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MARXISM IN THE AGE OF TOTAL CRISIS

Definitions, Productions and Functions

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EDITORIAL

This issue has been long in the making. The reasons are manifold, but in general, they pertain to workload and changes at various levels. The revised title and numbering mark a shift that reflects deeper transformations behind the scenes. This reorientation includes an ongoing process of restructuring (or, as we call it, *perestroika*): distributing tasks more equitably, building sustainable workflows, securing funding, and expanding our network through collaboration with other journals and projects. Further updates will follow as we prepare for our September retreat.

It should also be noted that Issue 2 (No. 8, Volume 4), *Marxism and Systems Science – The Technosphere: Systems, Things, and Infrastructures from Tektology, Cybernetics, and Computational Planning to the Complexity Paradigm and Platform Capitalism*, will be published on a significantly improved schedule.

A piece of good news is that the journal is now indexed in Scilit. We intend to secure its inclusion in additional databases and indices in the future.

A significant development is the change in our co-editorial team. Our collective has been strengthened by the addition of new associates, while our founding editor and esteemed colleague, Ali C. Gedik, has stepped down from his role as chief editor. His work and responsibilities will now be shared by Siyaves Azeri, Sascha Freyberg, and Joost Kircz. This new editorial troika is not a Stalinist homage, but rather a pluralist step—and, above all, a pragmatic response to the demands of collective open-access publishing under precarious conditions.

We are proud to be an independent journal—and we intend to stay that way. However, infrastructure, hosting, and the many visible and invisible labors that sustain this project require support. That is why we call on you—our readers and future contributors—to help us continue: through donations; through your texts, feedback, and solidarity.

In comradeship,
The Editor-in-Chief Collectives

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Capitalist Contradiction and the Spiritual Crisis: On the Fetishistic Structure of Total Crisis

Siyaveş Azeri

Crisis represents the ultimate form through which contradiction manifests in capitalist society. From an activity-based materialist perspective, contradiction—at a general (indeterminate) level—expresses the possibility of cognition. It serves as the point of departure that grounds the emergence of thought. Contradiction necessitates activity; activity, in turn, becomes the mode of existence of contradiction—the form through which contradiction generates movement and transformation.

Labour, understood as productive and purposeful human activity, constitutes the manifestation of the essential contradiction in being. It is the ongoing process through which thought is actualized as reality, and conversely, reality is internalized as thought. Labour embodies the unity of opposites: thought and being, human and nature (in their metabolic relation), knowledge and the object of knowledge. While labour is a manifestation of contradiction, it is also contradiction itself. It enables the emergence of the subject as an agent of action, even as it simultaneously negates both the object in its given form and the subject—since the subject must conform to the determinations of the object in order to negate it. In this dialectical process, human subjects negate objectivity in order to constitute themselves as subjects and to establish objectivity as a social reality.

As labour takes on specific historical and social forms, and as it requires cooperative structures appropriate to its mode, it becomes responsible for constituting the human subject as the ensemble of social relations—particularly those of production. From this follows the idea that the conceptualisation of contradiction and negating activity is itself

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• *Correspondence:* Siyaveş Azeri, Romania.
• e-mail: siyavesazeri[at]gmail.com
• ORCID: 0000-0002-3765-2489
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historically determined. Crisis, in this context, is the form in which human negative activity exists—manifesting within the metabolic relation between human beings and nature under capitalism.

Hegel's formulation that regards *thought as the negation of the immediately given*, despite its revolutionary potential, represents a *perverse expression* of the critical relation between historically specific forms of human thinking (and cognition and activity) and reality. In the Hegelian system, *nature* ultimately becomes posited as the *absolute other* of thought. Hegel depicts the historically specific movement of thought—though mystified and ontologised—as unfolding in several stages. At the first stage, external stimuli (*experience*) provoke a reaction in the subject, leading to inductive inferences. At the second stage, genuine thought emerges through the negation of these external stimuli. At the third, *ideas*—resembling scientific concepts—are constituted in contradistinction to phenomena. Subsequently, scientific concepts stimulate thought to overcome their own multiplicity, as this plurality is seen as a mere conglomerate lacking necessary connection. Finally, thought moves beyond the illusory form of its own realisation and advances toward *actual realisation* by incorporating scientific ideas and concepts, compelling them to imitate the original creative action of thought. In this sense, thought's movement toward its own realisation is mediated by its negative—the *other of thought*, *nature as given to the senses*. As Hegel puts it: "For mediation means to make a beginning and then to have proceeded to a second item, such that this second item is the way it is only insofar as one has arrived at it by starting with something that is an other over against it." (2010, 40, §12).

Still, *thought* requires a *negated object* in order to mediate its own negative movement. It thus depends on *sensory percepts*—not to affirm or identify with them, but precisely to negate them, to posit them as its *other*, and thereby constitute itself *as thought*. With the advance of the sciences, philosophy simultaneously develops, as scientific notions and concepts do not arise merely from generalisations of perceptible facts; rather, they emerge through the *negation of apparent similarities*. This is what necessitates philosophy's incorporation of scientific material into itself. In turn, philosophy grants empirical sciences the *freedom of thought*, endowing them with an *a priori* character—meaning that the contents of science become *warranted as necessary* and no longer dependent upon observable facts alone. As Hegel puts it: "insofar as philosophy owes its development to the empirical sciences, it bestows upon their contents the most essential shape of the *freedom* of thought

(i.e. the shape of the *a priori*) and, instead of relying on the testimony of their findings and the experienced fact, provides their contents with the corroboration of being necessary, such that the face becomes the depiction and the replication of the original and completely independent activity of thinking". (2010, 41, §12).

Given that, for Hegel, *dialectical negation* is not mere denial but a form of *positivity*—in the sense that, through such negation, thought absorbs the negated as a moment of itself (2010, 128, §81)—it ultimately becomes transubstantiated into an *affirmation of the existing state of affairs*. From this follows Hegel's orientation toward a "*matter of logic*" rather than a "*logic of the matter*." As Ilyenkov observes, "The profound flaws in the Hegelian dialectic were directly linked with idealism, due to which the dialectic was readily transformed into ingenious, logically subtle apologies for everything that existed" (2017, 133).

Although Feuerbach's contention that "The Hegelian philosophy is, uniquely, a rational mysticism" (Feuerbach 1839) is correct in its essence,[1] the foundation of Hegel's misconception lies not in the uncritical acceptance of religion *per se*, nor merely in the religiosity of his philosophical system—a theology in philosophical guise—but in his uncritical acceptance of the *existing state of affairs*, particularly the prevailing mode of division of labour in which *manual* and *intellectual* labour are entirely severed. This condition reflects the social form of the division of labour wherein the *products of labour* confront the labourer as an autonomous force—*alienation*. The philosophical expression of this condition is *idealism*, understood as the *self-consciousness of alienated thought*.

In Hegel's philosophy, *thought* is said to arise from *contradiction*. However, by failing to provide a clear account of the *reality*, *truth*, and *power* of thought, Hegel ultimately undermines the revolutionary potential of his own insights. He posits *reality*—or *nature*—as the *other* of thought, such that thought's negation of reality becomes a matter of *substance*: *thought* is defined as *non-nature* or *non-matter*. In this way, Hegel attempts to assert contradiction, but only by abstractly opposing thought to its material other, thereby severing it from the concrete conditions of its emergence.

1. "Feuerbach's great achievement is: (1) The proof that philosophy is nothing else but religion rendered into thought and expounded by thought, i.e., another form and manner of existence of the estrangement of the essence of man; hence equally to be condemned" (Marx 1975, 328).

But if *thought* and *matter* are treated as two mutually exclusive substances—each *other* to the other—then not only can we not speak of their *relation*, we cannot speak meaningfully of their *contradiction* either. In doing so, Hegel undermines his own dialectical promise: he reduces the *unity of opposites*, *thought* and *matter*, to a pseudo-contradiction in which *matter* is ultimately dissolved into *thought*, both conceived as substantial entities. As Ilyenkov notes, "[Hegel] considers thought not only and not simply as one of man's abilities but also as the substantional source of all the other human abilities and kinds of activity, as their essential foundation. He treats the ability to change practically the external world, nature outside man, also as a manifestation of the mental principle in man" (Ilyenkov 2017, 156). Hegel thus falls into the pit of *substantialism*, and the apparently *active* category of thought becomes *pacified*. In this way, *thought*, in Hegel, assumes the status of a *fetish*.

Fetishism is the inevitable form that consciousness assumes under capitalism. Unless science is transformed into a genuinely *critical* endeavour, it cannot escape complicity with this fetishism. *Money*, for example, though a commodity, is fundamentally a *social relation*. However, once it is treated as a thing *in and of itself*—precisely because its essence lies in being a social relation, that is, an *artefact* that inhabits the social universe (which itself signifies the totality of *human-to-human* relations)—it begins to appear as though it enters into social relations with other things on its own. It presents itself as an *agent*. Consequently, rather than conceiving of social relations as *relations among people mediated by things*—such as money as the *universal commodity*—people begin to appear as mere functions of purported *relations among things*. In this inversion, the objectivity of social relations becomes mystified, and the products of human activity take on a life of their own.

Fetishism is the conceptualisation of a thing as a *thing-in-itself*, independent of the social universe. In reality, however, things—*as artefacts of the social universe*—are *social relations* in the sense that they carry social significance; they are meaningful as *things* only within the context of historically specific social relations. Fetishism is thus the *mystified form of appearance* in which social relations present themselves as relations among *thing-agents*. Social relations become mystical precisely when they are conceived as inherent properties of things *in and for themselves*—as in the case of *value* being attributed to *gold* as

its intrinsic property, or to any commodity as if value were intrinsic to that commodity.

The point is that fetishism cannot be dissipated by reference to the things themselves because fetishism is the necessary mode of appearance of social consciousness under capitalism, which determines a specific mode of activity appropriate to its own form of organization and cooperation. Nature is perceived by a historically situated individual engaged in active, practical relations with the world, not by a passive, abstract observer. Consequently, social and historical aspects of objects often appear as natural, eternal traits. These fetishistic illusions—such as commodity fetishism—are not merely mental constructs but emerge from the actual structure of bourgeois social relations. Thus, simply observing objects does not dispel these abstractions, as bourgeois society presents them as they seem. As Marx noted, the contemplative mindset shaped by this society obscures a true understanding of reality (see Ilyenkov 2017, 127).

Idealisms of various kinds are the inevitable form of philosophical consciousness under capitalism. The dissolution of *reality in thought* (just as the dissolution of *thought in material reality*) amounts to the disappearance of the intrinsic *contradictions* inherent in the unity of *thought and being*. The consequent dismissal of contradiction—by collapsing one pole into the other—manifests itself as the *impossibility of the movement of the Absolute*. The *Absolute*, in this sense, becomes the manifestation of a crisis of inaction. As Ilyenkov notes: "By elevating thought to the status of a divine force that internally drives human historical action, Hegel effectively treated the lack of an answer to the legitimate question—why the Absolute, or Thought, should think—as if that very absence were the only possible answer" (Ibid., 137).

Hegel responds that *thought simply was*; questioning its origin in something else, he insists, is meaningless (Ibid., 128). Thought existed, functioned through human beings, and gradually became conscious of its own processes, structures, and laws. Yet while it is true that *thought was (and is)*, the critical issue remains: *how can we account for the transition from mere thought to the act of thinking*—from *being* to *activity*, or from *is* to *ought*?

The crisis of the inactivity of the absolute is accompanied by an epistemological crisis stemming from Hegel's mystification of the movement of the concept as self-expanding and self-developing knowledge. Such mystification is the necessary outcome of Hegel's uncritical endorsement of the existing order of things and the state of affairs: mystification

of knowledge is the other side of the coin to the sanctification of the existing order. Ironically, the matter of Hegel's logic, which is rooted in his dismissal of the logic of the matter, happens to be nothing other than the materiality that appears before him. Hegel's dismissal of matter entraps him in that very matter—matter over mind. The alleged knowledge of the absolute, therefore, is reduced to the knowledge of mere appearance, to the effect of rendering Hegel's "Science" superfluous. This uncritical affirmation of what is, is the source of his false *positivism* and is exactly in contradistinction to his promise of explaining the logic of the appearance of the essence; he betrays his own thesis that thinking, first and foremost, is the negation of what is—hence his inability to grasp the essence. He arrives at a conceptualization of the essence that is merely empiricist—essence as that which stands behind and not as that which develops and manifests—not a concept, a concrete universal, in the real sense of the term, but mere generalizations is what he finally arrives at.

In the realm of politics and social life, Hegel's *false positivism* culminates in his *sanctification* of the bourgeois state—even in its most "imperfect" form—and of bourgeois (civil) society more broadly. Hegel is correct in recognising the state as an entity distinct from civil society. While he acknowledges civil society as a domain of conflicting and antagonistic forces, and derives the necessity of the state from these tensions, he fails to conceptualise the state itself as a historically specific *expression* of those contradictions. Instead, he treats the state as their *resolution*. For Hegel, the state embodies a condition of social *equilibrium*, and its autonomy provides the foundation for its mediating role in social conflicts, including those between estates and classes. Yet, despite his critique of the naturalist view that posits a perpetual state of war among individuals, Hegel ultimately lapses into an equally uncritical position—remaining confined within the realm of *appearances*.

In Hegel's view, civil society is grounded in the pursuit of individual self-interest, where persons—conceived as abstract, formally "free" individuals—engage with others primarily as means to their private ends. These individuals are modeled after the bourgeois subject: "burghers" whose identity is rooted in property and exchange. The state, in turn, is theorized as the universal that mediates and realizes these particular interests, appearing as an impartial guarantor of social cohesion. For Hegel, the formation of the state represents the ethical culmination of individual development: the transition from the immediacy of private desire to the universality of rational will. Through education and civic

integration, individuals internalize the values of bourgeois society, thereby becoming bearers of universal freedom. However, this process effectively masks the historical and class-specific character of civil society and the state. The individual appears as a universally free subject, but in truth is shaped and constrained by the social relations of capitalism. Hegel's conception thus obscures the fact that the state functions to sustain and reproduce the very class divisions it claims to transcend.

By portraying the state as the embodiment of universal ethical life, Hegel effectively sanctifies the existing order, presenting the capitalist state not as a historically contingent form of domination, but as the realization of reason itself. In doing so, Hegel offers a philosophy in which the bourgeois state appears as the necessary and rational guardian of social harmony, while concealing its role in perpetuating systemic unfreedom.

Hegel's account presents the state as the rational resolution to the contradictions of civil society—a harmonizing force that mediates competing interests and establishes ethical unity. However, what Hegel treats as resolution is in fact a misrecognition of the real function of the bourgeois state. Rather than resolving contradictions, the state embodies them: it institutionalizes the conflicts inherent in capitalist society, particularly the class antagonism between labor and capital. The appearance of equilibrium that Hegel describes is a form of mystification—one that conceals the state's role in reproducing the very inequalities and crises that define capitalist relations.

From this perspective, the state does not transcend the contradictions of civil society; it materializes them in political form. Its "independence" is not a neutral, universal standpoint but a structural necessity for managing class conflict and enforcing the conditions of capitalist accumulation (e.g., the reproduction of "doubly free" labor, the protection of private property). Hegel's abstraction of individuals into formally equal legal subjects mirrors the way capitalism abstracts labor into labor-power, obscuring concrete social realities with ideological universality. This contradictory structure—where formal freedom coexists with material unfreedom—is not accidental; it is the political expression of capitalism's permanent crisis, as Marx identified. The state appears to stand above society, but in fact it is the legal-political form through which capitalism reproduces its structural crises and contradictions.

Thus, Hegel's idealist conception, by presenting the state as a realization of ethical life and universality, aligns philosophically with the real-world function of the capitalist state as a mechanism for stabilizing

crisis without resolving it: what appears as stability (the rational state) is actually the political form of unresolved and perpetual instability inherent in capitalist social relations.[2]

The contemporary erosion of the capitalist state and its institutions can be understood through the theoretical lens developed by Marx. Hegel's conception of the state as the rational embodiment of ethical life—mediating civil society's contradictions through universality—is a mystification of the capitalist state's true function: to institutionalize, not resolve, the contradictions of bourgeois society. In today's world, the declining legitimacy of state institutions, the rise of authoritarian populism, and the dismantling of welfare protections illustrate the state's increasing inability to maintain the appearance of neutrality or universality. Rather than standing above class struggle, the state is exposed as its political form—an apparatus for managing the crisis tendencies of capital accumulation. Austerity regimes, emergency laws, and militarized policing reflect the return of the "strong state," which paradoxically intensifies social unrest and undermines its own legitimacy. In this context, the state no longer even pretends to represent a universal will but functions more transparently as the guarantor of capitalist order. The Hegelian promise of the state as the realization of freedom gives way to its Marxian reality: a mechanism for the reproduction of unfreedom, now faltering under the weight of its own contradictions.

In reality, the capitalist state not only institutionalizes contradictions but often intensifies them, functioning as both the generator and amplifier of crisis. This is evident in how contemporary states manage systemic inequalities, suppress class conflict, and facilitate the ongoing accumulation of capital—all while maintaining the ideological appearance of neutrality. Thus, the state's proclaimed role as a stabilizing force collapses under the weight of its real function: to maintain a social order fundamentally structured by antagonism. Rather than transcending contradiction, the state becomes its most concentrated expression, embodying the crisis tendencies inherent in the capitalist mode of production.

What I aim to emphasize, however, is that the dismissal or occlusion of the contradictory nature of bourgeois society does not eliminate contradiction itself; rather, it merely displaces it, only for it to re-emerge in the form of critical ruptures and crises. In masking the antagonisms

2. The last six paragraphs draw on (Azeri 2009).

that structure capitalist social relations, such philosophical abstractions ultimately fail to account for the periodic and systemic breakdowns—economic, political, and social—that are intrinsic to the reproduction of the bourgeois order. Contradiction, in this view, is not resolved through ideal reconciliation but returns in intensified and destabilizing forms, thereby exposing the limits of any theory that denies its constitutive role.

This conceptual prejudice—the portrayal of the state as a neutral arbiter or guarantor of social harmony—is not unique to Hegel's system. It is symptomatic of a broader philosophical and ideological orientation that pervades much of liberal and idealist political thought. From Kant's moral idealism to Rousseau's general will, and even in contemporary theories that treat the state as a regulatory or administrative mechanism ensuring justice or efficiency, there persists an assumption that the state operates above and outside the sphere of material contradictions. These traditions often reify legal equality and political formalism while disregarding the class dynamics and structural antagonisms embedded in capitalist society. Such frameworks mystify the real function of the state: its role in mediating, managing, and reproducing social domination, particularly under capitalist conditions. In this sense, Hegel's philosophy is not an outlier, but rather a sophisticated articulation of a more general ideological tendency to naturalize and legitimize bourgeois political forms under the guise of reason or morality.

The idea of *equilibrium* and the suppression of *contradiction* is also a central tenet in philosophical trends such as *positivism* and *Bogdanovism*, both of which are inspired by *Kantianism*. In Kant's system, *logic* is reduced to a matter of *form*, indifferent to the *content* of knowledge; what matters most is the internal *coherence* and *non-contradictoriness* of a logical sequence—even if its content is pure absurdity (Ilyenkov 1968, 86).

The central issue in Kant's system is that reason inevitably collapses in the face of logical contradictions and antinomies. This failure is not limited to novel experiences; it extends even to past ones, since reason inherently encompasses both identity and its polar opposite—difference. For instance, in Kant's account, alongside the category of "necessity" within the schema of objective judgments (i.e., the table of categories), there appears the equally valid category of "accident." Each category holds the same epistemic legitimacy as its counterpart, and the range of its applicability extends as far as experience itself (ibid., 93).

Critical reason, in this view, recognizes both the legitimate scope of its application and the boundaries it must not transgress. It refrains from attempting a "complete synthesis" or crossing into the transcendental domain. Instead, it acknowledges that, in relation to the "thing-in-itself," two logically and empirically valid conceptualizations may coexist—neither of which can claim final authority. Therefore, reason must resist the impulse to eliminate one in favor of the other. As Ilyenkov states: "Theoretical opponents, rather than engaging in perpetual conflict, should establish a kind of peaceful coexistence—mutually acknowledging each other's right to relative truth and to a 'partial synthesis.' They must come to understand that, regarding the thing-in-itself, both are equally mistaken, for the thing-in-itself will forever remain unknowable—an 'X'—that gives rise to diametrically opposed interpretations. Yet, while equally wrong in their claims about things-in-themselves, they are equally right in another sense: in that 'reason as a whole' harbors within itself conflicting interests that are equivalent and equally legitimate" (Ibid., 96–97).

Thus, the highest *a priori* postulate—the fundamental law of "correct thinking"—is the well-known "prohibition of logical contradiction," functioning as a kind of categorical imperative, not only in the realm of morality, as in Kant's ethical philosophy, but also within the domain of logic. As a logical imperative, it sets the ideal for theoretical reason: the complete and absolute consistency of knowledge, understood as the total identity and coherence of all individuals' scientific conceptions of the world and of themselves (Ibid., 97).

The ideal of non-contradictoriness that underpins Kant's epistemology finds its counterpart in his moral and political philosophy. His categorical rejection of the right to revolution can be understood as the political manifestation of his broader effort to suppress contradiction. Just as the principle of non-contradiction serves as the foundation for Kant's theory of knowledge—ensuring logical coherence and systematic unity—his political thought demands the same consistency and formal integrity within the legal and institutional order. In both domains, contradiction is treated not as a moment of productive tension or transformation, but as a threat to rational structure and normative stability. The political sphere, no less than the epistemological, is governed by an imperative of systemic closure and the preservation of order.

This structural parallel reveals a deeper homology between Kant's epistemological and political commitments. In his framework, the revolutionary act constitutes a contradiction internal to the legal order: it

seeks justice by overturning the very form that defines the conditions for justice. As contradiction invalidates knowledge in logic, so too does revolution delegitimize law in the political domain. For Kant, the legitimacy of the state lies in its formal constitutionality, not in the moral substance of its outcomes. Thus, the prohibition of revolution is not merely a conservative political stance; it follows necessarily from the same philosophical imperative that animates his theory of reason—namely, the safeguarding of unity, form, and consistency against the destabilizing force of contradiction.

