("The Power of Money"/ Ergbd. 1, 564), the "*object* of eminent possession" (1, 563), the "spirit of commodities (*Warensseele*)" (C I, 177/ 23, 97), and "the universal commodity (*absolute Ware*)" (C I, 235/ 23, 152) and signifies the erasure of every temporary form of the commodity and of labour: "Since money does not reveal what has been transformed into it, everything, commodity or not, is convertible into money," and its "circulation becomes the great social retort into which everything is thrown" (C I, 229/ 23, 145). Money negates every form and therefore represents the "general distortion of *individualities*"; money, which "confounds and

confuses all things,” is “the general confounding and confusing of all things—the world upside-down—the confounding and confusing of all natural and human qualities” (“The Power of Money”/ Ergbd. 1, 566) that has “*divine power (die göttliche Kraft)*” (“The Power of Money”/ Ergbd. 1, 565) to undo all forms. Marx calls that power, in analogy with production, which is essentially the production of negation and demolition, a “*truly creative power*” (ibid.).

Just as the levelled-out time of a series of equivalent “nows” can only be infinitely extended into the past and the future, so is money by its nature infinite. This derives from its main characteristic by which it annuls and disintegrates everything, “confounds and confuses all things,” being “the general *confounding and confusing* of all things.” The urge to endlessly hoard money does not have a basis in some psychological, biological, or anthropological desire to be rich but in the fact that, “qualitatively or formally considered, money is independent of all limits,” and yet “every actual sum of money is limited in amount”; therefore, “the contradiction between the quantitative limitation and the qualitative lack of limitation of money keeps driving the hoarder back to his Sisyphean task: accumulation” (C I, 230-31/ 23, 147). The hoarding of money is always a quantitative imposing of restrictions because, by taking money out of circulation, it “necessarily crystallizes out of the process of exchange (*Geldkristal*)” (C I, 181/ 23, 101). To overcome this limitation, it has to “melt” and commence with the production of itself.

Social exchange and the circulation of values take place in two ways. In the first, “simple form,” the commodity is exchanged for money and then money for the commodity; “ontologically,” Marx describes this as “commodity-form, stripping off of this form, and return to it” (C I, 207/ 23, 126). Here the flow, the movement, the change, the “meltability” of the commodity and money is bounded on both ends by beings (things) which still in a certain sense exist (commodities). This state of things corresponds to the classic ontological postulate according to which “everything that changes is something and is changed by something and into something” (Aristotle, *Metaphysica* 1069b35). There is another form of circulation according to the formula “money–commodity–money”; the difference between the “initial” and “terminal” money is quantitative and represents an “increment,” a “surplus-value” (C I, 251/ 23, 165). The whole transformation is money becoming capital. Capital is a self-valorizing value that, “while constantly assuming the form in turn of money and commodities, . . . changes its own magnitude” (C I, 255/ 23, 169). According to its intention, the self-valorizing movement of capital is in its intention the *constant continuity* of the process, the unobstructed and fluid transition of value from one form into the other” (G, 535/ G, 433). Since the beginning and the end of this process are identical, namely money, “this very fact makes the movement an endless one” (C I, 252/ 23, 166), and since the circulation of money as capital is “an end in itself,” then “the valorization of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement. The movement of capital is limitless (*maßlos*)” (C I, 253/ 23, 167). Capital opens a vista on a process whose infinity consists not in the enormous number or the numberless host of beings or forms that it encompasses, sets moving, or produces, but in the

infinity, boundlessness, and measurelessness that exists in the lack of any boundary or measure of the process of movement itself, which, as movement, infinitely augments itself. The process of capital is not merely one of the processes of the world but the world process itself, so that Marx sees all historical happenings as, literally speaking, “acquisitions” of capital: “This progression, this progress belongs to and is exploited by capital” because “capital has subjugated historical progress to the service of wealth” so that “historical development, political development, art, science” (G, 589-90/ G, 484) are all acquisitions of the movement of capital, which is itself the “general intellect” (G, 706/ G, 594).