Yet Kant's ideal of non-contradictoriness is, by his own admission, ultimately unattainable—a fact he acknowledges in his treatment of the antinomies of pure reason. The same applies to his vision of social coherence and political equilibrium. Just as contradiction cannot be fully eliminated from theoretical reason, social antagonism cannot be eradicated from the political domain. The right to revolt, expelled in principle, returns in practice—through recurring social and political crises that expose the instability of the very order Kant seeks to preserve. As a result, the gradual, rational development of human society envisioned by Kant—culminating in the realization of liberty, equality, and human dignity—proves unrealizable. The contradictions that his system seeks to suppress re-emerge as the structural conditions of social life, undermining the possibility of a stable reconciliation between moral ideals and political reality.[3]

The Machist rejection of contradiction as an objective condition—which manifests in the denial of thinking as negation (i.e., the negation of immediacy)—and its emphasis on equilibrium as an ideal, understood as the absence of conflict within any organism, whether biological or social, constitutes a continuation of Kant's ideal of non-contradictoriness. Ilyenkov aptly characterizes this ideal as "the philosophy of lifeless reaction," where "the goal is to reach a state where the organism feels no needs whatsoever, but exists in a steady state of rest and immobility." (2009, 315)

The practical significance of the quest for equilibrium becomes particularly evident in both Bogdanov's techno-capitalist utopia, as portrayed in his novel *Engineer Menni*, and in his response to the political situation following the February 1917 Revolution in Russia. In the novel, the development of capitalism—understood as the advancement

3. For a comprehensive evaluation of Kant's rejection of the right to revolt and its place in his general philosophical outlook, see Azeri (2009).

of the so-called forces of production—is presented as a necessary precondition for the transition to socialism. Engineer Menni, who leads the ambitious project of constructing an enormous canal system on Mars—a project introduced as a solution to capitalism's economic crisis—eventually passes his responsibilities to his son, Engineer Netty. Netty, facing an inner contradiction—being physically part of the working class but assuming the managerial role typically associated with the capitalist class—accepts the position only on the condition that managerial authority remains with the capitalist elite. In doing so, he avoids internal conflict while overseeing a project that contributes to the expansion of Martian capitalism, which is portrayed as progressing inevitably and automatically toward socialism, without the disruptive intervention of social revolution or uprising. Netty refrains from assuming direct administrative power because the productive forces, in his view, have not yet reached a sufficient level of development to support socialist transformation. The influence of Menshevism and economism in Netty's (and Bogdanov's) position is unmistakable.

Bogdanov's own position after the overthrown of Tsar and the formation of the interim government simply replicates Netty's position. The core of Bogdanov's position can be summarized as follows: The February Revolution established a bourgeois-democratic regime in Russia, thereby resolving the principal political question left open since 1905. Full stop. Given that the Russian proletariat is not only numerically weak but also lacks sufficient education and cultural development, any discussion of seizing political power in the name of socialist transformation is dismissed as utopian and unrealistic. According to this view, political power—understood as administrative authority—should remain in the hands of the bourgeois democratic leadership. The immediate task is not socialist revolution, but rather to ensure that this national government fosters rapid industrial and technological development. To that end, the working class must support the regime by contributing its scientific and technical expertise, thereby facilitating the expansion of productive forces and the gradual growth of the proletariat itself.

In this framework, the working class is encouraged to make use of the democratic rights it has newly acquired to raise its cultural level, acquire scientific knowledge, and prepare itself intellectually and politically for a future moment when it might be deemed ready to assume administrative control. Only then, it is argued, can socialism in Russia become a realistic prospect. "Until that time, there is only one road –

state capitalism, which is seen to be the most 'balanced system', corresponding to all the necessary criteria: the minimum of contradictions, and the maximum of equilibrium and economy" (Ilyenkov 2009, 341-342).

It goes without saying that, in this framework, contradictions are not viewed as internal to the system—in this case, to capitalism. The source of imbalance and the loss of equilibrium is instead attributed to subjective (individual or social) attitudes toward social reality. The task, then, becomes the construction of a maximally balanced—therefore "rationally" organized—social experience. There is no acknowledgment of objectively existing class contradictions, nor of the internal contradictions within capitalist relations of production that give rise to cyclical economic crises. Chaos is instead seen as the result of the absence of a "mathematically uncontradictory schema," one that must be externally imposed upon the system.

As with any form of idealism—which often emerges as a symptom of theoretical crisis or a theory in crisis—reason or rationality (*Thought*) is not understood as embedded in the actual social relations among people. Rather, it is posited as a substance existing in and of itself: a divine principle that remains intact and pure despite the impurities introduced by material life and conditions. Contradiction is suppressed and excluded from the scene so that God—or Reason—can enter the picture as a miraculous remedy in moments of crisis, offering a metaphysical fix to what are, in reality, structural contradictions.

The total crisis of capitalism, some features of which have been discussed above, also manifests itself in the form of what may be called a "spiritual crisis."[4] This is evidenced by the widespread resurgence of religion, sectarianism, conspiracy theories, prevalence of different forms of philosophical idealism, and other irrational belief systems that increasingly shape the social imaginary. These phenomena are not merely cultural anomalies or psychological regressions; they are symptoms of a deeper systemic disorder embedded in the structure of capitalist social relations. What appears on the surface as a spiritual crisis is, in fact, a crisis of praxis—one rooted in the historical disempowerment and alienation of the masses under capitalism.

Fetishism, in this framework, must be understood in its full critical-theoretical sense—not merely as the attribution of agency to objects or

4. For a detailed and articulate account of the "spiritual crisis," see Azeri (2025).

external forces, but as the social logic that underlies such misrecognition. Under capitalist relations of production, where the value-form mediates all aspects of life and labor is systematically alienated, human agency becomes obscured, fragmented, and displaced. As capital assumes the character of self-valorizing value, it exerts a quasi-theological power over social life, rendering real social relations opaque and abstract. In this context, the proliferation of conspiracy theories, religious fundamentalism, and pseudo-spiritual movements reflects not a rejection of modernity, but its ideological consequence. These are the distorted cognitive responses to a real and lived powerlessness—expressions of a world in which people no longer experience themselves as the authors of their own social conditions.

Thus, the spiritual crisis is inseparable from both the general crisis of capitalism and the crisis of Thought itself. In an epoch where capital colonizes not only material production but also the symbolic and cognitive means through which reality is interpreted, the retreat into metaphysics and superstition signals a broader collapse of reason—or a rationality of a total collapse. The rise of idealism in philosophy, culture, and politics is not accidental; it is the ideological reflection of a world in which the rule of appearance over essence has become systemic. To address the spiritual crisis, therefore, requires more than secular critique; it demands a radical transformation of the material conditions that give rise to fetishism. Only by confronting and dismantling the social logic of capital can collective agency be reclaimed and emancipatory thought reactivated.

The resurgence of far-right and fascist movements must also be understood within this broader framework of spiritual and systemic crisis. Fascism is not an aberration external to liberal capitalism, but one of its recurring expressions in periods of deep structural breakdown. The spiritual crisis, characterized by mass disorientation and the retreat into myth, finds fertile ground in fascist ideology, which offers symbolic coherence, false agency, and the illusion of unity in a world fractured by capitalist contradictions. By re-enchanting social reality through national mythologies, conspiracy thinking, and authoritarian moral codes, fascism responds to the collapse of meaning produced by capitalist alienation—not by resolving its material basis, but by intensifying mystification. The far right does not aim to dismantle capital but to reinforce it through mythic forms of unity, racial or cultural essentialism, and the violent repression of class antagonisms. It is thus another ideological form of fetishism, in which systemic contradictions are displaced

onto scapegoats, and the possibility of genuine collective agency is further obscured. The rise of the far right is not an alternative to the spiritual crisis, but one of its most dangerous outcomes—a political crystallization of the very loss of agency and rationality that defines the crisis itself.

This spiritual crisis, as an ideological expression of the total crisis of capitalism, also finds political articulation in the erosion of international institutions—from the United Nations to the International Court of Justice—and in the utter indifference of ruling elites within the capitalist order toward the ongoing genocide of the Palestinian people by the fascist government of Israel, as well as the suppression of women by Islamist forces such as the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic regime in Iran. The rise of authoritarian figures such as Trump, Modi, Putin, and Erdogan is not incidental, but symptomatic of a broader historical moment in which the ideals of justice, reason, and collective agency are subordinated to mythic authority, nationalist fetishism, and the cynical management of permanent crisis. These developments, taken together, constitute not discrete anomalies but expressions of a deep spiritual malaise—one that reveals the decomposition of the capitalist world order under the weight of its own contradictions.

As stated above, *crisis* is the mode of existence of *contradiction* under capitalism. In this sense—and only in this sense—it serves as the mechanism for the perpetuation of capitalist relations of production: the form in which social relations are incarnated in a system that has come into being "dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt" (Marx 1993, 926). Yet, crisis also signals the possibility of *radical change*—the potential to constitute social relations that transcend the limits of capital and move toward the formation of a truly *human society*, or *social humanity*, in which human beings reclaim their own collective destiny.

To put it in a nutshell, the spiritual crisis emerging under contemporary capitalism is not a cultural deviation or ideological accident, but the necessary ideological expression of the deeper material contradictions within capitalist social relations. Crisis, understood as the mode of existence of contradiction, manifests through the fetishisation of thought and labour, wherein abstract forms assume autonomous power over human agency. Fetishism is thus not merely a category of false consciousness but the lived form of alienation under capital—a structure that renders real social relations opaque, turns historical

antagonisms into metaphysical enigmas, and displaces material contradictions into symbolic or spiritual crises. By tracing this dynamic from the dialectical foundations of thought through Hegelian idealism and into the ideological terrain of modern capitalism, one may be able to illustrate how the suppression of contradiction leads not to resolution but to deeper and more mystified forms of crisis.

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The current issue (No. 7—Volume 4, Issue 1) of *Marxism & Sciences* has been devoted to the theme of the total crisis of capital. In "Capitalism as a Species of Automation", Devin Wangert argues that automation has always functioned as a temporal contradiction within capitalism, not simply as a technological evolution. He critiques the popular belief that full automation is an imminent, unprecedented future. Instead, he traces a long historical pattern in which automation is continually imagined as just on the horizon—each epoch repeating this expectation as though it were novel. Wangert shows that capitalism persistently rearticulates itself through these threshold fantasies of full automation, treating each moment of development as the one that will finally displace human labour. Yet paradoxically, this promise remains unfulfilled, which sustains capitalism's capacity to accumulate by always deferring the horizon of complete automation.

Wangert proposes that the logic of automation under capitalism is not linear and progressive, but iterative and recursive. He draws heavily from Marx—particularly the evolution between the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*—to show how the initial crisis posed by fixed capital (machinery replacing labour) is sublimated by the concept of *real subsumption*, wherein automation becomes a medium for generating relative surplus value by replacing technologies with newer technologies. Thus, automation is no longer primarily about replacing labour with machines; it is about replacing technology with more technology in a cycle that perpetually restages the disappearance of labour without ever resolving it. This iteration aligns with Wangert's central claim that capitalism is itself a species of automation, constantly re-performing its own identity through these anachronistic developments.

Wangert's contribution is particularly significant to understanding the total crisis of capital because it reframes the crisis not as a breakdown caused by external technological forces but as an internal

temporal contradiction essential to capitalism's reproduction. He critiques both utopian and dystopian readings of automation by demonstrating that the notion of a final, subsumptive stage of capitalism—after which human labour will be obsolete—is a mirage intrinsic to capitalist ideology itself. Through meticulous historiographical and theoretical analysis, Wangert shows that automation is not a rupture in capitalism but a recursive technology of crisis management, constantly mediating value, labour, and temporality in a mode of production always trying to become what it already is.

Peter Lesnik's article titled "Seeing Dialectically: Systemic Crisis and Prognostic Intelligence in John Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea*" explores the capacity of multi-channel moving-image installations—specifically John Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea* (2015)—to confront the aesthetic and epistemological challenges posed by the current systemic crisis. He frames *Vertigo Sea* as a dialectical dispositif: a formal and conceptual mechanism that stages a counter-narrative to capitalist globalisation by exposing the historical and ongoing forms of exclusion, violence, and erasure underpinning modernity. The first part of the article analyses how Akomfrah's montage technique subverts dominant histories of the sea, mapping its role not only as a site of migration, slavery, and ecological devastation but also as a symbol of global connectivity forged through colonial violence. The artwork thereby resists the visual logic of capitalist modernity by foregrounding submerged histories and ruptured temporalities.

The second part of Lesnik's analysis develops the notion of "prognostic intelligence" as a mode of historical perception enabled by Akomfrah's aesthetic form. Through its three-channel montage, *Vertigo Sea* constructs a non-simultaneous temporal field, where past and present are not linear but entangled. Lesnik argues that this fragmented yet dialectically structured temporality confronts the viewer with the conditions of a systemic, multi-dimensional crisis—economic, ecological, and epistemic. Rather than representing crisis as a spectacular breakdown, the installation encourages a mode of critical seeing attuned to structural contradictions and latent futures. In doing so, Akomfrah's work displaces passive spectatorship and fosters reflective engagement with the global capitalist condition.

Thus, Lesnik positions *Vertigo Sea* as a significant intervention in both contemporary art and political theory. Its refusal of narrative resolution and embrace of dialectical montage open up space for a renewed aesthetic of critique—one that can grasp the total crisis of capital not

through spectacle or moralism, but through a historically grounded, temporally complex mode of visual thought. The article ultimately affirms that such aesthetic strategies can contribute to the revitalisation of historical materialism, offering new perceptual and cognitive tools with which to understand—and potentially intervene in—our unfolding crisis-ridden present.

Xindi Li's "The Neotenous Image: On the Technical Adaptation of Alienation" explores how cinematic animation, particularly in its deployment of cuteness, mediates both intimacy and alienation under contemporary capitalism. Central to the argument is the concept of the "neotenous image"—a form of animated visuality that retains childlike or undeveloped features, yet functions as a highly adaptable commodity form. Drawing on Marx, Bataille, and Simondon, Li argues that such images do not merely represent alienation; they are technically and economically adapted to produce it, while simultaneously generating affective bonds with viewers. The neotenous image is therefore both reproductively powerful and ideologically compromised: it captures the tension between novelty and disposability, life and death, production and sacrifice.

Li's analysis centres on *Tamala 2010: A Punk Cat in Space* (2002), which she treats not just as a film, but as a parabolic model of animated commodity-life. Through its disjointed plot and visual repetitions, *Tamala 2010* reveals the underlying structure of cute media as sites where technical development is both historicised and re-enchanted. The neotenous image, in this sense, does not erase its own evolution—it remembers and recycles prior forms, thereby embodying the logic of the commodity that constantly reinvents itself to sustain novelty. Yet, this perpetual reinvention is inseparable from a cycle of symbolic death and rebirth, a ritual of disposability that mirrors capitalism's exploitation of temporal crisis as a means of expansion.

Ultimately, Li contends that the neotenous image is not simply a product of capitalist visual culture—it is one of its operative logics. Cuteness, in this framework, is not a benign aesthetic but a mechanism of reproductive power, capable of absorbing and repurposing alienation in the form of affective intimacy. The neotenous image thrives in capitalism's contradictory temporality, where the desire for novelty conceals the exhaustion and repetition that sustain the system. By locating this logic within the technical development of animated images, Li provides a compelling theory of how visual commodities do not just reflect crisis, but actively shape and prolong it.

In her "Authoritarianism in Crisis: Resistance in Turkey under Erdogan," Duru Selimkan offers a comprehensive analysis of the current political crisis in Turkey following the arrest of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoglu, situating it within the broader trajectory of Erdogan's authoritarian consolidation. The article critiques the transformation of Turkey's state apparatus under Erdogan—from parliamentary democracy to a personalised authoritarian regime grounded in political Islam and neoliberal economic policies. Selimkan foregrounds the generational experience of Turkish youth under perpetual authoritarianism and the structural limits placed on political participation. Drawing on both national and global comparisons (including to Trump's America), the article highlights how Erdogan exploits democratic institutions while hollowing them out, using judicial, security, and media apparatuses to suppress opposition. Yet, Selimkan argues that spontaneous protests—like those erupting across Turkey in response to İmamoglu's arrest—are insufficient without organised, class-conscious resistance. The author calls for a revolutionary alternative grounded in the working class, warning that electoralism and liberal reformism are inadequate to overcome the structural foundations of authoritarian capitalism.

In the short film *Common Courtesy (Nezaket)* and its accompanying reflective essay *The Silent Weight of Class: Hegemony and False Consciousness in Common Courtesy (Nezaket)*—both authored by Mesut Yüce Yıldız and published in the "Cultural Work" section of *Marxism & Sciences*—courtesy is interrogated as a historical and ideological structure that masks and sustains class domination. Yıldız shows that courtesy, far from being mere politeness, descends from aristocratic codes of courtly behaviour and has evolved into a mechanism of soft power: it naturalises hierarchy, moralises inequality, and renders exploitation emotionally palatable. In the film, the relationship between Halil, an ailing worker, and his employer at a small appliance store appears humane and even tender—but beneath this surface lies a quiet reproduction of class power. Courtesy becomes the film's true protagonist, the invisible conduit through which domination is made to feel righteous and mutual.

Drawing on Gramsci's theory of hegemony, alongside scholars such as Norbert Elias, Jean Anyon, and Ruby Payne, Yıldız demonstrates how class power is not only material but also affective and moral. Halil's silent loyalty and refusal to leave for better working conditions are not simply personal traits, but expressions of deeply internalised class ideology—forms of false consciousness wherein subordination is perceived

as virtue. *Common Courtesy* reveals how domination today often appears as kindness, how structural violence is maintained through moral narratives, and how well-meaning gestures can quietly reproduce inequality. In asking "What is courtesy?", Yıldız's work gives a stark answer: under capitalism, it is often the means by which exploitation becomes bearable, and therefore sustainable.

Vesa Oittinen's non-thematic article introduces Vladimir Iurinets, a little-known Soviet Marxist philosopher of the 1920s, whose early and sharp critique of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology has been largely forgotten due to political repression and historical neglect. Drawing on Iurinets's two-part article published in *Pod znamenem marksizma*, Oittinen reconstructs his materialist and dialectical critique of Husserl, particularly targeting the latter's ahistorical and anti-dialectical treatment of consciousness and eidetic intuition. Iurinets challenges the phenomenological notion of "givenness" by exposing internal contradictions in Husserl's claims about perception, object constitution, and the supposed immediacy of essence. He further characterises Husserl's thought as Platonist and metaphysical, lacking a theory of intersubjectivity grounded in material and historical relations. Oittinen situates Iurinets among other early Soviet critics of phenomenology, like Grigori Bammel, and contextualises his eventual repression under Stalinism. Despite the fragmentary nature of Iurinets's surviving work, Oittinen argues that his critique remains philosophically relevant today, especially in discussions on Marxism's relation to phenomenology.

In "Marx, Engels and the Communist Revolution between Determinism, Telos and Self-Emancipation" Joshua Graf revisits Marx and Engels's understanding of communist revolution in light of historical developments that appear to contradict their expectations—most notably, the success of the revolution in backward Tsarist Russia rather than in advanced capitalist societies. He argues that Marx and Engels did not conceive revolution as a deterministic or teleological inevitability, but rather as a historically contingent process rooted in the self-emancipation of the working class. Emphasising their rejection of doctrinal rigidity, Graf shows that Marx and Engels insisted on internationalism, strategic flexibility, and concrete analysis of concrete conditions, rather than proxy revolutions or abstract schemas. This methodological openness, he contends, renders their revolutionary theory still relevant under conditions that appear unfavourable, offering not a blueprint but a dialectical approach capable of navigating the contradictions of contemporary class struggle.

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Biography

Siyaveş Azeri is an associate professor of philosophy at the Faculty of Theatre and Film, Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Azeri is the primary investigator of the project "Philosophy in Late Socialist Europe: Theoretical Practices in the Face of Polycrisis" (F104/15.11.2022), which is funded by the European Resilience Fund. He is also the Co-Editor in Chief of the journal Marxism & Sciences and an associate of the "Theses Twelve: Mardin Value-form Circle." Azeri writes on a large gamut of subjects in different international journals

and books. His areas of interest include Marxian materialism, the critique of epistemology, the problem of consciousness, philosophical psychology, Kant's transcendentalism and Hume's empiricism.

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Vladimir Iurinets–A Forgotten Marxist Critic of Husserl[1]

Vesa Oittinen

In this paper, I will shortly present a hitherto quite forgotten Soviet Marxist critic of the 1920s, Vladimir Iurinets (Юринец, *in Ukrainian* Юринець, *1891–1936/37). Of Ukrainian origin, he subsequently became one of the numerous victims of Stalinism and of his production only some articles remain. Although my presentation of him is only a first approach, his work and especially his evaluation of the problematic points of Husserl's philosophy are today still worth of attention.*

* * *

The dialogue between phenomenology and Marxism has always been tense, despite the fact that there are many points of shared understanding between these philosophical currents. To mention only one example, the four-volume-anthology *Phänomenologie und Marxismus*, edited by Bernhard Waldenfels et al. and published in the 1970s managed to show that there are possibilities for a prolific dialogue especially in the fields of social theory and moral philosophy. Nevertheless, the tension remains. Its source can be located in two focal points: doctrine of human subjectivity and theory of cognition. Here the approaches of Marxism and phenomenology are diametrically opposed. For Marxists, Husserl's construction of human subjectivity by means of a phenomenological reduction seems to be nothing else but a return to the abstraction of a single individual which Marx criticized already in his sixth thesis on

1. The article bases on a paper presented at the 18th Congress of Nordisk Selskab for Fænomenologi, Stockholm 21—23 April, 2022

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• *Correspondence:* Vesa Oittinen, Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki.
• e-mail: vesa.oittinen[at]helsinki.fi
• ORCID: 0000-0002-1022-9912
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Feuerbach.[2] One could say that Marxism starts at the outset from a view on human essence as a product of intersubjectivity, whereas phenomenology focuses on the human mind in the Cartesian sense, that is, as an *Egoität*.[3]

Marxist critiques have followed Husserl from very early on, almost at the same pace with the development of Husserl's own thought. Especially Georg Lukács' connections with Husserl's ideas have been discussed rather extensively. It should, however, be noted that the young Lukács of *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (1923) was yet at this stage heavily influenced by Neo-Kantianism (maybe more than by Hegel), and his position was thus already from its starting point close to phenomenology. The state of affairs was different in the Soviet Union of the 1920s, where Husserl's ideas were examined in the light of a much more strictly materialist world outlook than that of the young Lukács. Two Marxist critics of Husserl during this period are worth of mention. The first is Grigori Bammel, who analysed Husserl's views on logic in a review published in 1923, the other is Vladimir Iurinets. His article 'Edmund Gusserl' was published in two parts in the main philosophical journal of the Bolshevik party, *Pod znamenem marksizma* in 1922 and 1923. We could yet mention Valentin Asmus, later a well-known philosopher and logician, who published a short encyclopedia entry on Husserl in 1930.[4]

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2. In Thesis 6 Marx criticises Feuerbach thus: "Feuerbach resolves the essence of religion into the essence of man [*menschliche Wesen*]. But the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations […] The essence therefore can by him only be regarded as 'species,' as an inner 'dumb' generality which unites many individuals only in a natural way."
3. Husserl's later attempts to add an intersubjective dimension to his theory remind, in fact, of Feuerbach's similar moves in his "Philosophy of the Future" of the 1840s, to add an intersubjective aspect to his theory. Feuerbach stressed that the real subject is a result of a dialogue, an "I–Thou-relation." This led him to a peculiar "dialogical" theory, in which the human essence was constituted in a continuous dialogue between individuals, a dialogue founded on mutual love. I will here not discuss the question, whether Marx in his 6th Thesis thus described Feuerbach's point somewhat inadequately as merely a doctrine based on an "abstract—isolated—human individuality." This verdict hits well Feuerbach's previous philosophy, but Marx does not seem to take in account Feuerbach's efforts to break out from the Robinson-like individualism of his previous views. In every case, Feuerbach's attempt has much in common with the aspirations of Husserl over a half century later towards founding the intersubjectivity—by the way, a similarity to which the Husserl scholars seem not to have yet paid the attention it to my mind deserves. Marx' critique remains, however, valid in that for Feuerbach, the constituents of the I—Thou relation remain yet abstract in their generality. The same applies to Husserl.
4. All the articles mentioned (of Bammel, Iurinets, Asmus) have been republished in the anthology of Chubarov (2000).

These Marxist critics formed only a small strain in the Russian reception of Husserl's ideas during the two, three first decades of the 20th century. Husserl was discussed among the representants of Russian religious idealism (Nikolai Lossky, Aleksei Losev, B. V. Jakovenko), but as they soon were forced to emigration, their influence in the Soviet Union remained minimal. The most important representant of early Russian phenomenology is Gustav Shpet (1879–1937); his book *Javlenie i smysl'* (1914; English translation *Appearance and Sense*, Dordrecht 1991) was the first major work in which Husserl's ideas were presented to the Russian public. Shpet was, however, an independent thinker and in his later production he took distance from several points of Husserl's phenomenology, trying to solve the problem of intersubjectivity in his own way.

Shpet's philosophical evolution has recently been analysed by Liisa Bourgeot in her PhD thesis (2021), and I do not dwell here more upon it. There is, however, an interesting trait—or, if you like, an enigma—in Shpet's career. He did not emigrate, but chose to stay in the Soviet Union, despite the fact that he was not a Marxist. Indeed, in his works published in the USSR during the 20s and 30s he never refers explicitly to Marxism or to Marxist philosophy. Why did he then choose not to emigrate? Liisa Bourgeot explains this in her dissertation with the very probable hypothesis that Shpet, who in his aesthetic theory was very critical of the Proletkult and the Formalists, solidarised with the cultural politics of the Bolsheviks which tried to diminish the influence of avantgardist currents in favour of a more "traditional" cultural politics and education for the masses. It seems that the People's Commissar of Culture Anatoli Lunacharsky played a crucial role in persuading Shpet to remain in the Soviet Union and work for the cultural politics of the Bolshevik party.

Unlike Shpet, who remained an "academic" and non-marxist philosopher, and the ever-cautious Asmus, both Bammel and Iurinets criticised phenomenology explicitly from Marxist positions. Their views bore the marks of the epoch in that their critique had some reductionistic tones. This class reductionism did not, however, prevent them to deliver a critique of Husserl which has relevance yet for today's discussions. For example, Bammel, one of the most prominent representants of the Deborin school,[5] wrote that the general trait of the recent attempts at a reform of logic then actual in the West consisted in that

5. His original name was Bazhbeuk-Melikov and he was born in Tiflis (now Tbilisi) in 1900.

"they eliminated the last remnants of historism and, restauring the most reactionary scholastics, tear logics off from its living historical roots in their search for the eternal truths of 'pure consciousness' as an ideological antidote against the revolutionary ideas of the epoch" (Bammel in Chubarov 2000, 417). As to Husserlianism proper, which was a part of the said movement, so it was, according to Bammel, nothing but "a reaction against Neo-Kantianism." Despite this, Husserl's philosophy "remains in the boundaries of Neo-Kantian ideas" (ibid.). Even so, the rest of the article—which I have not the possibility to deal with in details here—did not continue in the same reductionistic vein. Instead, Bammel delivered a sharp and detailed critique of Husserl's ideas. His analysis tried to show that Husserl did not manage to develop an alternative to Neo-Kantianism and boiled down to the conclusion that Husserl's phenomenological method leads to a "complete elimination of consciousness […] in its real, generally aknowledged existence." For Husserl, the consciousness becomes a thing, an object among other things, and as a consequence, it is no more possible to speak of a dualism between the object and the consciousness, or between material and ideal (ibid., 429).

Bammel, Iurinets and Shpet became all victims of Stalinism. Grigori Bammel perished in Sevvostlag camp in 1939, Shpet in Siberia 1937. Iurinets was likewise repressed in 1936 or 1937 (the sources do not agree about the year). He had got in troubles already in 1931 during the so-called philosophical campaign initiated by Stalin,[6] when he became accused of "Menshevizing idealism" and expelled from the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences in 1933. All three philosophers have left unpublished works and other materials, which may have become destroyed or (though the chances are not high) preserved in the archives of the NKVD, from which they some day may be retrieved. Especially in the case of Iurinets we have to deal with a fragmentary *Nachlass* only. Besides his comments to Husserl, he published a critique of Freudo-Marxism and several articles in Ukrainian on philosophical subjects.[7]

Iurinets was born in Galizia, which today is Western Ukraine but then a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He studied in the universities of Lvov and Vienna. During the First World War, he was sent to the Eastern front but soon became a Russian prisoner of war. This

6. The hitherto best description of this campaign is still Yakhot (2013).
7. See *Filosofskaia entsiklopediia,* vol. 5, Moskva: Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia 1970, *sub verbo* 'Iurinets' of Ukrainian articles by Iurinets we can mention e.g. a presentation of Marx' and Engels' *German Ideology* (1927), the critiques of Max Scheler and German sociology (1928a), and of Kautsky ((1928b).

changed entirely the course of his life, since he moved after the October Revolution to the Red Army. In the years 1921–24 he studied at the Institute of Red Professorship (IKP) in Moscow, a school for the education of cadres for the service of the new Soviet state. Soon Iurinets moved to Kharkov in Ukraine, where he teached at the local Institute of Philosophy in 1925–1933. He managed to rise to important positions in the early Soviet Ukraine and participated in the edition of Ukrainian Bolshevik journals; in 1929 he finished a book manuscript with the title *Leninism and National Question,* which seems to be lost.[8]

Husserl as an Anti-Dialectician and Platonist

Iurinets' two-piece article on Husserl in *Pod znamenem marksizma* was only some 45 pages. The present-day historian of Russian phenomenology Igor Chubarov claims that Iurinets' article in this most important theoretical journal of the Bolshevik party "should be seen as programmatic, especially when one takes into account that this journal was a site of intellectual discussion with practical consequences, and a Red critique of Husserl expressed there was for many Russian phenomenologists an imminent political verdict" (Chubarov 2000, 432). It should be noted, however, that *Pod znamenem marksizma* was in the 1920s not so "orthodox" Marxist journal, if one means with orthodoxy the submission to the Party line. Its editor-in-chief Abram Deborin was an ex-Menshevik who displeased the Stalinists so much that they forced him out from the leadership of the journal in 1930—just with the motivation that *Pod znamenem marksizma* did not help to draw "practical consequences" from its theoretical discussions.

Iurinets begins his article on Husserl by quoting the acknowledging words of his compatriot Gustav Shpet which he gave in *Javlenie i smysl'* 1916 on Husserl's philosophy as an attempt to encounter in a creative manner a phenomenological theory. At first sight it may indeed seem that Husserl's theory is a harmonious whole based on one fundamental idea. But a closer look, continues Iurinets, shows that this system consists of different strata and contains several contradictions, so that it is more appropriate to call Husserl an eclectician. He compares Husserl with Plotinos, whose system had, in spite of its ostensibly formal structure, in the last instance a character of compilation (Iurinets 1922, 62). This assessment may sound for many too harsh, although Iurinets soon

8. See the Russian Wikipedia, *sub verbo* 'Iurinets.'

substantiates his claims by detecting contradictions in Husserl's thought.

The first part of Iurinets' article deals mostly with Husserl's philosophical influences. The text is in places hastily written and not very consequent. Nevertheless, Iurinets manages to enumerate the most important sources for Husserl's thought. As to Bernard Bolzano, who conducted Husserl in his anti-psychologist turn, Iurinets claims that he exerted notable influence on Husserl's *Logische Untersuchungen*, refuting Gustav Shpet's contrary view, according to which the role of Bolzano in the development of Husserl's thought remains yet open. But what Iurinets especially points out in Bolzano is his hostility towards Hegel. The indirect goal of Bolzano's *Wissenschaftslehre* was "to serve as an antidote to the dialectical method of Hegel, which Bolzano attempted to overcome in a 'scientific' manner […] This fact is for us of immense significance, because a complete lack of understanding, a complete lack of even a theoretical interest in dialectics is characteristic for Husserl, the 'founder' of the 'new' logics" (ibid., 63).

To back his claim of Husserl as an anti-dialectician, Iurinets quotes from his depreciating assessments of Hegel in the article "Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft" (first published in the journal *Logos*, 1911). According to Husserl, the fault of the 'maestro of Berlin' was, among other things, that "although Hegel insisted the absolute validity (*absolute Gültigkeit*) of his method and doctrine, his system lacks the critique of reason which in the first instance would make a scientific philosophy possible."[9] In other words, Husserl accuses Hegel of deviating from the path of a critical inquiry of reason which Kant had initiated. Iurinets makes an ironic comment to Husserl: "The main fault of Hegel thus was that he did not remain a mere commentator of Kant and did not already in his time propose the slogan 'Back to Kant!'" (Iurinets 1922, 68).

Since the claim of Husserls "anti-dialecticism" does not seem unfounded, it is pity that Iurinets does not dwell more upon the question of dialectics, or rather, of its lack in Husserl. After all, this is one of the most significant traits which distinguish phenomenology from Marxist philosophy. It is of course true that Hegel wrote a *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, but this is a work of quite another character than Husserl's phenomenological analysis of human consciousness. Hegel's work is "phenomenology" in the sense that it offers a revue in which concrete different historic characters of human consciousness pass the view of

9. Quoted here according to Husserl (2006, 7).

the reader, whilst in Husserl the consciousness is viewed as static and ahistoric.

Actually, this ahistoricity and lack of dialectics was noted even by Paul Natorp, one of the main representants of the Marburg school of neo-Kantianism, in a review of Husserl's *Ideen*. Natorp did not mention the term 'dialectics,' but from his comments follow that Husserl's thinking was 'metaphysic' (i.e. anti-dialectic) just in the sense Engels used the word. According to Natorp, there are Platonic traits in Husserl's doctrine, but Husserl has, nevertheless, not been able to adopt the genial core of Platon's philosophy:

> . . . scheint es, dass er [Husserl] zwar bis zum Eidos *Platos* vorgedrungen, aber auf der *ersten Stufe* des Platonismus, der der starren, unbeweglich "im Sein dastehenden" Eide stehen geblieben ist, den letzten Schritt Platos, der erst der grösste und eigenste war: die Eide in *Bewegung* zu bringen, sie in die letzte *Kontinuität* des Denkprozesses zu verflüssigen, nicht mitgemacht hat. (Natorp 1917/18, 231)

Iurinets quotes from the same article of Natorp, but, strangely enough, reproaches him for that he "did not find elements of Platonism in Husserl" (Iurinets 1922, 64). The real state of matters is according to Iurinets the contrary: "I am convinced that the Husserl school will finally merge with present-day Platonism." In a further passage he writes:

> The parallel with Platon is here especially instructive: both in Husserl and in Platon the 'essences,' the 'senses' exist in the metaphysical meaning of the word (that is, they do not exist in extension and time, but 'in the eternity,' as Platon would say). But Husserl goes further than Platon. The more Platon dicusses the ideas, the more he is bound to see them only as ideas of functions, not of things, they mutate in Husserl into the 'eidoses' of the things in a particular world of essences." (Iurinets 1923, 75)

A possible explanation for Iurinets' strange claim that Natorp does not recognize Husserl's 'Platonism' is that Iurinets thinks that the Neo-Kantian Natorp, whose rationalism culminates in a form of panlogism, is yet more Platonist than Husserl.[10] Be that as it may, if Iurinets' intention was to critique Husserl for the lack of dialectics, he would have

10. So might a somewhat unclear comment in a further passus be interpreted (Iurinets 1923, 61). A further reason for Iurinets' position may be that in his article he drew parallels with the 'bourgeois' philosophy of his days and the situation in Late Antiquity, where Neo-Platonism was a prevailing current of thought: when capitalism comes of age, it develops similar tendencies towards a Platonizing irrationalism as the Antiquity did.

had a valuable ally in Natorp. That he did not seize this opportunity is clearly a consequence of the general bias Marxist philosophers have had towards Kant and especially Neo-Kantianism, a bias which in no way is restricted only to Soviet philosophers.

The Antinomies of Husserl

The final part of Iurinets' article (section IV) is the most yelding part of his Husserl critique, since here he formulates the inherent contradictions (i.e. antinomies) of the phenomenological project.

The first antinomy concerns the problem of the ideation (*Wesensschau*, or the eidetic grasp of essences) which according to Husserl on the one side has the individual, contingent and empirical as their basis, but on the other side expresses the essence, a pure eidos (*Ideen*, § 2).[11] These eidoi are given by us via an "originally giving intuition" (*originär gebende Erschauung*; *Ideen*, § 3). Here we already encounter a problem, writes Iurinets. One is entitled to ask, which cognitive methods should be used in order to attain the goal of phenomenological analysis, the "vision of the essences":

> Because phenomenology deals with the essences, not with facts, we should expect that in order to reach its goal it should utilise the tools of abstract thought: concepts, judgements, conclusions. But this is not how the matters stand. True, Husserl underlines that the results of a phenomenological analysis may be given further to discursive forms of thought, but the tool of the immediate analysis must remain the intuition, the vision of essences […] Here we encounter the main contradiction of phenomenology. Its phenomena should, on the one side, be purely descriptive, but on the other side, they are not empirical. Husserl never solves this contradiction. (Iurinets 1923, 70)

Already the initial idea of 'original givenness' is for Iurinets suspicious and contains a further contradiction:

> The givenness of the object presupposes an active state of the consciousness, for which the object is given. But Husserl's 'givenness' presupposes a phenomenological position, a complicated apparatus of reduction. The essence of the object, which according to Husserl is given, is the result of some kind of activity carried out by the consciousness. Phenomenological objects are thus submitted to a certain process of working up. We see them eidetically from a certain point of view, in a certain light. Consequently, they are not at all given. (Iurinets 1923, 79)

11. So Husserl (1992, 12): "...dass es *zum Sinn jedes Zufälligen gehört, eben ein Wesen, und somit ein rein zu fassendes Eidos zu haben.*"

Hence, there is a contradiction in Husserl's theory of eidetic intuition. The postulate of the givenness of the object to the consciousness, which should relate to it in a passive, receptive way, is not in accord with the real activity of counsciousness and the "constructive" character of the object we have in our mind. "This is the second fundamental contradiction of phenomenology" (Iurinets 1923, 79).

Again, one might readily agree with Iurinets' critique of Husserl in this respect. The 'gnoseological antinomy' (if we may use this term) of Husserl is a consequence of his vagueness in the fundamental question concerning the activity vs. passivity of human consciousness. This inaccuracy is the more astonishing, as Husserl in other respects examines in his oeuvre the problems of consciousness in a most rigorous manner. To put it shortly, Husserl does not make a clear distinction between the intellectual and the sense-derived content of our ideas, despite the fact that already Kant's well-known separation between *Anschauung* and *Begriff* must have been known to him.[12]

Already Natorp had in his *Logos* review of 1917/18 noted the same problem in Husserl's "original givenness," but he did not formulate it in distinct words as a contradiction. He notes that Husserl does not speak of a mere "givenness" (*Gegebensein*) of the objects, but of an "original act of giving" (*originär gebender Akt*), in which the objects come to our consciousness. Already this expression of an "act of giving" is antinomic, since it should, on the one side, indicate the passivity of the way the objects are given to us, but on the other side, it stipulates this givenness as something active (Natorp 1917/18, 228). Natorp is, however, very cautious in his comments. He rests contented with wondering, whether Husserl's expressions of a "giving act" or "giving intuition" (*gebender Akt*, *gebende Anschauung*) will say that there is nothing "given" in the sense of a mere receptivity. In that case, however, the expressions "action" and "passion" "are very much in the need of explanation" (Natorp 1917/18, 228–229).

The reason for the cautious way Natorp presents his critique is, of course, the fact that he does not note Husserl's idealist presuppositions. For Husserl, not even the "given" is something independent from the

12. And not only Kant's distinction. Already in the previous century Spinoza formulated the same principle: see *Eth.* II prop. 49 schol. where Spinoza stresses that it is essential "to distinguish between ideas, or the concepts of mind, and the images of the things." According to him, it is easy to understand this if one keeps in mind that the thinking in no ways involves the extension, which is a propriety of the matter. *"Atque adeo clare intelliget, ideam (quandoquidem modus cogitandi est) neque in rei alicujus imagine, neque in verbis consistere."*

cognising subject. It is, in other words, not to be identified with Kant's things-in-themselves, which had the function of grounding the objectivity of the appearances. The Neo-Kantians generally dismissed this materialist element in Kant's theory of cognition, and it is consequently not a wonder that Natorp did not manage to proceed into a clear-cut formulation of the antinomies of Husserl's doctrine of eidoi. Iurinets, for his part, manages to do this. However, the problem with him is the anti-Kantian bias so characteristic for the Marxist philosophers of the epoch (it suffices to remember Paul Lafargue's quip of Kant as a "bourgeois sophist"), and so he does not revert to the distinctions of Kant between sensual and intellectual, which would have given his Husserl critique a more clear-cut profile.

Iurinets will see behind "Husserl's philosophical dreams" the Kantian doctrine of an *intellectus archetypus*, which catches up the reality in a twinkling of an eye without any mediating steps. Although Kant himself used this concept only sporadically,[13] it would indeed suit well as an equipment of Husserlian phenomenology. The *intellectus archetypus* creates the objects by intuiting them; correspondingly, in Husserl the consciousness creates the (intentional) objects thanks to the reductions, although it is not expressly characterised as an archetypic intellect (Iurinets 1923, 83).

* * *

As already mentioned, the analysis of Husserl's phenomenology is only a part of Vladimir Iurinets' philosophical work. Why his career was destroyed in the beginning of the 1930s is not yet quite clear. Certainly the philosophical campaign against "Menshevising Idealism" initiated by Stalin in 1929/1930 played a role, but it seems that he was, in addition, accused of "Ukrainian nationalism." He in fact published several texts in Ukrainian and contributed to a universitary textbook on Dialectical Materialism in 1932 intended for Ukrainian-speaking students. The last years of his life seem to have been very disheartened and humiliating, which led to his personal demoralisation. Deprived of all his previous positions, he finally agreed to become an informator for the NKVD/GPU. After a couple of years he was, however, again arrested,

13. Kant had probably borrowed the idea of *intellectus archetypus* not directly from Platon, but from the discourse of the so-called Cambridge Platonists. It designates the manner how the divine intellect operates, but Kant discusses it merely as an hypothetical antipode to the *intellectus ectypus* of the humans.

this time with the accusation of leading the security organs astray with fictitious information. He was shot in 4 October 1937.[14]

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Biography

Vesa Oittinen is Professor at the Aleksanteri Institute of the University of Helsinki. His research focuses on the history of modern philosophy, especially German, Scandinavian, and Russian philosophy. He is a docent of the history of philosophy at the University of Tampere. Vesa Oittinen defended his thesis in Germany on Spinoza interpretations by French structuralists and post-structuralists in 1994. He is the chairman of the Karl Marx Society.

14. So the Russian Wikipedia article on Iurinets. Some sources give other dates.

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Capitalism as a Species of Automation

Devin Wangert

ABSTRACT: For many decades, full automation has been treated as a possible outcome arising from the incessant transformation of the world's labour processes. The recent massification of ChatGPT and generative AI technologies has exacerbated the speculative tendency to move freely between the sense that this future is possible, on the one hand, and that it is proximate, on the other. Increasing confidence that this impending trajectory is already secured has incited both popular literature and funding-round proposals that put dates and concrete numbers on the temporal distance between our present and its fully automated future. While many critics have noted that full automation is not a new idea, what is more crucial is that its earlier precedents did not belong exclusively or even primarily to science-fiction: the genuine belief that full automation was and now is right around the corner is not new, either. In "Capitalism as a Species of Automation," I study how and why the notion of full automation has become a recurrent threshold state used to periodize the collective presents of capitalist development. What if full automation has always haunted capitalism's proximate futures because automation is itself an anachronism? In this article, I contend that while full automation appears as a technical antagonism that repeatedly restages the replacement of human labour, it relates to capitalist development as a temporal antagonism defining the replacement of *technology by technology*. In demonstrating how the contradictions internal to capitalist development come to be reformulated as temporal dynamics animating technological development, I focalize automation as a privileged interpretant of the mechanisms through which capitalism accumulates and disaccumulates value.

KEYWORDS: Automation, accumulation, disaccumulation, media studies, real subsumption.