As time unfolds, praxis, objectness, production, the commodity, and money negate forms and beings, and capital will annul both space and time as the most general measures of everything that is and, as such, the very foundations of order. The circulation of capital “proceeds in space and time” (G, 533/ G, 432), but capital as the measureless self-augmenting movement seeks to annul and destroy them. For capital, space is nonexistent; thus capital seeks to be cosmopolitan, that is, to bestride the one and unique, infinite world market, which arises with the erasure of all spatial markers, whether they be national, geographical or climatic. As Marx succinctly put it in *The Communist Manifesto*, “In place of the local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations”/ 4, 466). Space that comes into being through boundary demarcations and points which determine a place and through interrelations is annulled and reduced to the sameness of all space because “it is in the world market that money first functions to its full extent as the commodity whose natural form is also the direct social form of realization of human labour in the abstract” (C I, 240-1/ 23, 156). However, this tendency has its other side: “Thus, while capital must on one side strive to tear down every spatial barrier to intercourse, i.e. to exchange, and conquer the whole earth for its market, it strives on the other side to annihilate this space with time, i.e. to reduce to a minimum the time spent in motion from one place to another” (G, 539/ G, 438).

Synchronicity is therefore identical with annulled space. The destruction of space represents the absolute acceleration of the circulation of capital. The process of the annihilation of space grows with the historical development of capital: “The more developed the capital . . . the more does it strive simultaneously for an even greater extension of the market and for greater annihilation of space” (G, 539/ G, 438).

After the annihilation of space, the circulation of capital occurs exclusively in time. The time of circulation is the time capital needs to valorize and self-augment. If the speed of this process is accelerated, the starting point and the result of the circulation conjoin more and more into a “flowing unity; if the speed is slowed down, the starting point and the result diverge and grow independent—a space opens up between these points—and “the change of form” and “the change of things” fall into “stagnation” (C I, 216/ 23, 134), which is “pure loss” (G, 535/ G, 433). Stagnation, the temporary coming into being of things puts a stop to valorization and is the „time of devaluation” (G, 538/ G, 437). Capital seeks to “artificially abbreviate” (G, 543/ G, 441) the time of stagnation and the time of circulation with the purpose of fulfilling

its nature, to augment itself as a process. Since its goal is boundless and measureless augmentation, it will seek the “absolute velocity of circulation” (G, 544/ G, 442) and the annihilation of time. As Marx writes,

Thus if circulation caused no delay at all, if its velocity were absolute and its duration = 0, i.e. if it were accomplished in no time, then this would only be the same as if *capital* had been able to begin its production process anew directly it was finished; i.e. circulation would not have existed as a limiting barrier for production, and the repetition of the production process in a given period of time would be dependent on, identical with, the duration of the production process. (G, 545/ G, 443)

The annihilation of space and time as the most general forms and measures is the end point of disintegration and negation. In that final achievement of production, Marx gives us a sketch of completed modern nihilism. This new historical event occurs as capital, as the boundless and limitless becoming of becoming itself, the augmentation of augmentation, the movement of movement. “The total realization of capital” (G, 544/ G, 442) signifies the total disintegration of the world as an assemblage of everything that is, of forms, of space and time, of being, and of becoming. Production and work are inverted into their opposite: being is transformed into a flow and a becoming, Being into Nothing. In production where capital is the “subject,” the identification of Being with Not-being takes place, labour “posits itself objectively, but it posits this, its objectivity, as its own not-being or as the being of its not-being—of capital” (G, 454/ G, 358). From a historico-philosophical perspective, Marx’s analyses show a teaching that is most radically opposed to the whole tradition of philosophy and ontology. Since time immemorial, philosophy has been determined by the fact that its point of view and its interest passes from what is becoming to what is, from becoming to Being, from the relative to the absolute; Plato designated the “true philosophy” as one “that would draw the soul away from the world of becoming to the world of being” (*Respublica* 521D3-4<sup>8</sup>). Marx’s teaching is opposed to this, his point of view and its queries are focused on becoming, on movement, on the relative as such. If the classical postulate of philosophy held that the “process of formation takes its lead from the being, and is for the sake of that; the being does not take its lead from process” (Aristotle, *De generatione animalium* 778b6-7<sup>9</sup>), in the new historical event and according to Marx’s teaching, capital inverts this traditional relation into its opposite by putting the origin and the end into the movement of its own becoming, which is again movement, so that being is for the sake of becoming and succumbs to it.

<sup>8</sup> Within parentheses, I employ the customary system for quoting from classic works of philosophy. For the English translation, see *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Princeton, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. For the English translation, see Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, with an English translation by A. L. Peck, Cambridge, Massachusetts—London, 1963.

## VI

Everything that Marx wants and strives for is a future society and society as the future. Marx did not come to this project of “radical revolution, *all human emancipation*” (“A Contribution”/ 1, 388) and to the achievement of what he calls “communism” or “the realm of freedom” (C III, 959/ 25, 828) on this path by freely construing utopias but by way of “scientific socialism” (as Engels formulated it). In a letter to Arnold Ruge dated September 1843, the young Marx wrote, “we do not dogmatically anticipate the world” and announced that the fundamental thrust of his program “wants to find the new world through criticism of the old one” and “develops new principles for the world out of the world’s own principles” (“Letters from the Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher”/ 1, 344–45); within that framework; “the critique of the economy” shows that “the productive forces developing within bourgeois society create also the material conditions for a solution of this antagonism” (“Preface to the Critique of Political Economy”/ 13, 9). Communism is therefore historically necessary and scientifically founded.