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• *Correspondence:* Devin Wangert, University of Tyumen, *Russia.*
• e-mail: d.wangert@utmn.ru
• ORCID: -
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1. Enduring Automation

Sites of automation and automative technologies have become seductive metonyms for what is contemporary about the contemporary moment. The affordances and properties of these technologies have been used as prominent signifiers defining the boundaries inherent to our periodizations of capitalism: if, for example, the automation of motor function delimited late nineteenth and twentieth century capitalism from its preceding epochs, the automation of mental labour seems now to delimit the early twenty-first century. Accordingly, one popular interpretation of automation's relationship to capitalism today is the notion that the world's labour processes are on the precipice of *full automation*—that AI and machine learning technologies now herald the accumulative possibility of automating, in "real time," "the mental processes that can be made to control automated manual processes" (May 2017, 22).

If what seems to determine the contemporary *qua* contemporary is this threshold state of full automation, the term's spatial logic implies that automation itself is not a unique determinant of twenty-first century capitalism. Full automation implies a progressive (albeit not necessarily continuous) logic in which a greater and greater amount of territory in the labour process is subsumed by automative technologies. Indeed, it is understandable as a threshold state because it defines itself against a limit after which there will be no further site or type of labour to automate. As Matteo Pasquinelli notes in *The Eye of the Master*, this does not necessarily imply that 'subsumption' is synonymous with 'labour replacement,' but it does lead to a notion of spatial conquest in which "AI [can be interpreted as] the *culmination* of the long evolution of labour automation and quantification of society" (Pasquinelli 2023, 247).[1] If full automation is a metonym for the contemporary, it is because it appears to realize and fulfill a process of automation that began centuries ago. Crossing this threshold would ostensibly see the long evolution of labour automation henceforth be what it was always becoming.

However, there are two reasons that any historiography of a contemporary defined by full automation must remain in the hypothetical. The first reason is that full automation has not (yet) happened. The second is that, more crucially, the threshold state of full automation—and not simply automation itself—has had two centuries of historical prece-

1. Italics mine.

dents. Summarizing the long history of what he terms "automation discourse," Aaron Benanav observes the following in his book, *Automation and the Future of Work*:

> Automation may be a constant feature of capitalist societies; the same is not true of the theory of a coming age of automation, which extrapolates from instances of technological change to a broader account of social transformation. On the contrary, its recurrence in modern history has been periodic. Excitement about a coming age of automation can be traced back to at least the mid nineteenth century, with the publication of Charles Babbage's *On the Economy of Machinery and Manufactures* in 1832, John Adolphus Etzler's *The Paradise within the Reach of All Men, Without Labour* in 1833, and Andrew Ure's *The Philosophy of Manufactures* in 1835. These books presaged the imminent emergence of largely or fully automated factories, run with minimal or merely supervisory human labor. Their vision was a major influence on Marx, whose *Capital* argued that a complex world of interacting machines was in the process of displacing human labor from the center of economic life. Visions of automated factories appeared again in the 1930s, 1950s, and 1980s, before reemerging in the 2010s. Each time, they were accompanied or shortly followed by predictions of a coming age of 'catastrophic unemployment and social breakdown.' (Benanav 2020, 7–8)

The corpus that Benanav has assembled does not tell the story of a simple dialectic of forgetting and remembering that has characterized theories of social transformation accompanying the development of automative technologies since the nineteenth century. Rather, what he indicates is a more profound iterativity whereby the signal precedent of full automation is that, in each and every epoch that it emerges, it emerges *as unprecedented*. Paradoxically, because each of these epochs shares an image of full automation (rather than 'more' automation) as a precedent, they each appear as unique and unprecedented within the history of capitalist development. It is precisely this factor that makes automation an easy metonym not only for our contemporary, but the contemporary in aggregate: in 1832, society finds itself on a threshold after which the evolution of labour automation will finally culminate a process it had heretofore been becoming; in 1930, society finds itself on a threshold after which the evolution of labour automation will finally culminate a process it had heretofore been becoming; in our contemporary moment, society finds itself…

Are these past precipices of full automation wrong and is our present, AI-driven, precipice right? Conversely, should the repetition of these claims within an archive that can only be right once (if at all) lead us to moderate our emphasis on the exceptional character of *this* present? Are

these questions about full automation ultimately decidable from within a linear framework of progressive automation? If they are not, this might reveal something about automation itself and not only our collective trouble with correctly periodizing its development and theorizing its social implications. What interests me here is that the iterativity of this process describes the return not only of the specter of full automation, but its culminative relation to a process of past automation which it is on the precipice of fulfilling. A seemingly intuitive proposition about the *progressive* automation of the world's labour processes has as its verso a *subsumptive* proposition which holds that automation is, each and every time it reemerges, the full automation of those labour processes. Put differently, because a given contemporary moment (1930, 1950, 2025) is subsumptive in relation to each epoch it succeeds, the preceding epochs must be treated as interim states. Because each of those epochs now treated as interim states likewise originally understood itself to be in the position of a final, subsumptive relation with regards to the epochs it succeeded, these claims have an in-built corrective mechanism. Thought synthetically, this corrective mechanism leads to a polemical outcome. Each claim must simultaneously re-periodize the past by reiterating the exceptional, subsumptive character of the present, which will itself be open to this same corrective mechanism as the interim coordinates of a future epoch. It follows that subsumption is not, as common sense might tell us, the terminus of progressive automation: it rather operates according to an iterative logic that violates the logic of progressive automation even as it both concludes and incites it. As a limit-state, the subsumption implied by full automation is both final *and* mobile.

The relationship between the historical development of capitalism and the historical development of automative technologies *under* capitalism thus becomes a problem for thought. To the extent that the progressive history of labour automation is actually derived from the repeated restaging of labour's full automation, this coupling can only result in a contradiction which seems to prohibit recourse to that same linear, accumulative mode of development posited by the long history of labour automation. My general intervention in this article is to argue that this temporal contradiction between progressive automation and full automation does not need a resolution: it should be treated as a real, enduring contradiction that has been and continues to be borne across the stages of capitalist development. To that end, I explore how and why automation becomes a unique site of semantic and historiographical

confusion and correction within the historical span of capitalism. I argue that an analysis of this historiographical dynamic demonstrates that automation itself must be understood as an *anachronism*—a problem of time specific to the mode of development of capitalism. What appears like a polemical struggle over the periodization of a perpetually coming age of full automation is, when read cumulatively, an index of the temporal register proper to automation operations and their technological development within a capitalist mode of production.

In using this temporal problem to formalize the relationship between the historical development of automation and the historical development of capitalism, I sustain five main theses across this article. (1) The incessant restaging of full automation is a necessary outcome of the role that automative is a necessary outcome of the role that automative technologies play as vehicles for the accumulation. (2) This structural linkage between the historical development of automative technologies and the process of capitalist accumulation means that the primary dynamic of automation is not the eventual replacement of labour by technology but the perpetual replacement of technology by technology. (3) This dynamic effectively depends on restaging the *disappearance* of labour (without actually eliminating labour) because it uses labour as a metric for evaluating the performance of distinct automative technologies as vehicles for the accumulation of value. (4) The perpetual replacement of technology by technology defines an iterative trajectory of capitalist development in which capitalism must restage the process through which it *finally* but *repeatedly* realizes itself in successive forms of technological development. (5) We can consequently read the continual reiteration of the question of the full automation of labour as a cipher through which capitalism constantly restages its own accumulative dynamics.

I treat the long history of labour automation through what I call a media theory of labour. Instead of beginning from the supposition that automative technologies have innate technological properties that render them as obvious functional equivalents of human labour, and instead of supposing that these properties eventually accumulate so that there are (or will be) technological equivalents for all sites of human labour, I propose that the *work* done by a given automative technology is an outcome to be explained rather than an analytic point of departure. In my conception, what automation actually does in the production process would thus be the outcome of a temporal contradiction linking the historical development of capitalism to technological development un-

der capitalism. For this reason, I do not introduce an operative technological definition of automation—the idea, for example, that an automative technology is distinguished from other technologies because the former has a technological property that allows it to 'move by itself' or 'work by itself.' Instead, I derive what automation actually does or does not do from its linkage to the temporal organization of capitalist development: as we will see, when capitalist development seems to 'move by itself'—that is precisely when the technologies of the production process come to 'work by themselves.' As a temporal contradiction, automation thus interlocks two critical desires: a desire within Marxist political economy to periodize the difference made by contemporary capitalism and a desire within media philosophy to formulate automative operations as performances of technological labour.

If I am correct that automative labour or work is the product of a mode of time rather than an intrinsic technological property, then the problem of full automation is not decidable on the basis of the idea that past epochs which understood themselves as tending towards full automation were incorrect because they were eventually found to be lacking a technological property that was introduced into labour processes in subsequent epochs. What stopped the automated factories of the 1930s from being fully automative was not a lack of AI technologies. To that end, an anachronistic temporal operation describes the condition for actually-existing automation, not a speculative future domain of automation. If what automative technologies actually do in the present is derived from the iterative introduction of *further threshold states* of full automation in the future, then *further automation* does not automate out a last remainder but recapitulates it anew.

Why should the anachronism I am describing come to define automation itself? Doesn't what I have noted thus far merely demonstrate that we have repeatedly misinterpreted the future? After all, we tend to do that. The second section of this piece turns to a tension inherent in Karl Marx's own understanding of the relationship between automative technologies and capitalist development. I do this to demonstrate that this problem of time is encoded in capitalism's developmental logic, animating its future elaboration. Where Marx originally understood the accumulation of automative technologies to represent a crisis for capitalism as a system of production based on and measured by human labour, by the time of the publication of *Capital* he 'resolves' this crisis through the concept of "real subsumption." This concept centralizes the perpetual replacement of technology by technology over and above the

potential replacement of labour by technology. This shift in emphasis also entails that Marx interpret automative technologies as vehicles for the accumulation of value under capitalism, thus creating a structural linkage between the development of automative technologies and the development of capitalism. I will show how it is precisely Marx's transformation of this prospective crisis into a perpetual process of replacement that entrenches automation as a real problem of time within the arc of capitalist development.

In the subsequent sections of this piece, I will study how the legacy of this temporal contradiction already authorized in and incited by Marx's own formalization of real subsumption is endured across an archive of attempts to periodize real subsumption according to automative technologies in the time after Marx. Methodologically speaking, this polemic becomes more than a polemic when read in aggregate: this archive is valuable because it *shows* something (cumulatively) that its theorists do not *describe* (individually). I therefore centralize a reception history that has been left to work out the legacy of this transformation of the crisis of fixed capital between *Grundrisse* and *Capital* not because I am primarily interested in who is right and who is wrong. Rather, I use this archive as an archaeological optic on both automative operations and the development of automative technologies under capitalism. I will demonstrate how this archive of (mis)readings and re-readings forms a protocol that seems to duplicate (or "perform"), on an intra- and paratextual level, the anachronistic operations proper to the capitalist conception of automation on a technological level. This archive does so by perpetually re-periodizing *Capital's* real subsumption and perpetually disinterring Marx's "Fragment on Machines" as an explanatory optic on the contemporary defining virtually every decade since the 1940s. In other words, I track the repeated re-periodizing of the epoch of real subsumption not because I believe a correct periodization of real subsumption *should be* synonymous with full automation. Rather, I will demonstrate how the historiographical treatment of real subsumption can become a register tracking the relationship between the development of automative technologies and the historical development of capitalism.

I organize and distinguish two orientations towards the problem of real subsumption's iterativity through two main arcs that structure the remainder of this article. The first set of readers, whom I will come to call "Cyclicists," believe that real subsumption is a concrete stage in the development of capitalism that is directly (but perpetually) in front of us—one that defines the contemporary of capitalism. The second set of

readers, whom I will come to call "Secularists," believe that real subsumption was a concrete stage in the development of capitalism that is now behind us. As I will demonstrate, the stakes around which position is correct—in front or behind?—are more primarily the stakes of two different orientations towards the iterativity of real subsumption itself, responses to the anachronism of that concept.

My first arc formalizes automation's relationship to this mechanism of correction and recapitulation that haunts the legacy of real subsumption. As I will demonstrate, Marxisms may not be interested in the iterativity of real subsumption, but it is interested in them—such that the very desire to displace this iterativity only entrenches it. Reading across the Cyclicist stratum of this archive demonstrate how the critique of real subsumption inherits the temporal pathology of that concept. Each critique of the concept becomes synonymous with its recapitulation, predicated as they are on a(nother) finally correct periodization of capitalism based on a(nother) finally correct reading of real subsumption, which is itself based on a(nother) finally *just* disinterment and contemporization of Marx's "Fragment." I call this dynamic, which couples the repeated finality of critique with the disinterment and contemporization of Marx's "Fragment," the *realer subsumption*. I use this arc to support two theses. First, I argue that the technological properties used to specify each period of real subsumption are in fact derived from the anachronistic logic of automation's technological development. Second, I demonstrate how the notion of progressive automation (the idea that more and more sites of labour are automated under capitalism) actually defers a terminus after which there would be no labour to automate. I argue that it does this not because real subsumption resolves the question of the disappearance of labour but rather because it is driven by a more primary iterative mechanism that constantly restages labour's disappearance.

My second arc looks at recent attempts to critique not real subsumption but the mechanism behind its successive correction and recapitulation. Aaron Benanav and Nathan Brown[2] propose cogent versions of this

2. See Brown (2018, 20–21). Benanav's critique is indirect in that it is essentially lodged in a compliment that recognizes the prescience of the Cyclicists "social visions." What we must remember is that the Cyclicists do not think they are Cyclicists. In reality the Cyclicists are, like Benanav, making *economic* arguments based on the way in which *social antagonisms* are *technologically borne*. The accounts that Benanav has in mind are primarily critiques of capitalist presents, not utopian speculations of post-capitalist futures—critiques which Benanav glosses as incorrect and untimely precisely in his praise of their imaginative capaciousness. Thus, when he notes that, "[t]he automation

solution by which there are empirically *incorrect* Marxisms that are analytically interesting because of the fleshiness of their errancy (what they tell us about culture in erring) and finally *correct* Marxisms, like their own, that are analytically correct because they correspond empirically to the actual historical development of capitalism and the actual processes of production that occur today.[3] In this situation, the Cyclicists (those undergoing critique; those read for the 'unconscious cultural uptake' of situations they consciously misrecognize) are interpolated as cultural Marxists, while the latter (those critiquing; those reading for the historical-empirical data that will let them correctly recognize capitalism's secular development) could be called "Secularist" Marxists. Brown uses the "secular" as shorthand for an approach that grants "explanatory priority" to "capital's totalizing structural dynamics," periodizing capitalist development on the basis of how these dynamics or tendencies temporarily crystallize into specific structural coordinates. The Cyclicist, from the Secularist point of view, mistakes cyclical epiphenomena such as "the expansion of markets" or "periodic shifts of supply and demand" for secular, structural coordinates. This distinction allows the Secularists to simultaneously graft Cyclicist Marxisms onto cyclical trends within the development of capitalism and monopolize explanatory license over the linear thrust of capitalism's secular development, which Brown formalizes as capitalism's "secular dynamics of accumulation" (Brown 2018, 12). In this way, they really do get close to the 'realest' real subsumption, and they do this by periodizing it in such a way that it has (1) already happened globally and secularly and has, even more crucially, (2) ceased to happen by now only happening locally and cyclically.[4]

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theorists are our late-capitalist utopians" (Benanav 2020, 11), this interpellative gesture is one of critical diplomacy.

3. "Rather than a theory of capitalist stages prioritizing cyclical dynamics and an order of explanation prioritizing markets and technological innovations, what the work of periodization requires is a unified framework for understanding capital's secular dynamics, within which the tendential contradictions of accumulation are granted clear explanatory priority and constitute a consistent referent for periodizing transitions" (Brown 2018, 8). "The return of automation discourse has been a symptom of our era, as it was in times past: it has arisen when the gap between the supply and demand for jobs becomes so large, leaving so many individuals scrambling to find scraps of work, that people begin to question the viability of a market-regulated society. Even prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, the breakdown of the labor-market mechanism was more extreme than at any time in the past. This is because, over the past half century, a greater share of the world's population than ever before came to depend on selling its labor…to survive in the context of weakening global economic growth rates" (Benanav 2020, 12).
4. "[T]he history of modernity continues as the movement of the *same* structural contradictions that necessitate the accomplishment of real subsumption in the first place. One

In maintaining that real subsumption is behind us, the Secularists would thus indirectly challenge my primary methodological proposition—that the iterativity of the concept of real subsumption indexes the temporal logic of automation under capitalism. If the Cyclicists are errant readers of real subsumption, does this not demonstrate that the anachronism I track in this article is proper to the application of the concept of real subsumption, but not proper to real automative operations or the development of automation technologies that real subsumption has been continually used to periodize? Indeed, with the exception of Benanav, the majority of the Secularist correctives I treat here have no overt interest in critiquing automation. Rather, what they respond to is the following question: if real subsumption describes the threshold after which capitalism properly becomes itself, how could we conceive of an epoch *after*? In maintaining that real subsumption is behind us, the Secularists must recapitulate a periodizing gesture by which another phase—alternately named the long downturn, the stationary state, stagnation, devalorization, and so forth[5]—explains how capitalism can fundamentally change itself (in ceasing to be a regime of real subsumption *par excellence*) without ceasing to *be itself*, without ceasing to be capitalism.

What I argue in this arc is that the same factors which the Secularists use to demonstrate that we have moved beyond real subsumption cause them to inadvertently conceive of the epoch after in terms of automation's anachronistic temporal dynamics—even as and precisely because they are trying to periodize the present according to ostensibly unrelated categories. What each of these periodizing gestures has in common is the proposition that capitalism fails today by working as it always has. The Secularists thus commit to showing how the accumula-

sign that the accomplishment of real subsumption does not signal a radical break with the history of modernity is that the period of declining profitability following from it is attended by profit-seeking through the renewed expansion of absolute surplus value production…We do not exit modernity into a fully modernised world in which uneven development is eliminated, but we do enter into a late phase of modernity, correlated with a late phase of capitalism, during which the social and political consequences of real subsumption play out" (Brown 2018, 19).

5. While I will discuss each of these terms further in the body of this article, they align with the thinkers discussed here as follows. "The Stationary State" refers to the outer bounds of a stagnant capitalism, as formalized in Balakrishnan (2019). "Stagnation" is Benanav's term for the contemporary moment. See Benanav (2020, 32). The "long downturn" is Robert Brenner's name for the period and the structural dynamics accompanying the falling rate of profit since the 1970s. See Brenner (2006, 26). For "devalorization" see Aglietta (2015, 102–103).

tive mechanism used to periodize the historical ascendancy of capitalism is also the explanatory device behind the potential limits to economic growth capitalism encounters today (its prospective stagnation) and its tendency to disaccumulate already-created value. In this arc, I argue that if Marx resolves the crisis of fixed capital by reconceptualizing it as an asset enabling the ascendancy and expansion of capitalism, then the way in which this legacy is borne in the contemporary moment shows us how automation can be considered both as an optic on the temporal iterativity of disaccumulation as well as a major stage on which the real process of economic disaccumulation actually plays out. Today, disaccumulation describes the temporal mechanism through which the technologies of the production process can literally be said to be automative.

In tracking two opposing orientations towards the temporal contradiction thrown off by Marx's sublimation of the crisis of fixed capital, what I ultimately aim to demonstrate is an involuntary point of consensus. When these theorists are explicitly speaking about automation or when they are inadvertently speaking about automation while trying to periodize capitalism according to ostensibly unrelated categories, they are speaking about automation as a problem of time proper to the dynamics of capitalist dis/accumulation. When these theorists are talking about what automative technologies actually *do* or how they operate in the present, they are talking about a technological property that is effectively derived from this same problem of time. Marx's displacement of the crisis of fixed capital ensures that, whenever we are thinking capitalism's past, present, or future—we are thinking about automation, all the time.

2. Crisis and Chronology: Capitalism as a Species of Automation

The frequency with which we understand change to capitalism as technological change renders the notion of full automation as a problematically intuitive idea that needs no further recourse to structural or schematic elaboration. Conversely and counter-intuitively, the mechanism behind our two centuries of unprecedented precedents of full automation—the cumulative anachronism of this notion—only makes sense as a product of the structural relation between the development of capitalism and the development of technology. This section turns to the problem of automation as it is formalized in the ten years between Marx's writing of the so-called "Fragment on Machines" in his *Grundrisse* and his concept of "real subsumption" in the publication of *Capital*. Where

Marx originally understood the accumulation of automative technologies to herald an eventual crisis of capitalism due to its decentralization of human labour, he comes to sublimate that crisis by understanding the accumulation of automative technologies as a vehicle for the accumulation of value under capitalism—a process through which capitalism effectively becomes itself. In this section, I will show how it is precisely Marx's own solution to the accumulation of automative technologies that enables and incites the constant restaging of the threshold state of full automation.

Already in his *Grundrisse*, Marx intuited that a proposition about how machinery (as distinct from simple tools) actually works in a present production process was a synthetic proposition that linked the arcs of capitalism's historical development and the technological development of automation. In the so-called "Fragment on Machines," where he has frequently been interpreted as offering speculative remarks on a coming age of automation, Marx notes:

> The production process has ceased to be a labour process in the sense of a process dominated by labour as its governing unity. Labour appears, rather, merely as a conscious organ, scattered among the individual living workers at numerous points of the mechanical system; subsumed under the total process of the machinery itself, as itself only a link of the system, whose unity exists not in the living workers, but rather in the living (active) machinery, which confronts his individual, insignificant doings as a mighty organism. In machinery, objectified labour confronts living labour within the labour process itself as the power which rules it; a power which, as the appropriation of living labour, is the form of capital. (Marx 1993, 693)

Marx thus narrates what this present production process actually *does* (how it operates) on the basis of "the form of capital" that it has historically come to embody. Marx continues, "Machinery appears, then, as the most adequate form of fixed capital, and fixed capital, in so far as capital's relations with itself are concerned, appears as the most adequate form of capital as such" (Ibid., 694). Automative technologies make a difference to capitalism's present (production process) because they appear to realize, some centuries after the origin of capitalist development, the form of capital and systematization of the labour process most adequate to capitalism. These technologies thus double as determinants of present production processes and interpretants which read the stratigraphy of capitalist development as technological development.

For Marx, there are two signal differences between machinery and simple tools. The first is the fact that machinery actively reshaped the

forms of labour involved in the production process. Early capitalism proceeded according to a process of proletarianization and enclosure, which created an ever-growing population of subjects who were required to pay to live and who had no means of satisfying the discipline of payments outside of selling their own labour. In appropriating already-extant forms of labour and reorienting them towards market-based production, it left those forms of labour largely intact. To that end, the introduction of machinery radically intervened in the form and content of labour processes themselves, altering them in ways that did not have clear precedents prior to the development of capitalism.

The second difference has to do with the diminishing role of those subjects who must sell their labour to satisfy the discipline of payments:

> In machinery, objectified labour material confronts living labour as a ruling power and as an active subsumption of the latter under itself, not only by appropriating it, but in the real production process itself; the relation of capital as value which appropriates value-creating activity is, in fixed capital existing as machinery, posited at the same time as the relation of the use value of capital to the use value of labour capacity; further, the value objectified in machinery appears as a presupposition against which the value-creating power of the individual labour capacity is an infinitesimal, vanishing magnitude. (Ibid., 694)

As is well known, Marx's labour theory of value is predicated on the argument that the production of surplus value is explained by a mechanism that leverages the difference that exists between how much value an hourly wage can purchase and how much value an hour of labour time creates.[6] In other words, in order to satisfy the discipline of payments, the worker exchanges his or her labour power over a given quantity of time for a wage, while only a fraction of the quantity of time actually worked (what Marx calls "necessary labour") is required to reproduce the capital initially outlaid for the wage payment. The remaining hours worked after this outlay is recouped are value-added (what Marx calls "surplus labour") that is captured by the capitalist. And Marx thus comes to define capitalism against other forms of social and economic organization by way of the mechanism through which *labour time* is linked to the production of profit. This definition is why Pasquinelli is able to succinctly summarize the qualitative shift that emerges in the initially quantitative adjustment of the ratio of capital outlaid on machinery (what Marx calls "fixed capital") vs. human labour as "a crisis

6. See Foley (1986, 14–15).

of capitalism due to the crisis of the centrality of labour, and therefore of the labour theory of value" (Pasquinelli 2023, 114).

But what, precisely, are the coordinates of the crisis brought on by the accumulation of machinery? Marx continues:

> Capital itself is the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth. Hence it diminishes labour time in the necessary form so as to increase it in the superfluous form; hence posits the superfluous in growing measure as a condition - question of life or death - for the necessary. On the one side, then, it calls to life all the powers of science and of nature, as of social combination and of social intercourse, in order to make the creation of wealth independent (relatively) of the labour time employed on it. On the other side, it wants to use labour time as the measuring rod for the giant social forces thereby created, and to confine them within the limits required to maintain the already created value as value. Forces of production and social relations - two different sides of the development of the social individual - appear to capital as mere means, and are merely means for it to produce on its limited foundation. In fact, however, they are the material conditions to blow this foundation sky-high. (Marx 1993, 706)

As I will explore in the third section of this article, this passage of Marx's so-called "Fragment" has received extensive and successive theoretical treatment in almost every decade since the *Grundrisse*'s publication in 1941—resulting in often incommensurable theoretical conclusions. Marx claims that the "contradiction" in question is the "exchange of living labour for objectified labour – i.e. the positing of social labour in the form of the contradiction of capital and wage labour" (Ibid., 704). Does the crisis occur because of the fact that the relative magnitudes of capital outlaid on human labour and machinery now have a difference that is exponential? If labour time remains the "sole measure" of the creation of wealth, then the crisis would be the fact that the measuring stick used has become "infinitesimal" in relation to the object it is attempting to measure—like attempting to measure a skyscraper with a hand ruler.

What if the measure itself had not only *become* "infinitesimal," but was *now* "vanishing"? Marx notes that "machinery inserts itself to replace labour only when there is an overflow of labour powers…It enters not in order to replace labour power where this is lacking, but rather in order to reduce massively available labour power to its necessary measure" (Ibid., 702). Here, the crisis would rather be that the creation of wealth now relatively independent of labour time would cross a threshold after which labour time would be irrelevant. In this account, machinery turns what was formerly necessary labour into excess labour—

workers without work who could only be reabsorbed by capitalism and reemployed if production was capable of expanding. Given that further investment in production would be predicated on expectations of satisfactory demand for the goods produced, and given that the massively available labour power machinery had already rendered superfluous would have no income to support increased demand, the crisis of the accumulation of fixed capital could be read as an absolute limit to expansion, a falling rate of profit that would lower the price of goods without generating more wealth.[7]

This popular interpretation of Marx's "Fragment" hinges on reading the conjunction "infinitesimal, vanishing" literally and linearly: the infinitesimal status of living labour is, in this logic, what indicates that it is now vanishing and, eventually, will have vanished. It thus becomes the site of projection for two contradictory reception histories which both interpret Marx as writing a prophetic passage in the *Grundrisse* that seems to ultimately contradict the labour theory of value. The utopian interpretation understands Marx as saying that capitalism will drive technological development to the point that it will eventually automate *itself* out, creating a form of post-scarcity socialism where a minimal amount of necessary labour would be sufficient to sustain humanity, while transmuting surplus labour into free time that could be exercised how one sees fit. The dystopian interpretation understands Marx as saying that capitalism will drive technological development to the point that it will eventually automate the bulk of the world's working populations out while still enforcing the discipline of payments on those subjects—creating a world of work done without workers and a growing population who must pay to live but have no capacity to generate means of payment.[8] What is striking is that these antimonious readings are derived from the same point of consensus—that technological development will eventually pass a threshold after which capitalism will cease to be capitalism, either by violating its surplus-producing principle or by displacing labour as the producer of surplus value.[9]

7. See Meister (2021, 18).

8. Many different variations of these two interpretations are collected in the journal *e-flux*'s special issue 46, organized around the theme of "accelerationism."

9. There are many different paths that, taken to their most extended points, could demonstrate this fundamental violation of capitalism's logic in both the utopian and dystopian valences outlined above. For the sake of illustration, I will give an example using the distinction between necessary labour and surplus labour. In its utopian valence, technological development is thought to eventually violate the structural relationship between necessary labour and surplus labour, given that after necessary labour is recouped a quantity of time would no longer be dedicated to surplus-production *by right*.

Between the writing of his "Fragment" in 1857 and the publication of *Capital* in 1867, scholars of Marx have remarked that this sense that the accumulation of automative technologies will necessarily reach a threshold after which capitalism will cease to be capitalism largely disappears from his theory.[10] Indeed, when Marx introduces the concept of "real subsumption" in *Capital* to describe the process of accumulation of automative technologies analogous to the one glossed in his "Fragment," he understands it as a modality proper to capitalism—not the forebearer of its downfall.[11] I will now discuss how Marx's resolution of this crisis transforms the accumulation of automative technologies into a temporal problem.

"Free time" untethers necessary labour from surplus labour and makes the production of surplus merely one option among others. Put differently, while it is correct that there is necessary labour in all organizations of society, there is also a specific valence through which "necessity" is defined under the capitalist mode of production. It is defined against surplus as the minimal cost necessary to maintain and reproduce the worker such that this subject can live to produce surplus again the following day. The definition of necessary labour is derived from capitalism's surplus-producing necessity, in other words—not from workers' own sense of their needs. A post-scarcity society that does not maintain and reproduce the worker precisely to produce surplus (capitalism's definition of necessity), and does not price the existence of that subject against surplus-production, is no longer a capitalist society. The dystopian valence—the idea that automative technologies develop to such a point that they now produce surplus value entirely without human labour—is likewise untenable within the capitalist mode of production. Marx privileges labour time as his measure of value precisely because labour couples exchange and production. As we have already seen, surplus value is derived from the distinction between how much value an hourly wage can purchase and how much value an hour of labour time creates—this double-status of labour is elsewhere what he singles out as labour's "value-creating possibility" (Marx 1993, 452). If technology develops to the point that it produces surplus value without any intervention of human labour, the crisis is not simply that Marx's labour theory of value no longer explains capitalism (because labour no longer measures the production of value), but that the mode of production that needs to be explained is no longer capitalism. While it is correct that there is surplus production in other organizations of society, there is likewise a specific valence through which "surplus" is defined under the capitalist mode of production. Here surplus does not simply mean that technology can produce more than is necessary for the survival of a society, but describes instead how an unprecedented magnitude of value emerges out of exchange. Put differently, in paying a wage rather than reimbursing the worker for the full value produced by an hour of labour time, the capitalist is able to appropriate the difference, and thus appropriate value that was not originally exchanged. If automative technologies could by themselves guarantee the generation of a certain amount of surplus value, as defined above, this guarantee would already be priced into exchange: such technologies would be *worth* the sum total of this guarantee, less a premium for the time it takes to fulfill the guarantee. In other words, surplus—an unprecedented magnitude of value—would not emerge through exchange, and any gains would be due to the accumulation of *interest*. If technology really can be said to produce surplus here, it is thus not the type of surplus that defines capitalist production.

10. See Heinrich (2013, 197). See also Spence (2019, 327–339).

11. See Marx (1990, 643–667).

In his article, "The Capitalist Use of Machinery: Marx Versus the Objectivists," Raniero Panzieri formalizes the impetus through which capitalism *necessarily* arrives at the stage of real subsumption by noting that, "[t]echnological progress itself thus appears as the mode of existence of capital, as its development" (Panzieri 1980, 46). That Panzieri was, like Marx, effectively attempting to offer a single, synthetic proposition about present automative operations and the historical development of automative technologies under capitalism is evident from his formulation, which defines what capitalism is (its mode of existence) by what it was and will be (technological progress). This synthetic principle not only implies that capitalism can be used as a register to understand the development of automative technologies. Rather, in understanding capitalism as a mode of existence defined by an impetus to realize the technical composition specific to it, Panzieri comes to posit capitalism itself as a species of automation which exists prior to, actively incites the development of, and is finally fulfilled in automative technologies. The circularity of Panzieri's phrase (mode of existence = development) narrates real subsumption as a process of self-realization in which capitalism must become what it is—in which the automative development of capitalism fulfills itself in automative technologies.

Does this entail that capitalism's self-realization is also the realization of *full* automation? Marx and his contemporaries often spoke metaphorically about capitalism as a gigantic machine. Is Panzieri reiterating this metaphor once more? I will show how this interpretation of capitalism itself as a species of automation that *necessarily* tends towards a greater and greater expansion of automative technologies is rather inherent to how the prospective crisis of fixed capital that Marx wrote about in *Grundrisse* is sublimated by the concept of "relative surplus value" in *Capital.* By "sublimated," I mean that the contradiction animating this crisis is transformed—it no longer appears as a crisis of fixed capital accumulation—but it is not overcome. While there is, in Marx's "Fragment," an empirical propensity towards the accumulation of machinery, there is not yet a structural mechanism that explains why this must be the case. Capitalism could tend towards the development of automative technologies, and these technologies might realize a specific organization of labour that did not exist prior to capitalism, but this dynamic was not understood to be self-realizing. Likewise, the specter of overproduction already discussed seemed to present an absolute limit to the benefits derived from the expansion of automative technologies which might even make such a trajectory undesirable. Marx's concept

of relative surplus value addressed the crisis of fixed capital by reimagining the relation between technology and labour in terms of what are now called productivity gradients.[12] As Pasquinelli summarizes it, "real subsumption" employs the concept of relative surplus value to critique Marx's earlier notion of crisis in the "Fragment," positing that "surplus value can be augmented not just by reducing wages and material costs but also by increasing the productivity of labour in general" (Pasquinelli 2023, 118). Investment in technology would provide a capitalist with the possibility of selling goods at the prevailing price while also decreasing the overall cost of production, since it would decrease the quantity of labour required to produce those goods. Marx saw that technological development thus opened up the possibility for the *relative* capture of surplus value before intra-capitalist competition would eventually lower the price of the goods in question. As Robert Meister notes in *Justice is an Option*, while this reformulation ostensibly resolves one facet of the crisis of fixed capital—since it explains how the accumulation of machinery can continue to generate wealth while indirectly lowering the price of goods—it does so by entrenching the accumulation of automative technologies as a structural dynamic of capitalist accumulation:

> [P]roducer goods—new machinery and raw materials—become core vehicles for preserving and accumulating surplus value by allowing investors to benefit from the arbitrage opportunities that are opened by the steeper productivity gradients that relative surplus value reflects. Because of its need to accumulate previously created surplus value by investing in producer goods, industrial capitalism simultaneously commits itself to constantly expanding production. (Meister 2021, 20)

If the notion that capitalism preserves its past gains through future-oriented investment in machinery leads to the proposition that capitalism itself is a species of automation, why should real subsumption not eventually come to mean full automation? How does the concept of relative surplus value sustain both the logic of progressive automation, as we can now see above, and the iterativity of the subsumptive limit of full automation? Because Marx understands the creation of relative surplus value to be predicated on the capture of the value thrown off by the spread between different costs of production of a given commodity that

12. "Using as data the gradients of the relevant functions evaluated at the current point of operation, the procedure calculates the direction of change from the status quo that yields the greatest feasible local rate of increase in the objective function of the decision maker…the procedure can also be used to obtain an upper bound on the gain from effecting any particular (non-local) set of feasible changes in the decision variables" (Willig and Bailey 1979, 96).

will be sold for the same price—a spread that will eventually close when intra-capitalist competition causes the entire industry to adopt the more productive method of production—the Fragment's problem of the *replacement of human labour by technology* is both systematically attached to and made secondary to the problem of the *replacement of technology by technology*.[13] Relative surplus value reinterprets the "infini-

13. Pasquinelli treats this transformation of the concept of fixed capital between *Grundrisse* and *Capital* in a 2019 article published in *Radical Philosophy*, "On the origins of Marx's general intellect," which was later updated for his book, *The Eye of the Master*. He offers a different account of why the crisis of fixed capital accumulation is a crisis, as well as how it is resolved. According to Pasquinelli, who follows the emphasis of readers of Marx's "Fragment" such as Paulo Virno, the main problematic term in the accumulation of fixed capital is not fixed capital *per se* but the tension it exacerbates between two modalities of knowledge. He consequently maps this problematic according to "an unresolved tension between *knowledge objectified in machinery* (as 'development of fixed capital') and *knowledge expressed by social production* (as 'development of the social individual')" (Pasquinelli 2023, 112). He then tracks the resolution of this crisis by emphasizing Marx's replacement of his concept of the "general intellect" with that of the "collective worker" in the time between the writing of *Grundrisse* and publication of *Capital*. According to Pasquinelli, *Capital*'s direct references to the work of Charles Babbage can be used to reconstruct how Marx now imagines the extraction of relative surplus value as part of a "machine theory of value," which describes how fixed capital mobilizes the knowledge it appropriates to redesign "the division of labour and machines." Pasquinelli continues, "if, according to Babbage's principle, the division of labour is an apparatus to modulate regimes of skill and therefore different regimes of salary according to skill, the division of labour becomes a modulation of relative surplus value. Being itself an embodiment of the division of labour, the machine then becomes the apparatus to discipline labour and regulate the extraction of relative surplus value" (Pasquinelli 2023, 118). In my view, Pasquinelli offers a compelling and correct account of how the technologies of the production process can be used as a means not only to increase the spread between productivity gradients but also as a means of segmentizing formerly continuous labour processes. They can therefore increase the spread in the gradients of empirical wages on the basis of the level of skill required for a certain aspect of the newly-segmented labour process. By contrast, in an unsegmented labour process a skilled worker will still command the higher wage determined by the skill used for only a fraction of the labour process, even when executing parts of this process that require less skill. However, I do not believe Pasquinelli's machine theory of value is a direct account of the *resolution* of the crisis of fixed capital accumulation. In both *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, Marx offers a series of propositions which certainly did not correspond to nineteenth century capitalism as an *empirical* object of study. The fact that workers are paid in advance rather than arrears, or that labour time is always exchanged for a *monetary* wage are two such propositions which clearly do not function as empirical descriptions but rather belong to a tendential and structural account of capitalism as a system of production and exchange. Another one of these propositions is Marx's derivation of the value of the wage of the worker from the cost of the worker's maintenance and reproduction. See, for example Marx (1993, 286). Marx makes this derivation of the price of the minimal wage quite literal in another passage of his *Grundrisse*: "If…only half a working day is necessary in order to keep one worker alive one whole day, then the surplus value of the product is self-evident, because the capitalist has paid the price of only half a working day but has obtained a whole day objectified in the product; thus

tesimal" magnitude of living labour not according to the integral definition of a very small magnitude that could one day be removed. Rather, it is likely that Marx implicitly understood "infinitesimal" in a directional, derivative sense—as a function that is perpetually tending towards a limit of 0, without ever reaching that limit. In this logic, living labour is both progressively *and* perpetually vanishing without arriving at a terminus after which it will have actually vanished. Labour's tendential relation to this limit is precisely why it could become a measure of the difference in possible spreads between productivity gradients that could be opened up by the replacement of technology with technology, which is the tacit condition for the capture of relative surplus value in the first place. Put differently, human labour can measure the spread in productivity of two or more different technologies used to produce a commodity sold at the same price because each combination will yield a different position of that magnitude of labour relative to 0. In placing these productivity gradients on a continuum where they can be compared against each other (a spread), human labour is treated as an "infinitesimal" measure or directional derivative that tends towards 0. Conversely, if human labour was treated as an integer (0), the measurement would become undefined and could no longer compare the possible spreads between productivity gradients which informs the replacement of technology by technology.

Relative surplus value implies that living labour could only function as a measure for productivity gradients to the extent that it is retained, of course—but what we see here is that it is retained *as* vanishing. Because the replacement of technology with technology is essentially based

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has exchanged *nothing* for the second half of the work day" (Marx 1993, 324). In deriving the price of labour from the cost of labour's maintenance and reproduction, Marx is assuming in his structural account that wages had *already* been optimally allocated. While this ideal proposition would need to be embodied in empirical mechanisms which could only ever approximate it (a legal minimum wage, Pasquinelli's machine theory of labour, and so forth), it is important to note that the accumulation of fixed capital is a crisis in Marx's *structural* account, while the optimal allocation of wages is not (or is only a problem in the translation between a structural and an empirical account). I therefore hesitate to think that this structural crisis could be resolved by understanding the technologies of the production process in terms of their optimization of *wage gradients* which had, as part of the schematic assumptions of Marx's early conceptions of surplus value, already been treated as if they were optimally allocated. For this reason, I think that, while Pasquinelli is correct about how the machine theory of value functions on an empirical level, the emphasis on Marx's resolution of the crisis attending fixed capital accumulation should remain with productivity gradients over wage gradients and thus privilege the replacement of technology by technology rather than the stratification of labour on the basis of skill.

on investment and thus the outward expansion of capitalism, this internal limit which living labour tends towards is, as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have argued, perpetually displaced.[14] In this way, the sublimation of the problem of labour replacement itself creates the possibility of repeatedly revisiting that problem anew in successive epochs. It does so by repeatedly restaging the moving limit against which living labour is an infinitesimal, vanishing magnitude. Labour is perpetually disappearing, again and for the first time.

In sum, we can see that the crisis of the accumulation of fixed capital found in Marx's "Fragment" is transformed in *Capital* according to the following logic. (1) Marx's real subsumption describes a process through which the prospective crisis of fixed capital is sublimated by the introduction of relative surplus value, which reimagines technology as a vehicle for capitalist accumulation (an asset) because it allows machinery to capture the relative value in the spread between differing costs of production for a commodity sold at the same price. (2) If real subsumption thus reconceives the accumulation of fixed capital in terms of capitalist accumulation, the development of the technologies of the production process appears to embody the self-realizing development of capitalism itself, validating Panzieri's synthetic proposition linking capital's mode of existence and its technological development. (3) Reconceiving the technologies of the production process as assets that capture relative surplus value requires reconceiving labour as a differential magnitude that tends towards but does not reach 0. (4) Its derivative status is now why labour time *can* be used as the measure of productivity gradients opened up by the replacement of technology by technology. (5) The differential relationship linking the replacement of labour by technology to the replacement of technology by technology thus sustains both a progressive logic in which capitalism is figured as a species of automation that realizes itself in automative technologies and an iterative logic which sees the recurrence of real subsumption as an absolute *and* mobile limit after which capitalism will, again and for the first time, finally have realized itself.

The distance between the crisis of fixed capital in Marx's "Fragment" and the concept of relative surplus value in *Capital* thus both shows us why the threshold state of full automation cannot be a real state within capitalist development (because it is an iterative series of states) *and* why it is repeatedly read as a state (because it must be understood in

14. See Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 463).

relation to a limit that it displaces and recapitulates). While automation is bound up with the question of labour replacement, we can see now that the same subsumptive logic which incites us to think about automation as an explanatory mechanism behind the disappearance of labour is paradoxically the logic that renders an integral, linear understanding of labour's eventual disappearance as an insufficient explanatory device to conceptualize the relationship between technological development and the historical development of capitalism. If Marx thus diffuses the crisis of fixed capital quantitatively—in terms of its ratio to human labour—he does not overcome the contradiction on which it is based. Instead, he reformulates it as a temporal contradiction animating automation itself. Marx's sublimation of the crisis of fixed capital retains the synthetic proposition understanding what automative operations actually do in the production process on the basis of "the form of capital" that they have historically come to embody but does not understand that form as unfolding within a lateral, linear mode of time.