That the result of the “critique of economy” is a project for a future society has its foundation in the fact that Marx thought of society as the entirety of production. In his contribution to *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* dated April 7, 1849, Marx stated, “*The relations of production in their totality constitute what is called the social relations, society*” (6, 408). As is already visible in the essential loss of form of the product in the commodity that exists only in its protean social exchange and amidst the loss of determination of specific labour, production is not something to do with the individual, nor is its product singular. Production is an activity of the whole society which is then conceived as a “social power, i.e. the multiplied productive force” (*The German Ideology* / 3, 34) or as a “social power” (C I, 230/ 23, 146). Social relations and relations in production, as we read in the *Zeitung* article, are “conditions” in which producers “work together” and share the “total act of production” (6, 407). These conditions are malleable to historical change and “are altered, transformed, with the change and development of the material means of production, of the forces of production” (6, 408). “What is society?”, asks Marx in an 1846 letter to Pawel Wassiljewitch Annenkow, and answers, “If you assume given stages of development in production, commerce or consumption, you will have a corresponding form of social constitution, a corresponding organisation, whether of the family, of the estates or of the classes—in a word, a corresponding civil society” (27, 453). Roughly divided, as Marx wrote in *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* on April 7, 1849, these societies are “ancient society, feudal society, bourgeois (or capitalist) society” (6, 408), or, put otherwise, “the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production” (“Preface to the Critique of Political Economy”/ 13, 9), “bourgeois” being here synonymous with capitalism.

As a late historical event, bourgeois society is “the most developed and the most complex historical organization of production” (G, 105/ G, 25). Capital presupposes the constant process of limitless change that negates all forms so that bourgeois society is perceived as “the universal uncurbed movement of the elementary forces of life freed

from the fetters of privilege” (*The Holy Family*/ 2, 123). For the sake of production, capitalism has destroyed all “closed forms” and has created the singular quantified continuity of homogeneous space of the “world market”; all “local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency” “have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed” (*The Communist Manifesto* 4, 466), which gives man “a world-historical rather than a locally based actual empirical existence” (*The German Ideology* / 3, 34; English translation altered). Capitalist production is characterized by the dilution of every restraint and determination. In this production, everything appears as an abstraction: “Indifference towards specific labours corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transform from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference” (G, 104/ G, 25). Therefore, bourgeois society is not a possible stable social order but primarily social change; in its metamorphosis from form into flux, it most closely approximates the endless movement of capital because its “social organization evolves directly out of production and commerce” (*The German Ideology* / 3, 36).

Speaking truthfully, in reality, communism is merely the further development of bourgeois society and its principles, in other words, of production, beyond its not-yet-transcended boundaries. Thusly, although capitalism “transcends the State and the nation, “on the other hand again, it must assert itself in its foreign relations as nationality, and inwardly must organize itself as a State” (*The German Ideology* / 3, 36). Capital differs from all earlier “modes of production” because of its “universal significance” in that

it strives towards the universal development of the forces of production, and thus becomes the presupposition of a new mode of production, which is founded not on the development of the forces of production for the purpose of reproducing or at most expanding a given condition, but where the free, unobstructed, progressive and universal development of the forces of production is itself the presupposition of society and hence of its reproduction; where advance beyond the point of departure is the only presupposition. (G, 540/ G, 438)

Nevertheless, capital, unobstructed and unbounded production, and the destruction of all forms in their real dissolution is “by its very nature limited”; the “universalizing tendency” is limited, “since capital is a limited form of production, contradicts it, and hence drives it toward dissolution” (*ibid.*). Communism annuls the contradiction between the “universalizing tendency” and capital.

Since capital in capitalism still allows certain forms and society as a form, communism will be “the overthrow[ing] of the existing state of society” (*The German Ideology* / 3, 34) or the abolition of the form of society as such because communism “is not the goal of human development—the form of human society” (“Private Property and Communism”/ *Ergbd.* 1, 546); it “is not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an ideal to which reality (will) have to adjust itself” but a “*real* movement (*wirkliche* Bewegung)” (*The German Ideology* / 3, 35).