3. The Realer Subsumption: Defining Capitalism's Contemporaries Through Automation

In a passage of "Notes on the 'General Intellect'" that seems now to have a reception history isomorphic to the one it was actually meant to describe, Paulo Virno writes:

> Often in westerns the hero, when faced by the most concrete of dilemmas, cites a passage from the Old Testament…This is how Karl Marx's 'Fragment on machines' has been read and cited from the early 1960s onwards. We have referred back many times to these pages…The history of the 'Fragment's' successive interpretations is a history of crises and of new beginnings. (Virno 1996, 265)

Indeed, as Virno noted already in 1990, it was (and is) a rather ubiquitous gesture to invoke Marx's "Fragment on Machines" as both a prophetic and frankly interruptive moment in his writing on the labour theory of value in the *Grundrisse* and as an analytic adequate to contemporary automative operations. More than the frequency of citation alone, what is important is the fact that the "Fragment" is often the only part of the *Grundrisse* that such conceptualizations deem adequate to descriptions of contemporary instances of automation. For example, Yuk Hui's recent piece, "On Automation and Free Time," notes that in his "Fragment":

> Marx made the case that with investment in automative technology, which he called fixed capital, capitalism is able to reduce necessary labor time and

> increase both surplus labor and value. Marx then speaks of the possibility of sublating surplus labor to free time…*This speculation, in which the type of labor corresponding to a capitalist mode of production disappears, is predicated on new technological developments.* (Hui 2018)

Hui also avails himself of other passages in the *Grundrisse* in order to demonstrate the difference that the "Fragment" makes to their mode of theorization and the conditions they theorize: in light of automative technologies, according to Hui, Marx now speaks speculatively of the disappearance of the very form of labour that the bulk of the *Grundrisse* analyzes. Still other citations of the "Fragment" do not acknowledge its place in the *Grundrisse* at all, treating it as a standalone piece.[15]

Inasmuch as the point of these repeated returns to Marx's "Fragment" is to theorize the differences that contemporary technological life makes, one should not necessarily expect such articles to theorize that (supposedly) no longer extant state which we differ from. While the aim of disinterring and contemporizing the "Fragment" is common-sensical, it renders the return itself counterintuitive: in reading the "Fragment on Machines" as a speculative text about automation, such theoretical attempts effectively import all of the baggage of the labour theory of value in order to posit ritualistically (and, if they are correct, redundantly) that this theory's attendant mode of production is no longer operative in contemporary instances of automation. Reformulating Hui's statement in positive terms, this new type of labour corresponding to new automative technology emerges out of (and not simply *after*) the disappearance of the concept of human labour theorized in Marx's labour theory of value.[16]

Clearly, the passage in the context of the *Grundrisse*'s labour theory of value leads a different life than the existence of the passage as a fragment in the sense that I have described above—and this difference is both the condition and conceit of many attempts to theorize automative technologies.[17] But attention to this strategy of citation demonstrates

15. See, for example: (Terranova 2014, 379–400).

16. Put differently, inasmuch as the labour theory of value does not understand technology itself as labouring (when a capitalist pays for labour, it is human labour) this disappearance could be understood as the way in which "the production process has ceased to be a labour process" (Marx 1993, 693).

17. *Karl Marx's Grundrisse: Foundations of the critique of political economy 150 years later*, an anthology compiled by Marcello Musto, provides an extensive publication history of both Marx's "Fragment" and the *Grundrisse* more generally. The *Grundrisse* consists of eight notebooks which were not published in full until the 1940s, when the Moscow-based Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute released a Russian translation. A full German edition did not circulate until 1953. The first full English translation was released

that, before these theoretical attempts read or misread what Marx supposedly claims in this passage, it is first the performative fragmentation of the "Fragment on Machines" from the rest of the *Grundrisse* which renders the former adequate to contemporary automative technologies. The interpretation that Marx writes a prophetic passage incidentally included in *Grundrisse* is a product of the intra- and paratextual fragmentation of the "Fragment" from the *Grundrisse*. This shared protocol of reciting the "Fragment" indicates not simply the positing that contemporary instances of automation and their technologies are different from or problematize the labour theory of value. Rather, this protocol demonstrates that this difference must be *produced* in running through the trajectory of technological development enabled by the labour theory of value and fulfilling it. It is only after the fact that the content of the "Fragment" becomes radically incommensurable with what existed prior to it, just as it is only after the publication of the *Grundrisse* that Marx's "Fragment" becomes properly fragmentary.

The repertoire of fragmenting the "Fragment on Machines" and the idiom of self-realization that repertoire shares is not particular to the contemporary moment or its instances of automation. When the concept of real subsumption is introduced by the Cyclicists, it is not introduced, following Marx, as a salve for the crisis of the accumulation of fixed capital. Rather, in the time after Marx, real subsumption becomes an emblem of the repetition-compulsion of capitalism's self-realization in automative technologies—a logic that, as I have shown, Marx's own solu-

twenty years later, in 1973. Still, excerpts and fragments of the *Grundrisse* had circulated since 1903, when the "Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy" was released in Germany. An English translation of this fragment was published the next year and another English-language fragment, "Forms which Precede Capitalist Production," was released around the time of the full German translation. Now, there are only three instances prior to the twenty-first century in which the "Fragment on Machines" appears as that—a fragment. Raniero Panzieri was first to occasion its Italian translation in 1964 for his journal, *Quaderni Rossi*. In 1966, Ben Brewster excerpted and translated this passage from the full German edition of the *Grundrisse*, titling it "On Machines." The passage was also included in a collection of excerpts from the *Grundrisse* in David McLellan's 1971 book, *Marx's Grundrisse*, where, ironically, its author understood it as a functional component of (rather than a break with) a more complete theory of the production process than was presented in Marx's *Capital*. For my purposes, what is particularly salient about this history is that the "Fragment on Machines" did not lead a preliminary existence outside of the *Grundrisse* as either an autonomous text or a remnant of an already published work. Its fragmentation was rather predicated on the existence of a 'completed' text from which it was then excerpted and translated. See Musto (2008).

tion already authorizes and incites. When we read across these accounts, the archive itself issues out of anachronism: the iterativity of the Cyclicists critique becomes abyssal—always penultimate and finally fulfilled. We have inherited a century of real subsumptions in which multiple, equally unprecedented stages in the development of capitalism finally realize it again, and for the first time. This dynamic, which I have called "the realer subsumption," describes a temporal rather than a technical antagonism.

Panzieri mobilizes real subsumption in order to demonstrate that, at the turn of the twentieth century, the simple coordination of workers is a nascent mode of automation characterizing the machinery *that is* capitalism, even in the absence of machinery in the production process, the machinery *within* capitalism.[18] Antonio Negri sees real subsumption's fulfillment in automation's 'further' retrenchment in the (re)production of capitalist social relations—what he calls the "social factory."[19] Jonathan Beller begins precisely at the site of the social factory, arguing that real subsumption entails a new, "world-historical" prolongation of work that occurs at the level of the sensorium: "to look is to labour."[20] After the sensorium, what Andrea Fumagalli dubs "life subsumption" indicates an unprecedented stage entailing the automation of cognition—a final development of production under capitalism, once again.[21]

As we can now see, the iterativity of these (re-)readings is an historiographical proposition that recites, in turn, an argument about the progressive intensification of automation from simple coordination, through mechanization, through the automation of social relations, sensoria, and cognition. The technological development of automation is given here as a process of *progressive subsumption*.

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18. See Panzieri (1980, 47).
19. See Negri (1991, 114).
20. "To look is to labor" (Beller 2006, 2, 4, 78). To the degree that this unprecedented development "automates" the subject of capital, it does not extract more work from the worker but posits the sensorium itself as that which labours. See Beller (2006, 66–68).
21. See Fumagalli (2015, 231).

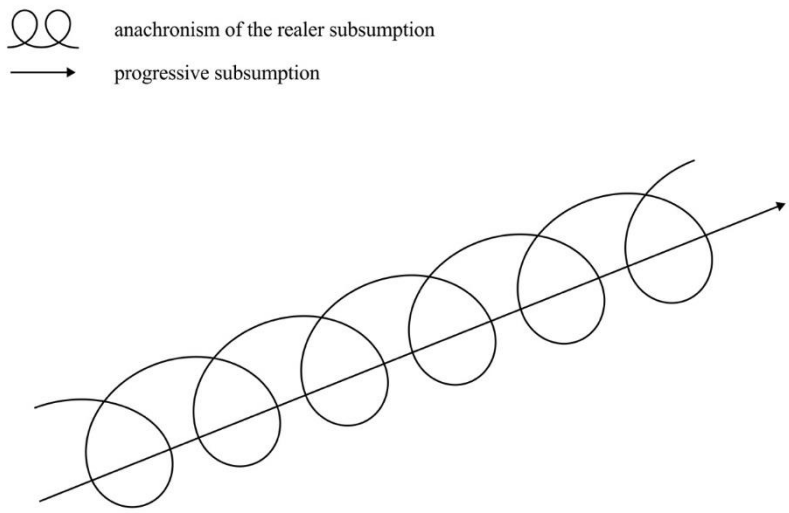

Figure 1. Automation's accumulative conquest of more and more functions in the labour process is derived from the repeated restaging of a real(er) subsumption.

This historical and technological continuity is only possible to the extent that real subsumption operates in relation to a limit or threshold state that is constantly restaged. In that relation, capitalism perpetually realizes itself in instances of automation that it simultaneously yearns for, has been, and already is. Accordingly, we can maintain that real subsumption represents a concrete stage in the development of capitalism only on the basis of an enduring anachronism in which that unprecedented stage is incessantly disinterred and contemporized—for the first time, each and every time. In this sense, *real subsumption has no purely technological conten*t but refers instead to an anachronism recurring within and between almost every technological development throughout the last century. Real subsumption names a process that is, paradoxically, realer and more subsumptive with each repetition: it is a properly temporal contradiction because the incessant restaging of real subsumption as a final and absolute state is precisely why labour's subsumption by technological development is rendered progressive, partial, and mobile.

We could multiply theories of the technological enclosure and foreclosure of the human labourer indefinitely. Such theories are indices attaching the constantly final and therefore always penultimate 'catching-up' of real subsumption to the disinterment and contemporization of a state that had, according to each theory of automation, *really subsumed* the worker. The problem with this logic is that it can posit that living labour really does vanish only on the basis that this disappearance and supersession is incessantly restaged. This dynamic between retention and disappearance is thus not the result of the "functional equivalence" of any given machine system. For the same reason, we should not expect the solution to this logic to be that new technological developments would introduce final functional equivalents to mimic the complete the spectrum of human labour, as in the discourse of full automation. Rather, what this dynamic comes to indicate is labour's *indefinite* potential for narratives of progressive subsumption: living labour is always vanishing, again and for the first time.

4. The Epoch After: A Symmetrical Dynamic of Accumulation and Disaccumulation

In "2. Crisis and Chronology," I showed how technological development came to be defined as capitalism's mode of existence through the way in which Marx sublimated the crisis of the accumulation of machinery by understanding it as a vehicle for capitalist accumulation. In "3. The Realer Subsumption," we saw that once the accumulative dynamic of capitalism is understood according to the accumulation of automative technologies—once the question of the replacement of labour by technology is systematically attached to but made secondary to the question of the replacement of technology by technology—these periodizations of real subsumption iteratively disinter and contemporize *the same epoch* to describe the repeated and further subsumption of human labour. In the Cyclicist archive, the story of capitalist development is thus both self-realizing and accumulative—the intuitive proposition this article began with—but only *because* it is anachronistic—the counter-intuitive proposition I have been elaborating thus far.

My next section introduces the Secularist attempt to critique the mechanism I have called "the realer subsumption." Here I show how the Secularists attempt to overcome this legacy attending Marx's sublimation of the crisis of fixed capital accumulation. I first follow the re-periodizing gesture of the Secularists as it disarticulates the identification of real subsumption, relative surplus value, and automative technolo-

gies. The Secularists argue that we are living in a time after real subsumption because we are living in a time of capitalism's descendancy. Do they thereby also decentralize the explanatory privilege that the Cyclicists give to automative technologies? Is technological development not, in fact, capitalism's mode of existence but only a conjunctural period whose connections cease to define capitalism today? The Secularists base their critique on the fact that a symmetrical dynamic animates capitalism in its ascendancy and its descendancy—a claim that capitalism fails, today, in working as it always has. To that end, I focus here on the dynamics of accumulation in the phase of capitalism's ascendancy before turning, in my subsequent sections, to the dynamics of disaccumulation that the Secularists use to describe capitalism's descendancy. In this section, I show how the interpretation of real subsumption as a stage in an accumulative *past* of capitalism actually further centralizes the place of automative technologies as an explanatory optic on the temporal logic of capitalist accumulation.

There is a parallel impetus uniting how the Cyclicists (mis)read real subsumption and how the Secularists correct the iterativity of this reading: namely, the critical burden of talking about how contemporary capitalism defines an *epochal difference* without, because of that same difference, ceasing to define capitalism as the present mode of production. Inasmuch as their corrective is based on an operation that places real subsumption in the past by re-periodizing the present, the Secularist account of capitalist development entails a methodological commitment to a two-fold proposition: a claim about the difference that contemporary capitalism makes (while still remaining capitalism) is the verso of a historiographical claim about the secular development of capitalism up until that point. The Secularists must thus treat two problems. (1) if capitalism fails today, how does it remain capitalism? (2) If capitalism works as it always has today, why is this period distinct from real subsumption? Put differently, in committing to a two-fold proposition that defines the contemporary moment as an epochal difference *within* the span of capitalist development, the Secularists attempt to avoid both the argument that the contemporary epoch is distinguished from real subsumption because it is no longer an epoch of capitalism *and* the argument that, in remaining within capitalism, the contemporary moment is not an epoch distinct from real subsumption.[22]

22. "This is also a 'late' phase of modernity, during which the modern growth of the industrial proletariat and the technological dynamism of a transformed process of production traverses the arc of real subsumption and passes into a period of relative decline

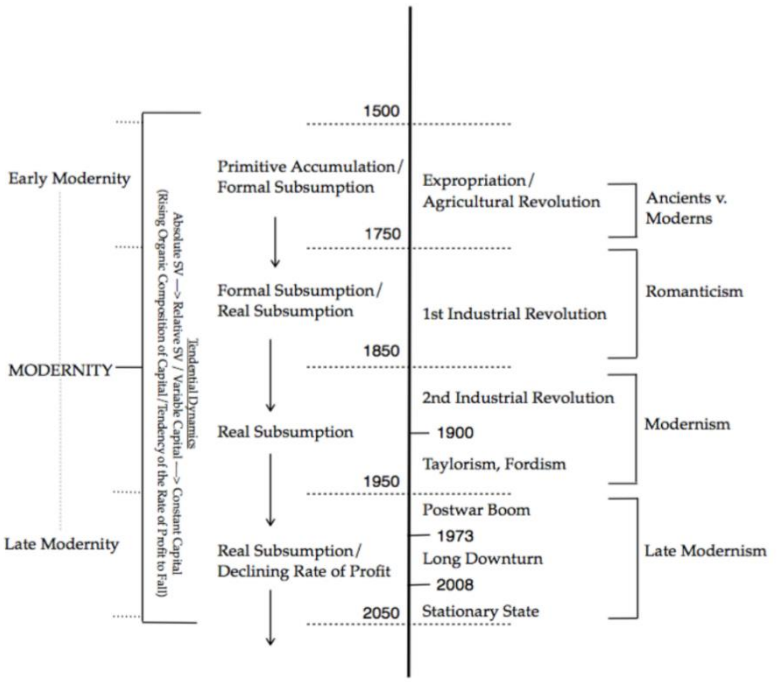

Figure 2: Nathan Brown, "Postmodernity, not yet: Toward a new periodisation"

and stagnation, thus transforming the social dynamics and lived class structure of recent history without thereby breaking its continuity with the structural determinations that brought us to this point. Indeed, the continuing legibility of those structural determinations depends upon our capacity to situate them within the continuing history of modernity, rather than as a radical break with or termination of the latter" (Brown 2018, 20). Benanav's argument turns on the same point but explains its dynamics negatively, by way of historical narrative. He pursues this strategy in order to interpellate Cyclicists (automation theorists) as utopian futurists responding to a dystopian present: "Pointing with one hand to the homeless and jobless masses in Oakland, California, and with the other to the robots staffing the Tesla production plant just a few miles away in Fremont, it is easy to believe that the automation theorists must be right. However, the explanation they offer—that runaway technological change is destroying jobs—is simply false" (Benanav 2020, x). According to Benanav, the present which automation theorists incorrectly explain is dystopian precisely because it has ceased to describe capitalism in its ascendancy, while not ceasing to describe capitalism. "In reality, rates of labor-productivity growth are slowing down, not speeding up…Decades of industrial overcapacity killed the manufacturing growth engine, and no alternative to it has been found, least of all in the slow-growing, low-productivity activities that make up the bulk of the service sector. As economic growth decelerates, rates of job creation slow, and it is this, not technology-induced job destruction, that has depressed the global demand for labor" (Ibid., x).

Brown's article, "Postmodernity, not yet: Toward a new Periodisation" exemplifies this methodological commitment:

> We can only grasp the history of modernity through the moving contradiction of capitalist accumulation if we are willing to think the structural determinations of that history through to the end of capital's tumultuous dynamics, rather than canceling the history of modernity as it moves into a late phase characterized by the achievement of real subsumption: a phase which, we must note, Marx had already predicted within the same historical conjuncture in which he identified modernity with capitalism. The consequences of real subsumption are as much a part of modernity as the process of real subsumption itself, precisely because both result from and inhere within the history of capitalism. (Brown 2018, 14)

Brown's first proposition is that we must understand the contemporary moment as belonging to an arc *within* the history of capitalism and its secular development. Brown then proceeds with a second proposition that periodizes the present in the *time after* of real subsumption. The contemporary period "results in the inception of the long downturn" (Ibid., 22), a period that, according to Brown, will itself terminate in another epoch that he follows Gopal Balakrishnan in naming "the stationary state" (Ibid., 1). Such a state would ostensibly signal "the end of capital's tumultuous dynamics." Here I am not attempting to manufacture a consensus about the exact contours or contents of the epoch(s) that the Secularists place after real subsumption. Rather, what I would like to emphasize is a point of convergence among these efforts of re-periodization: "the long downturn," "the stationary state," "stagnation," and so forth negotiate the difference that contemporary capitalism makes in remaining capitalism through an account of how capitalism *fails to produce profit* by functioning as it always has. Thus, if each Secularist "grants explanatory priority" to the "[secular] movement of capitalist accumulation" (Ibid., 15) in order to periodize real subsumption in the past, what they are required to explain is how that dynamic of accumulation becomes a structural dynamic of disaccumulation. In other words, what aligns Secularists like Benanav, Brown, Balakrishnan, as well as Michel Aglietta and Robert Brenner is a synthesis of the double-proposition: capitalism remains capitalism (thus fulfilling proposition one) *because* the same mechanisms which produced profit in its ascendancy, from 1970 onwards, fail to produce profit precisely by continuing to work as they always have (thus fulfilling proposition two). This allows Brown to re-periodize real subsumption as a definitive event within the global history of capitalism that is essentially "accomplished"

in the 1960s.[23] Thus if Brown is correct, he proves that *contra* the iterativity of the *realer subsumption*, any account which mobilizes real subsumption to describe an epoch occurring after 1970 is essentially confusing cyclical phenomena for secular noumena.[24]

Benanav follows the same choreography as Brown but, as I have noted above, takes aim at automation specifically. Benanav argues that automation discourse is only the cyclical, cultural uptake of a present period of stagnation—defined here as a combination of overproduction and underemployment—which occurs in the time after real subsumption.[25] He explains the conflation of automation and overproduction through an analysis of what happens when productivity increases outpace demand for output. According to him, introducing more efficient machinery into a production process will necessarily displace labour if a firm cannot simultaneously increase the output of that same process (as, logically, less labour will be required to reproduce the *status quo* output).[26] Consequently, the recurring notion that automative technol-

23. See Brown (2018, 13).

24. After the 1970s, the regional oscillation between the extension of the working day and technological advancement plays out the formal and real subsumption of domestic capitalisms *cyclically*. "Here we see the importance of understanding 'formal' and 'real' subsumption not as wholly discrete periods but rather as overlapping processes responsive to the contradictions of accumulation whose movement is neither cyclical or linear but rather tendential, and thus requiring an account fundamentally grounded in the secular dynamics of capitalism" (Ibid., 11).

25. For the first epochal determinant, overproduction, see Benanav (2020, 36–39). For the second epochal determinant, underemployment, see (Ibid., 53–59). "The tendency to economy-wide stagnation, associated with the decline in manufacturing dynamism, then explains the system-wide decline in the demand for labor, and so also the problems that the automation theorists cite: stagnant real wages, falling labor shares of income, and so on. The economy-wide pattern of declining labor demand has not been the result of rising productivity growth rates, associated with automation in the service sector. On the contrary, productivity has grown even more slowly outside of the manufacturing sector than inside of it" (Ibid., 36).

26. "*Employment*, as I use it here, is a measure of the number of workers rather than of hours worked…while *productivity* is the ratio of output to employment. The more output is produced per worker, the higher that worker's productivity level. For any economic sector, the rate of growth of output (ΔO) minus the rate of growth of labor productivity (ΔP) equals the rate of growth of unemployment (ΔE). Thus, $\Delta O - \Delta P = \Delta E$. This equation is true by definition. If the output of automobiles grows by 3 percent per year, and productivity in the automative industry grows by 2 percent per year, then employment in that industry must have risen by once percent per year ($3 - 2 = 1$). Contrariwise, if output grows by 3 percent per year and productivity grows by 4 percent per year, employment will have contracted by 1 percent per year ($3 - 4 = -1$). Since 1973, both output and productivity growth rates have declined, but output growth rates fell much more sharply than productivity growth rates. By the early years of the twenty-first century, productivity was rising at a much less rapid pace than it had during the postwar era" (Ibid., 19).

ogies are directly responsible for replacing human jobs is only a symptom of a more primary secular process whereby increases in productivity are not balanced by equivalent or greater increases in demand for output. Benanav thus shows us why there is no necessary polarity in the correlation between the adoption of automative technologies and the replacement of labour: if the rate of output grows at a pace equivalent to or faster than the rate of productivity, either no labour replacement will occur or employment will actually grow. Conversely, in a period of capitalism defined by stagnation (a period where demand cannot keep up with productivity increases), the surplus labouring populations thrown off by this process are then absorbed into various forms of underemployment: work that does not maintain and reproduce the worker.[27]

In "1. Enduring Automation," I noted that these propositions are, potentially, an indirect critique of my own methodological commitment, which tracks the iterativity of real subsumption as an index of the temporal logic linking automation to capitalism. I said that Marx's introduction of the concept of relative surplus value is precisely what makes it possible to constantly restage real subsumption as an epoch and, as the auxiliary of this possibility, to constantly restage labour's disappearance. In interpreting this legacy, Brown's re-periodizing gesture severs precisely that connection by arguing both that real subsumption is a *phase* that can and has been "accomplished," but likewise that the extraction of relative surplus value is a *dynamic* which can and does continue after real subsumption.[28] Does this imply that automation is understood as a temporal problem only when real subsumption and relative surplus value extraction are mistakenly interpreted as synonyms, thereby erroneously understanding relative surplus value extraction as an epoch rather than a dynamic? This would mean that what I understand as a temporal dynamic proper to automation is merely an historiographical tendency proper to readers who likewise fail to discriminate

27. "[A]s the rate of overall economic growth slows with the dilapidation of the industrial growth engine, the pace of service sector employment growth should slacken, too…It is precisely at this point that the logics of underemployment come into play. It turns out to be possible to lower the prices of some services, and so to expand demand for them in spite of overall economic stagnation, without raising corresponding levels of productivity—that is, by paying workers less, or by suppressing the growth of their wages relative to whatever meager increases in their productivity are achieved over time…The extent to which firms are allowed to take advantage of income-insecure workers to generate immiserating forms of work, then, depends on the strength of each country's labor-protection laws" (Ibid., 60–61).

28. See Brown (2018, 13–14).

between the epoch of real subsumption and the dynamic of relative surplus value extraction. Indeed, that is precisely Benanav's point in describing these collective readings as "automation discourse": because the usage of real subsumption discussed in my previous section would index only the cultural uptake of a given moment's historical conditions without accurately stating those conditions, such commentary would become exemplary, cyclical, and interchangeable.[29] To that end, recourse to the concept of real subsumption outside of these historical bounds is simply inaccurate historiographical work—a theoretical problem with the usage of the concept, not a temporal problem proper to capitalist development.

I explicitly formalize this tacit critique against my own argument as an opportunity to show the stakes of my claim across the subsequent sections of this piece: the Secularists do overcome the realer subsumption but they do not overcome its iterativity. If Brown is able to mobilize the continuation of relative surplus value extraction in order to demonstrate that we have moved *beyond* real subsumption but remain *within* the historical span of capitalism, I will show how my own formulation of that dynamic—the replacement of technology by technology—becomes a symmetrical mechanism that describes capitalism in its descendancy. My argument therefore adopts the periodization of the Secularists but emphasizes that this periodization retains the temporal problem first indexed by the realer subsumption. It retains this problem because the replacement of technology by technology still animates the logic through which capitalist development is periodized after real subsumption. In the subsequent sections of this piece, I will thus argue that the anachronism proper to automation is itself what lets us move beyond the historiographical anachronism animating real subsumption's reiteration. The endurance of this anachronism in the time after real subsumption repeatedly stages the disappearance of labour today as an avatar of capitalist disaccumulation rather than accumulation.

29. See Benanav (2020, 1–13). Of particular interest here is Benanav's claim about the iterativity of automation discourse. For Benanav, "automation discourse" represents a cyclical, repetitious phenomenon—a "symptom" of a real, secular process of stagnation that it discloses as part of a utopian imaginary. Just as Benanav is not particularly concerned with the specific temporal content of future utopias (which are definitionally "timeless"), the specificity of any one *past* future utopia also does not matter vis-à-vis its contiguous claimants. Put differently, temporal distinctions in automation discourse are *discursive*, not historical. See Benanav (Ibid., 5–7).

While Brown and Benanav differently name and hold slightly different ideas of how capitalism ceases to produce value in working as it always has, they make isomorphic arguments about the status of the contemporary moment (as a period operating in the time after real subsumption and a period failing to produce value in operating as it has historically) and they both use isomorphic periodizations until they arrive at that moment (which essentially locate the accomplishment of real subsumption in the 1960s), based as they are on Robert Brenner's book *The Economics of Global Turbulence*.[30] What we might call the Secularists' 'same-difference' approach thus elegantly links the current period of capitalism to its historical development, but it is able to do so because it centralizes the symmetry of the mechanism through which past capitalism produced and accumulated value and through which present capitalism fails to produce and accumulate value.

What, then, is this mechanism of accumulation that, during the 1970s, becomes a mechanism of disaccumulation? We have already seen how Marx used the concept of relative surplus value to transform the accumulation of automative technologies into a dynamic of capitalist accumulation, and later how this transformed real subsumption into an epoch that was *both* accumulative and anachronistic. What happens when, conversely, that same dynamic of capitalist accumulation is used to periodize a time after real subsumption and thus used as an attempt to overcome the iterativity of that concept? To answer this question, it is necessary for me to outline a single principle which would connect the following relationships: (1) what it is about capitalist accumulation in its specificity that permits temporality to become a primary register of its dynamics; (2) why the dynamics of capitalist accumulation seem to play out across a particular order of time; (3) and why the technologies of the production process come to structure the temporal order of capitalist development. To understand these relationships, we must understand the role of automative technologies in transubstantiating the capture of profit into a dynamic of accumulation.[31]

30. See Brown (2018, 12). In the two articles that were published in advance of Benanav's book (which is essentially a combination of those two articles, plus a new introduction and an updated conclusion) in the *New Left Review*, Benanav cited Brenner's text but did not emphasize the identity of their historiographical accounts up until the time after "the long downturn." In Benanav's book, this shared lineage is made overt and explicit in his introduction. See Benanav (2020, x, 36).

31. In an analysis of "Say's Law" of supply and demand, Robert Meister notes that "profit" in itself does not secure the "profitability" of the next cycle of the production process—thus threatening to turn each cycle into a "new gamble." And yet, of course, we know

As we have seen, capitalism produces surplus by leveraging the distinction between how much value an hourly wage can purchase and how much value an hour of labour time produces. This implies leveraging a systematic connection and a systemic difference between (1) the moment of exchange, where the worker's labour power over a given quantity of time is exchanged for a wage and (2) the moment of production, where that labour power is employed—thus Marx's insistence that the real contradiction animating capitalism is predicated on the *relation* between production and exchange, rather than being located in one sphere or the other.[32] Profit describes the *unprecedented* value produced during the time after exchange—produced, in other words, when the worker works past the time necessary to maintain and reproduce that subject. This unprecedented value is no less eminently *exchangeable* and indeed must actually be exchanged to be realized: surplus value is unprecedented value that will have had an equivalent. The real contradiction between capitalist exchange and production is thus that capitalism is a system of equivalence and commensuration whose mode of existence is defined by the production of equivalence-violating surplus. This means that, if it is to be realized, the surplus produced must find commensuration in a future production process and thus displace the internal limit of its past equilibrium.[33] The distinction between how much value an hourly wage can purchase and how much value an hour of labour time produces is thus the distinction between an *actual* quantity (a wage)

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that capitalism does accumulate value and that this describes the way in which capitalism works in its ascendancy—in its self-positing self-realization. "By assuming that increased production is motivated by the desire of individual producers to reap windfall profits if prices do not fall, Say's Law merely proves that if prices fall far enough there cannot be overproduction in the market as a whole. Such an argument implies, however, *that profits for reinvestment and growth are not necessary at the point of market equilibrium*…Say's Law is largely circular insofar as levels of both supply and demand see themselves to be determined by price. Say's Law does not explain the levels of supply, demand, or price, but rather assumes these and explains their interaction at given levels; it does not have explain the cumulative economic value of the national product, but rather assumed this and describes the physics composition of that product at equilibrium. It does not explain how economic demands are themselves created (or changed) through the process of production, but rather assumes this and explains what people want as a response to what they can get, and what they can get as a response to what they want; it does not explain how economic value is accumulated at the end of each production cycle so as to reproduce and expand the market, but rather assumes that each cycle is a new gamble on the level of consumer and producer preferences" (Meister 1990, 257 n. 52).

32. See Marx (1990, 247–269).

33. Therefore, the reason why Say's Law is inadequate here is because it is a theory of homeostasis, not a theory of meta-stable states that crystallize around the *disequilibrium* of the valorization process.

and a *virtual* quantity (how much value a unit of labour time *can* produce, *after* it will have been realized in the future). In the capitalist mode of production, the arbitrage opportunity that exists between what value the wage can purchase and the value a unit of labour time can create is perpetually held open through a temporal distinction between what we currently have (exchange) and what the future owes us (production). This is why temporality becomes a primary register on which the contradiction animating accumulation plays out.

What we can see already is that, inasmuch as the production process is a valorization process (inasmuch as it produces surplus), its temporal logic necessitates that it is already has an accumulative dynamic, not that it is afterwards subject to a distinct or separate accumulative dynamic: surplus value does not become actual value until it enters into exchange again. For Marx, the story of capitalism's accumulative ascendancy is the story of how this futural orientation of the production process links the reproduction of already-created value to the creation of new or unprecedented value that will have been given an equivalent in a later production process. The technologies of the production process are a privileged point of passage between the virtual and the actual because they link the actualization of the unprecedented value that capitalism has produced with the virtualization of the already-extant value which it reproduces. My introduction of these temporal terms certainly does not cohere with the terminology that Marx himself offers, but I will demonstrate why it does cohere with his logic. For Marx, the storage of present value cannot explain capitalist accumulation. The phenomenon of removing capital from circulation—what he calls hoarding—is literally counterproductive.[34] How can we understand the accumulation of past value if it is not removed from circulation? If accumulation is instead predicated on the utilization of present value in a future-oriented production process, then the problem of what I am calling its virtualization emerges: if one can only *preserve* already-created value by consuming and reproducing it in a future production process, how could this magnitude be understood as having a value *now* rather than *later* (and thus potentially not at all)? Because Marx does not understand already-created value to be accumulated through storage but rather through its consumption and reproduction, the dynamics of capitalist accumulation play out across an order of time particular to it.

34. See Marx (1990, 227–231).

In answering how already-created value virtualized in the production process can have an actual value *now* rather than *later*, Marx emphasizes the double-status of the technologies of the production process. On the one hand, these technologies can be sold (albeit likely for a loss) to satisfy the discipline of payments *now*. On the other hand, machinery can be actively consumed or used in the production process. This incremental consumption of machinery (its incremental destruction) fractionally reproduces the value outlaid on it plus the relative surplus value captured by existing productivity gradients *later*.[35] Since Marx understands the production process to be a reproduction process, machinery has a privileged place in the dynamics of accumulation because it doubles as an actual value now and a futural claim on a virtual value. Thought across many cycles of the production process, the surplus created *then* is realized through exchange for machinery which has an actual value *now*, and which will, through leveraging productivity gradients, throw off a greater amount of value *later* (*then* realized in machinery, repeating the series). This futural mechanism of accumulation is thus properly ecstatic: it proceeds *through* itself to go *outside of* itself.

35. Meister's work in conceptualizing an implicit theory of *assets* in Marx's commodity-based labour theory of value has been important for my purpose in demonstrating how the accumulation of automative technologies can be understood as a vehicle for capitalist accumulation. See Meister (2021, 15–44). In using Meister's work to privilege the technologies of the production process as assets in my own argument, an ambivalence arises: to the extent that Marx resolves the crisis of the accumulation of fixed capital by showing how the technologies of the production process do double-duty as assets and commodities, why privilege the technologies of the production process once this asset logic is established? For Meister, the technologies of the production process are just one form of asset among others that could be used as vehicles of capitalist accumulation. See Meister (2021, 23–29). His account thus differs from mine because he understands the privileged place of the technologies of the production process to be a *conjunctural* aspect of accumulation that "could not last" (Meister 2021, 21). Put differently, an emphasis on the technologies of the production process would be an *outcome* of the secular dynamic of capitalist accumulation (since the conjuncture actually existed and, according to Meister, later ceased to exist) but it would not understand the accumulation of automative technologies to be the dynamic itself. Following Meister, disaccumulation could then be interpreted, in part, as the unraveling of this conjunctural relation between the accumulation of capital and the accumulation of automative technologies. In tracking how automative operations are derived from a symmetrical mechanism of capital accumulation and disaccumulation, I depart from Meister not because I disagree that other assets can act as vehicles of capitalist accumulation but because I do not understand the inversion of these two dynamics as indicating a conjunctural relation and its later dissolution. I discuss my own understanding of this inversion *viz.* the declining rate of profit in the final two sections of my text, highlighting how disaccumulation presupposes the same entrenchment of automative technologies within the production process.

The technologies of the production process are thus temporal loci which, in holding the past, present, and future of capitalism together, ensure that its productive mechanism is a reproductive mechanism—and, thus coupled, a dynamic of accumulation. The replacement of technology by technology secures the Secularists' double-proposition in the period of capitalist ascendancy—why we can think of primitive accumulation, formal subsumption, and real subsumption as phases distinct from each other but not distinct from capitalism.[36] There is thus a very good reason to mobilize the technologies of the production process as optics on capitalist dynamic of accumulation, a gesture that is compatible with the Secularist periodization up to and including the point of real subsumption. Inasmuch as the Secularists use the dynamics of capitalist accumulation to periodize an arc of capitalist descendancy in which those same dynamics become mechanisms for disaccumulation, it is clear that this latter story must also include the automative technologies of the production process.

5. Angels of Devalorization: The Automation of Disaccumulation

In "2. Crisis and Chronology," I showed how Marx sublimated the crisis of the accumulation of automative technologies by introducing the concept of relative surplus value. Marx's concept effectively transformed these technologies into vehicles for capitalist accumulation by demonstrating how value could be extracted from the spread between productivity gradients which specified different costs of production for a commodity sold at the same price. I then argued that this reformulated the stakes of automation: relative surplus value extraction rendered the

36. This is not to say that the replacement of technology by technology is equally important in every phase of capitalist development. In the phases of primitive accumulation and formal subsumption, a capitalist looking to actualize the unprecedented value produced in earlier rounds of production might extend total working hours or hire further workers and thus, inasmuch as there is still a further population to proletarianize, indirectly expand capitalism. On the one hand, this does represent a real movement of accumulation as it describes the further capture of what Marx calls absolute surplus value. It does result in an expansion of the total value circulating in exchange. See Marx (1990, 643–668). On the other hand, inasmuch as these periods still understand the reproduction of already-created value to be predicated on its virtualization within a future production process, primitive accumulation and formal subsumption differ from real subsumption to the degree that only a marginal magnitude of the already-created value thus virtualized can also be understood as having actual value *now* rather than *later*. In other words, to the extent that capital accumulates on the basis of the extension of the working day and the proletarianization of further populations, only a marginal amount of that capital would have a value that could be used to satisfy the discipline of payments now because only a marginal amount would be outlaid on machinery.

process of the replacement of labour by technology secondary to the process through which technology is replaced by technology. In "3. The Realer Subsumption," I showed how this legacy likewise reformulated the quantitative problem of the ratio between human labour and machinery as a temporal problem: the iterative occurrence of "full automation" posited capitalism as a species of automation that realized itself in automative technologies. If the technologies of the production process are vehicles of accumulation that attend the historical development of capitalism in its ascendancy, can the process through which technology is replaced by technology also be used to periodize an epoch after real subsumption? Can the replacement of technology by technology also be understood as a self-realizing dynamic of disaccumulation and thus fulfill the symmetrical requirement entailed by the Secularists' double-proposition?

In the diagram I reproduced earlier, Brown calls the period following real subsumption "the Long Downturn," and notes that it is characterized by a tendency towards a "Declining Rate of Profit." I have said that the point of convergence among the Secularists is not a critique of automation specifically but an historiographical gesture which derives a time after real subsumption through recourse to the fact that today capitalism fails to produce profit in working as it always has. A series of distinctions must be introduced here if we are going to transform that empirical fact into a secular dynamic and accordingly formulate disaccumulation as a concept. First, is this failure extrinsic or intrinsic? An extrinsic failure would describe a barrier to capitalist development that affects but is not engendered by its secular dynamics. This conception would propose that capitalism *remains* an accumulative mechanism which today is truncated by the inertia of external forces. I emphasized the symmetry of the Secularist argument in my last section to demonstrate that the declining rate of profit cannot be understood in a classical sense: understood extrinsically, what would periodize the difference that the contemporary moment makes to capitalist development would precisely be something other than the secular dynamics of capitalism. The Secularists thus commit to an understanding of disaccumulation that is intrinsic: if the mechanism of accumulation becomes a mechanism of disaccumulation, it is because it must *actively produce* a declining rate of profit.

This criterion also requires a set of distinctions that will shed light on an ambivalence in the Secularist convergence around capitalism's tendential failure to produce profit in the contemporary moment. For

example, when Benanav identifies the contemporary period with an intrinsic tendency towards stagnation, this could mean two things. Stagnation could be a counterfactual proposition about the *production* of value, which says that more profit could have been produced than was produced, were it not for certain factors internal to capitalist development today. Conversely, to the extent that Benanav uses stagnation to describe not only the hypothetical profit that could have been captured would capitalism have been otherwise but a real loss—that tendency aligns him with Secularists such as Brenner and Aglietta, for whom the declining rate of profit is also based on a proposition about the failed *reproduction* of already-created value.[37]

In this section, I will demonstrate that the replacement of technology by technology becomes a dynamic of disaccumulation and thus a symmetrical means for periodizing the time after real subsumption because it understands the declining rate of profit as a problem with how capitalism's productive mechanism functions as a reproductive mechanism. The replacement of technology by technology describes how capitalism becomes a species of automation that *disaccumulates itself* in and through automative technologies. I thus use "disaccumulation" to formalize the process through which the declining rate of profit plays out between reproduction and production. In the time after real subsumption, automation shows us how the failure to *reproduce* past value becomes an internally *produced* limit on the scope of future value.

Understanding the declining rate of profit as the product of an internal dynamic requires an explanation based on production and the desire for profit, rather than reversion to an explanation which understands the declining rate of profit according to increased costs of production. For Brenner, these internal, vicious cycles are empirical products of the replacement of technology by technology in the period after real subsumption:

> I shall present an account of the long downturn which finds the source of the profitability decline, schematically speaking, in the tendency of producers to develop the productive forces…without regard for existing investments and

37. Benanav's three key coordinates here are underdemand for labour, which he explains through the relationship between global overcapacity and depressed investment. See Benanav (2020, 78). As I will show below, to the extent that Brenner demonstrates that global overcapacity is an interpretive optic on how the replacement of technology by technology necessitates either lowering the expected rate of return on still-competitive technologies of the production process, prematurely scrapping those extant technologies and adopting more cost-effective technologies, or leaving the industrial line entirely, it seems clear that Benanav's notion of stagnation also implies this second valence in which already-created value is not reproduced.

> their requirements for realization, with the result that aggregate profitability is squeezed by reduced prices in the face of downwardly inflexible costs. I shall explain the perpetuation of the crisis by demonstrating that the profit-maximizing steps capitalists find it rational to take in response to the reduction in their profitability not only fail to resolve the problem that brought down profitability in the first place, but have the effect, in aggregate, of making necessary and rational additional responses which further undercut aggregate profitability. (Brenner 2006, 26)

Where relative surplus value allowed for the capture of the value thrown off by the spread between different costs of production of a commodity sold for the same price, Brenner demonstrates what happens when intra-capitalist competition forces the entire industrial line to recalibrate their expected profits based on the introduction of a more efficient technology widening the spread, and to ultimately converge on a lower commodity price:

> Rather than merely replacing, at the established price, the output hitherto but no longer produced by a higher-cost firm which has used up some of its means of production…real-world cost-cutting firms, by virtue of their reduced costs, will reduce the price of their output and expand their output and market share *at the expense* of the higher-cost competitors, while still maintaining for themselves the established rate of profit. (Ibid., 28)

At the sectoral level, Brenner outlines three rational, profit-maximizing responses to the introduction of cost-cutting technology. (1) The established capitalists can scrap their existing technologies and adopt those of the "cost-cutter." (2) The established capitalist can choose to keep their current technologies, write them off as "sunk" value, and profit only from the capital they have in circulation.[38] (3) The established capitalist can leave the industrial line entirely.[39] Because, in each of these scenarios, only the cost-cutting firm can produce the given commodity at a new, lower price while maintaining the *prior* rate of profit (which higher-cost producers could enjoy only before price of the commodity was lowered), "the outcome is an aggregate reduction of the rate of profit in the line" that is not offset by the gains of the cost-cutter.[40] This sec-

38. See Brenner (2006, 29).
39. See Brenner (Ibid., 28).
40. "The line's output now has the lower price imposed by the cost-cutting entrant. Its population consists of the cost-cutting firm making the old rate of profit on the basis of its reduced production costs plus the firms that have failed to cut costs having to take a reduced rate of profit…The outcome is that, rather than leading to a higher rate of profit, the entry of a lower-cost, lower-price producer brings about a lower rate of profit in the line. The line is nonetheless 'in equilibrium' and no further transition can be

toral, internal limit on future profits will iteratively intensify when rational, profit-maximizing competition initiates the cost-cutting replacement of technology by technology once more.

If the replacement of technology by technology secures capitalism's secular ascendance, it does not function otherwise in Brenner's account of the long downturn in the time after real subsumption. His account of the long downturn through the lowering of the average rate of profit is an account of capitalism functioning rationally, capitalism functioning as it always has in its ascendancy. The accumulative dynamic animating the replacement of technology by technology can thus actively produce intrinsic limits to and downward pressure on the rate of profit. Conceived this way, stagnation would describe intrinsic limits to future growth. However, establishing that the dynamic of accumulation can produce limits does not yet establish it as a dynamic that fails to reproduce already-created value. What Brenner's argument narrates from the point of view of the production of new value can also be understood according to changing sectoral expectations about whether its current technologies will still be able to reproduce already-created value. Scrapping existing machinery, treating it as "sunk" value, or abandoning the sector entirely all entail interruptions during which the production process does not reproduce already-created value. Aglietta notes that these potential interruptions are not violations of the logic of capitalism but another valence of the same contradiction between exchange and production that had always enabled it:

> [C]apitalist production is founded on the transformation of conditions of production, whose origin is the creation of new means of production…But there is no reason why the pace of transformation of the productive forces should be adapted to the pace of replacement of fixed capital which satisfies the conservation of the value of constant capital. We are faced here with a contradiction in the most rigorous sense of this term. This is a real contradiction in the process of accumulation, for which there does not exist any 'synthesis'. On the one hand, as capitalism is a commodity-producing society, the reproduction of the conditions of production implies conservation of the value of all commodities in exchange; on the other hand, as capitalism is based on the antagonism of the wage relation, it cannot produce its constitutive relation except by revolutionizing the conditions of production. A contradiction of this kind cannot endure; one of its terms must necessarily destroy the other. It is thus the capitalist relation of production itself which causes the non-conservation of the value of fixed capital. There results a *devalorization of capital*. (Aglietta 2015, 102–103)

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expected to take place for the time being since all of its incumbents are presumably making the best profit rate they can" (Ibid., 30).