As pure movement, communism neither has a plan nor a leading idea (form): “The theoretical conclusions of the communists are in no way based on ideas or principles,” but they “merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes” (*The Communist Manifesto* / 4, 475). The communist revolution is not “the partial, the *merely* political revolution which leaves the pillars of the house standing” (“A Contribution” / 1, 388), but a “radical revolution” and “emancipation from . . . real limitations.” Alongside institutions that subsist in bourgeois society such as the family, the nation, and the state, communism will abolish private property and the division of labour: “*Positive transcendence of private property as human self-estrangement*” (“Private Property and Communism” / Ergbd. 1, 536) does not mean that property passes into the hands of the state because the state, as a social form, will not persist; “private property” is such a determination of production in which it is administered by “private man” who presupposes a political community so that production under private ownership is thereby curtailed. Since communism is the “real *appropriation of the human essence*” (ibid.), and that essence is praxis and production, the abolition of private property is therefore the liberation of production for its own sake, movement which is not limited by individual wills or by the political community; it is the setting free of production for self-management and for the self-administering of production itself, which, with the abolition of private property becomes its own “owner.” The division of labour must also be abolished because that division creates concrete, useful labour which produces use values, distinguishes between spiritual and manual labour, structures the family and enables the constitution and makeup of society and of the state; everything that was based on the division of labour, namely the totality of social forms and the social order, has to disappear in communism, whose main goal is the “annihilation of strangeness (*Vernichtung der Fremdheit*)” (*The German Ideology* / 3, 35). What exists, the being independent of pure praxis, has to dissolve: “In communist society . . . society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow . . .” (*The German Ideology* / 3, 33). This annuls and makes worthless not only society as an ensemble of specificities, the state, and the family but the “singular individual” as well, who can exist only as a moment of the total “general production” as the activity of the total “society” which is activity itself. That communist social activity is no longer some kind of being; it “strives not to remain something he has become, but is in the absolute movement of becoming (*absolute Bewegung des Werdens*)” (G, 488/ G, 387).

Having nothing outside of themselves, communism or “total man” is the identity of “objectification and self-affirmation.” He is activity itself, boundless, measureless, unconstrained production for production’s sake. His absolute freedom is a necessity because he is the identity of “freedom and necessity”; as absolute free movement, he is absolutely necessary, and that is why “total man” is the identity of “existence and essence,” and his absolute essence incorporates existence. “Total man” no longer stands on the position of the “being in the past (*vergangenes Sein*)” (“Private Property and Communism” / Ergbd. 1, 536) and that is why, this being a position different from the

entire tradition of ontology, i.e. the negating Nothing, communism does stand for the real and complete “negation of philosophy” (“A Contribution”/ 1, 384). Within that horizon of thought, Marx’s work, espousing from beginning to the end the idea of the “realization of philosophy,” is a “meontology” and an absolute nihilism foreign to and in opposition to the whole philosophical tradition.

## VII

Thusly, in Marx’s conception, communism turns out to be the continuing development of capitalism as it existed in the West during the nineteenth century. It signifies the freeing of capitalist production from all restrictions, in the first place from political restrictions such as the existence of local communities (nation and state) and their customs and legal norms. It is a freeing from the physical frameworks of the process of production (time and space) and, finally, from ontological restrictions, so that being itself is annulled and becoming understood as continuous coming into being and limitless movement takes its place. The “overcoming” of capitalism in socialism as a pre-form of communism did not succeed because the newly-established order established the absolute authority of politics over the economy, not to mention other methods of containment and control. Principles which originally were meant to be crucial in freeing capitalism from constraints, such as the abolition of private property, established the domination of the political over the economic rather than freeing the latter from political influence. In general, it can be said that, to the extent that communism as a classless, stateless, moneyless, etc. society was realized, at the same time, it signified a return of the political and its dictatorship over production and over the economy. It retained at the same time the primacy of being over becoming. Communism as it is thought in Marx’s conception and the real, world-historical communism that was installed in the countries of the “socialist world” were not identical or comparable but wholly opposite phenomena.

The entirety of Marx’s thought is turned to the new historical event, to capitalism and its future, so that his “communism” can be said to be the future of capitalism. But what is described in Marx’s conception of “communism”? The answer is simple, easy to see, almost banal: what is described is capitalism as it developed during the more than one hundred years after Marx formulated the theory of “historical materialism,” one of whose main methodological presuppositions was to derive the principles of the future from the principles of the present. “Communism” is the description of present-day capitalism. We can say that Marx’s conception of “communism” goes hand in hand with some of the most penetrating insights into the contemporary moment, such as (to mention one example in closing) the diagnosis of “liquid modernity” in the work of Zygmunt Bauman.

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