In "4. The Epoch After," we saw that the relationship between exchange and production was formalized as a real contradiction in which capitalism was figured as a system of equivalence whose mode of existence was defined by the production of equivalence-violating surplus. The replacement of technology by technology became a dynamic of accumulation because it acted as a temporal locus for *both* the actualization of a virtual magnitude—how much value a unit of labour time *can* produce, *after* it will have been realized in the future—and the virtualization of an actual magnitude—how the value we have *now* is preserved through its consumption and reproduction in a *later* production process. This dynamic thus specified the production process as a reproduction process. Aglietta's complex intervention starts from the fact that, because the reproduction of already-created value is incremental, it must occur across *many* production processes. It is subject to a certain rhythm. Simply put, a certain amount of time (and output over time) is required for a newly-installed technology to both recoup the capital outlaid on it and capture the relative surplus value of existing productivity gradients. This is the colloquial sense in which technology is understood as an investment vehicle, even when it is not directly financed. If the technology in question is not replaced during this time, and if the productivity gradients remain the same, then it will have facilitated the accumulation of capital through the reproduction of already-created value and the production of new value. This is what Aglietta refers to as the "amortization" of the technology in question.[41]

What Aglietta argues is that, although the dynamic of accumulation can be understood according to the replacement of technology by technology, there is no necessary reason why these processes should have the same rhythm. The replacement of extant technology by new technology *before* it has reproduced already-created value is accordingly not an added cost of production but a loss of value that should have, by definition, been conserved. This contradiction is what Aglietta refers to as the "devalorization" of the technology in question.[42] The very fact that

41. See Aglietta (2015, 108).

42. We could call devalorization a type of "realization problem," as Brenner occasionally does in his text. See Brenner (2006, 27, 137). I choose not to use this notion for a few reasons. The first is that its structural relationship to the declining rate of profit is, in my view, unclear across many conflicting interpretations. Because the realization problem is typically thought to occur in the time-lag between when capital is outlaid for production and when the commodities thus produced are (or are not) sold for the assumed monetary value necessary to ratify the expected rate of return on the capital outlaid, the realization problem tends to suppose that profits are indeed *secure* after this problem has been overcome. Because I am interested here in accumulation rather than

the pace of the replacement of technology by technology can match the pace of the reproduction of already-created value—thus becoming a dynamic of accumulation—is also why, when the replacement of technology by technology outpaces the reproduction of already-created value, it becomes a dynamic of disaccumulation. The Secularists maintain a same-difference strategy to the extent that the same temporal loci (the technologies of the production process) are themselves what enable a different temporal relationship between the actualization of newly-created value and the virtualization of already-created value (production and reproduction). Past value virtualized in the production process is not actualized (reproduced) by a future production process. What Aglietta calls "non-conservation" and what I am calling the failure to reproduce this already-created value becomes a limit to the scope of virtual value that can be actualized (produced) in the following production processes. Because of the symmetry of this mechanism, it would be more accurate to speak of 'dis/accumulation' as a pivot that indicates a shift in the modality of capitalist development rather than a shift towards a different system of production.

We have now seen that the replacement of technology by technology is precisely what synthesizes the declining rate of profit both as an internally produced limit to growth and as an internally produced loss of already-created value.[43] How does this possibility secure its own repetition and compounding? Where the replacement of technology by technology posited capitalism as a species of automation that realizes itself in automative technologies, how does the replacement of technology by technology posit capitalism as a species of automation that *devalorizes* itself in automative technologies?

Crucially, Aglietta argues that accumulation is only one of two polarities belonging to the same dynamic, but *not* that the accumulation of capital through the accumulation of automative technologies was only

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a successful cycle of the production process, I emphasize that these realized profits must, if they are going to be the basis of future exchange and thus actually enlarge the system of equivalence implied by exchange, support further production. I believe that devalorization is a better explanatory mechanism for the declining rate of profit because it shows how the replacement of technology by technology can generate an *internal* and *particular* realization problem, and it synthesizes this with an account of how the value already realized in the technologies of the production process can later be subject to disaccumulation.

43. "[Devalorization] is incorporated *a priori* into cost prices. As a result, *an intensification in the pace of obsolescence is translated into a growth of the share of depreciation allowances in overall cash flow,* and correlatively into a relative decline in net profit" (Aglietta 2015, 108).

a conjunctural logic which is now beginning to fracture. This is why the relationship between the development of capitalism and the development of technology is predicated on a "real contradiction." In other words, we are not describing how a mechanism of accumulation that once held the past, present, and future of capitalist development together now begins to unravel. We are describing a mechanism of disaccumulation that holds the past, present, and future of capitalist development together. That it is not the dissolution of a conjuncture is what leads Aglietta to argue:

> [D]evalorization no longer expresses itself chiefly as a brutal interruption of the course of fixed capital depreciation. It forms part of the metamorphoses of value, and is integrated into the financial provisions for replacing fixed capital…This fund is lumped together with the amortization fund, from which it cannot really be distinguished. (Ibid., 108)

In my final section, I use "disaccumulation" to formalize the temporal logic through which the failure to reproduce already-created value virtualized by the technologies of the production process (devalorization) becomes analytically indistinguishable from the incremental reproduction of already-created value through the technologies of the production process (amortization). This indistinction likewise indicates that disaccumulation is *not* the untethering of the production process from the reproduction process. What changes is the fact that disaccumulation now holds the moments of production and reproduction together. This is what it means to say, now quite literally, that a process of descendancy (rather than ascendancy) is what ensures that contemporary capitalism remains capitalism. Devalorization, if it is actually indistinguishable from amortization, must take place in the same productive-reproductive process. Disaccumulation therefore describes the way in which devalorization is produced in the production process and reproduced by the reproduction process. *Consequently, there must be a real sense in which disaccumulation can be said to accumulate.*

6. Automation All the Time

Across "2. Crisis and Chronology" and "3. The Realer Subsumption," I argued that, when Marx sublimated the prospective crisis of the accumulation of fixed capital in *Grundrisse*, he also rendered the problem of the replacement of labour by technology intrinsic but secondary to the replacement of technology by technology. The consequences of this transformation meant that technological development became the accumulative mechanism behind capitalist development—its mode of existence in tending towards real subsumption. In studying how this legacy

was borne by Cyclicists writing after Marx, I demonstrated that technological development was therefore simultaneously conceived as progressive and anachronistic—an iterative process through which labour was constantly staged in its disappearance as the obverse of the way in which capitalism realized itself in an iterative epoch of real subsumption, again and for the first time. In "4. The Epoch After," I demonstrated how the Secularists took aim at real subsumption in order to take aim at its iterativity. Arguing that real subsumption is behind us entailed that the Secularists commit to a symmetrical proposition through which the mechanism of capitalist accumulation that did, eventually, accomplish real subsumption is also the mechanism behind disaccumulation in the time after real subsumption. In "5. Angels of Devalorization," I then showed how disaccumulation could only be conceived as a symmetrical mechanism to the extent that it could be thought according to the same temporal loci through which the technologies of the production process link production and reproduction.

In my conclusion, I propose that the Secularists remain within the legacy of Marx's sublimation of the crisis of fixed capital accumulation between *Grundrisse* and *Capital* and I outline the consequences of that legacy today. I will first show that, if disaccumulation now describes how automative technologies link the production process to the reproduction process, then disaccumulation must itself be said to compound. In other words, if devalorization is a real contradiction, it is because it conceptualizes something other than the simple dissolution of the mechanism that held together production and reproduction in the phase of capitalism's ascendancy. I will then argue that, if disaccumulation does not decentralize the importance of automative technologies as temporal loci connecting the reproduction of already-created value to the production of new value, it is because it instead remaps their temporal logic. Externally, disaccumulation might be viewed as an algorithm which charts out capitalism's eventual end. However, this will give us an inverted and incorrect view of its internal logic. Internally, disaccumulation must rather be understood as process that makes an indefinite claim on the future as the future of capitalism. I conclude by reformulating an argument "3. The Realer Subsumption" made in terms of capitalist ascendancy: today, what automative technologies are actually said to *do* is likewise derived from the anachronistic temporality of capitalist development that the replacement of technology by technology first enables. Automative technologies become functional equivalents of

human labour as an outcome of the process through which the replacement of technology by technology becomes a dynamic of disaccumulation. In restaging labour's repeated subsumption and disappearance today, full automation is the modality through which capitalism iteratively articulates its own indefinite dynamics of disaccumulation.

We saw that the Secularists seem to revive a central concern of classical economics—the declining rate of profit—but reinterpret it as an internal product of the dynamic of accumulation, which therefore becomes a dynamic of disaccumulation. Unlike its classical sense, here the declining rate of profit is due to a real contradiction in which the failure of the replacement of technology by technology to reproduce already-created value is redoubled as downward pressure on the virtual scope of future value. However, "failure" is an unsatisfactory term here, as is "devalorization," if it is taken to mean only that a quantity of value initially created is now lost. It is one thing to note that capitalism is based on an ultimately unsustainable contradiction: a system of equivalence and a principle of conservation coupled with a mechanism which violates equivalence by creating unprecedented value and a principle that commensurates this value in the future. Inasmuch as disaccumulation is now the foundation of an historiographical argument, its own implied terminus seems to radically limit it as a lasting metric for the future history of capitalism: capital cannot, by definition, disaccumulate infinitely even though capital can, by definition, accumulate infinitely. This fact is doubtless the hope of many of the Secularists who periodize the time after real subsumption—that here, on the threshold of capitalism's declension, might be a glimpse of what lays beyond it. Thus Brown terminates on "The Stationary State" (2050) as a period ostensibly outside the bounds of capitalism. Does this render the dynamic of disaccumulation as a prophetic algorithm through which capitalism will eventually price itself out?

We should see, already, that if the present epoch of capitalism seems to double as a proposition about the prospective end of capitalism, then from a temporal perspective it has little in common with the sense in which we have used "epoch" in the phase of capitalist accumulation. Quite the opposite, the accumulative epochs that the current moment succeeds define themselves in terms of the limits they displace rather than engender. The real contradiction animating capitalism is not only that two contradictory logics exist in the same place, at the same time, but that they do so for the same reason. In accumulation, this real con-

tradiction describes precisely why capitalism works—there is no preservation of equilibrium except through its violation; there is no conservation except through addition. The energy of the contradiction itself is what magnetizes and associates its contradictory elements. If the declining rate of profit indicates how disaccumulation disassociates these two contradictory logics, then disaccumulation does not describe a real contradiction. Rather, it describes a contradiction that has *already been resolved* virtually. Thus conceived, this trajectory would follow the gradual uncoupling of reproduction and production precisely because they had already lost their associating principle. The fact that we tend to imagine the "Declining Rate of Profit" as an exceptional epoch that engenders its own anterior limit—a virtual trajectory that only needs to be followed to be actualized—is a sign that we are prioritizing the declining rate of profit as the causal mechanism behind disaccumulation, rather than understanding disaccumulation as the causal mechanism behind the declining rate of profit.

While it may initially sound like a semantic distinction, I propose that the declining rate of profit should be considered as the outcome of a reorganization of the temporal relationship between production and reproduction, not as the causal mechanism behind disaccumulation. This shift would highlight how the real contradiction behind devalorization is not virtually resolved but rather actually *endures* as a contradiction once devalorization is generalized in disaccumulation. As I noted in "4. The Epoch After," the real contradiction associating exchange with production became a modality of accumulation because its temporal logic coupled the actualization of a virtual, unprecedented magnitude of newly-created value with the virtualization of an actual magnitude (the preservation of already-created value through its consumption and reproduction in a *later* production process). Inasmuch as devalorization is another valence of the production process (the other being valorization), what is produced is an unprecedented magnitude that also violates the principle of equivalency in exchange. This is why Aglietta still articulates the real contradiction of devalorization as a violation of the principle of equivalency: *both* the production of profit in an accumulative system (valorization) and the production of loss in a disaccumulative system (devalorization) violate this principle. We are therefore speaking of a form of *negative surplus*—a magnitude that also appears as supernumerary, unprecedented value that will need to be commensurated to be actualized in a future process of exchange.

As we have seen, surplus violates the principle of equivalence by producing more than what was exchanged. Within the dynamic of accumulation, that surplus must then be given an equivalent in a later production process in order to be actualized. Negative surplus violates the principle of equivalence by producing less than what was exchanged. Within the dynamic of disaccumulation, that negative surplus must be given an equivalent in a later production process in order to be actualized. If negative surplus value appears as a declining rate of profit, it is because this magnitude understands its *future equivalent* as *future reparations*—as a reparative magnitude for the already-created value that should have been conserved by right but was lost instead. In "4. The Epoch After," surplus described what the future owed us. Negative surplus describes what we owe the future. This is indeed the colloquial sense in which we are said to realize a loss.

If devalorization *compounds*, thus becoming disaccumulative, it is because what it simultaneously reproduces is the loss of that already-created value which should have been conserved. The dynamics of disaccumulation describe an abyssal modality of time in which the past (reproduction) and the future (production) are drawn together. As the actualization of a virtual loss, negative surplus value *must* be settled by a future equivalent but definitionally *cannot be* without that settlement repeating and compounding the loss. It follows that, when Aglietta says that amortization (the incremental reproduction of already-created value through the technologies of the production process) and devalorization become genuinely indistinguishable, he is also describing the temporal reconfiguration of the relationship between reproduction and production. If, as he notes, the devalorization process allocates a magnitude of surplus for the reparation of past value not reproduced by that same process, then he describes the way in which (1) virtual surplus cannot be fully realized because it is *already* the debt of the past and, consequently, (2) how this magnitude of unrealized surplus used to settle past debt will, at that same moment, be recapitulated as past debt that needs to be settled by another de/valorization process.[44] We posit an increasing magnitude of future surplus value as a virtual equivalent for the debt of the past, but we also posit that the future is the futurity of past debt (the fact that it will remain unpayable). Understanding the declining rate of profit as a symptom of the rearrangement of the tem-

44. See Aglietta (2015, 108, 313).

poral dynamic proper to accumulation shows us why we should not imagine the declining rate of profit to represent a fixed limit and thus concrete endpoint to capitalist development. The declining rate of profit appears, externally, as a subtractive tendency towards an integral limit—the number 0—that likewise puts a number on capitalism's future lifespan. Disaccumulation is, internally, a future-oriented process through which capitalism indefinitely displaces this same limit. Both profit (surplus) and debt (negative surplus) are claims on the future which claim the continued futurity of capitalism.

The indistinguishability of amortization and devalorization is thus the indistinguishability of a profit mechanism and a debt mechanism within the dynamics of disaccumulation. Disaccumulation describes the replacement of technology by technology within a temporal logic in which the past is already a canceled future; the future is an unredeemable past. As temporal terminals, the past and the future threaten to become reversible through a process whose causes are effects and whose effects are causes. Is this the kind of capitalist real time that theorists of automation such as May imagined when he noted that we are on the dis/accumulative precipice of automating "the mental processes that can be made to control automated manual processes"? Capitalism thus appears as a species of automation today not because it is self-propelling but because disaccumulation is *self-causing*. If real time describes the modality of capitalism today, it is because the epoch after real subsumption is not only a different *kind* of epoch from primitive accumulation, formal subsumption, and real subsumption. The time after real subsumption is not, after all, epochal; it is abyssal.

The Cyclicist archive shows us how the replacement of technology by technology in a period of accumulation stages the repeated subsumption of labour and thus constantly asks the question of its full automation. The Secularist archive critiques the iterativity of this question by critiquing the iterativity of real subsumption. Analyzing the role of the replacement of technology by technology in a dynamic of disaccumulation demonstrates that the Secularists do not overcome this temporal problem in overcoming real subsumption. For his part, Benanav attempts to treat full automation today by distinguishing between technological properties that are labour-saving (non-automative) and labour-replacing (automative technologies).[45] If Benanav's goal is to understand how automation operates in a capitalist present defined by stagnation, he

45. See Benanav (2020, 5).

should not be able to maintain both of the following points: (1) any increase in the productivity of the production process that is not accompanied with an equivalent increase in output will reduce the number of workers employed in the production process and (2) we can meaningfully distinguish labour-augmenting and labour-replacing technologies through an analyses of their technological properties.[46] If we could begin from the optic of technological properties and distinguish between labour-saving and labour-replacing technologies using such properties, then Benanav's economic argument would be moot. If Benanav's economic argument is not moot, it is because any technology that increases productivity without increasing output will become labour-replacing.

Accordingly, Benanav's account indexes an undecidable choice between a political-economic theory of stagnation and a media philosophy of labour. If, in his political-economic theory of stagnation, technology is an economic modifier in which all increases in productivity translate more and more into job loss, in his media theory of labour, all technological development is consequently automative development and all technological operations are automative operations. If Benanav attempts to displace and peripheralize automation discourse as an epochal determinant through a political-economic theory of disaccumulation, disaccumulation overcomes automation discourse only to rediscover automation everywhere. Whether a more effective hammer or a fully-autonomous robot, all technology tends to be automative technology under a dynamic of disaccumulation. It is, ironically, the time after real subsumption which fully synthesizes a media theory of automation and a political-economic periodization of capitalism.

The constant restaging of the question of full automation today—a problem of the replacement of labour by technology—is thus the restaging of capitalism's own disaccumulative dynamics—the replacement of technology by technology. This is why I have maintained, throughout this article, the initially counterintuitive proposition that automative technologies are *temporal* registers on capitalist development. Reading across the Cyclicists and Secularists thus demonstrates how automation becomes a technological property in this first sense—a functional equivalent of human labour—because it is derived from a temporal dynamic structuring capitalism's mode of dis/accumulation. Automative technologies work *now*, as automative, because they double as an exhausted call for a reparative magnitude of value, *later*. An economic paradigm in

46. See Benanav (Ibid.).

which any technology is an automative technology is thus only the obverse of an automative mode of disaccumulation in which capitalism 'moves by itself'—which is to say that it operates in and as the absence of its own material supports. Echoing Marx, Benanav is therefore correct that striking workers misidentify automative technologies as the primary threats to their livelihoods. Automative technologies are forebearers of a self-striking out, a capital strike that has already happened.

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Biography

Devin Wangert is an assistant professor of media studies at the School of Advanced Studies, University of Tyumen. He is currently working on his second book, titled *Media Theories of Labour: Automation and the Economics of Exhaustion.*

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Seeing Dialectically: Systemic Crisis and Prognostic Intelligence in John Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea*

Peter Lešnik

"In an age of pressured time, and at the moment of film's obsolescence, the inner, temporal, communal architecture of film spectatorship is reinvented in the art of [public] projection" (Giuliana Bruno 2019, 126).

ABSTRACT: This article explores the potential of multi-channel installations to tackle the aesthetic and epistemological challenges posed to contemporary visual cultures by the scope and complexity of the current systemic crisis. Focusing on John Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea* (2015), the author conceives of the three-channel installation as an audiovisual dispositive geared towards the articulation of dialectical modes of perception and cognition. The first part of the article reconstructs *Vertigo Sea*'s counter-narrative of globalization, highlighting the installation's interest for the mechanisms of social exclusion and erasure that sustain the planetary unification initiated by the advent of European colonialism in the early modern era. In the second part of the article, the author concentrates on the workings of Akomfrah's dialectical montage and on the visualization of the present in the guise of an expansive field of non-simultaneity. Suggesting that Akomfrah's dialectical approach to filmmaking and moving-image exhibition fosters a spectatorial engagement based on forms of prognostic intelligence, the article elucidates the political stakes of *Vertigo Sea*'s response to a crisis that is simultaneously unfolding across social, environmental, and epistemological domains.

KEYWORDS: multi-channel installations; John Akomfrah; Anthropocene; dialectical montage; blackness; globalization; primitive accumulation.

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• *Correspondence:* Peter Lešnik, School of Advanced Studies, University of Tyumen.
• e-mail: peterlsnk@gmail.com
• ORCID: 0009-0001-1950-5231
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It was in response to a deepening sense of crisis and ineluctability that, in the late 2000s, Dipesh Chakrabarty popularized within the humanities the geological notion of the Anthropocene. With "The Climate of History," Chakrabarty called attention to the inextricable entanglement of human chronologies and the deep time of the physical world.[1] At this most basic level, the term Anthropocene can be taken as the master signifier of the current systemic entanglement of crises, the crisis of contemporary political and economic arrangements, with its direct repercussions on the global web of social relations, the ecological crisis threatening life-sustaining systems and the viability of habitats, and the crisis of epistemological certainties propelled by the delegation of intellectual work to machines. In a situation where the environmental conditions of human dwelling are established at the intersection of ecological, social, and technical systems, visual cultures are confronted with the unprecedented aesthetic and epistemological challenges that the extension, scope, and complexity of the contemporary systemic crisis pose to perception, cognition, and the imagination. John Akomfrah's trilogy of multichannel installations focusing on the Anthropocene, and which comprises *Vertigo Sea* (2015), *Purple* (2017), and *Four Nocturnes* (2019), provides an exemplary response to such challenges.

Recognized today as one of the leading voices within the panorama of the British visual arts, Akomfrah built his international reputation on a considerable *corpus* of highly influential audiovisual works made for theatrical release and broadcast distribution between the second half of 1980s and the beginning of the 2010s. Already enjoying a worldwide fame, at the turn of the 2010s Akomfrah impressed an abrupt inversion to the trajectory of his career, returning to the *locus* of inception of his creative activity in 1983, the gallery space.[2] Freed from the material and formal limitations of television and film exhibition, Akomfrah

1. See Chakrabarty 2009.
2. Honored with a knighthood in the 2023 UK Honours list, in 2024 John Akomfrah represented Great Britain at the sixtieth edition of the Venice *Biennale* with a solo exhibition entitled "Listening All Night to the Rain." He made his public debut in 1983, as a member of the Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC), with the first of a two-part gallery installation, *Expeditions 1–Signs of Empire*. The second part, *Expeditions 2–Images of Nationality*, was completed the following year. Akomfrah returned to the gallery space in 2010 with the single-channel video installation *Mnemosyne*. His most recent works for television (*Martin Luther King and the March on Washington*) and the silver screen (*The Stuart Hall Project*) were released in 2013. Since then, and up to this day, Akomfrah has exclusively produced audiovisual works designed for gallery exhibition. Detailed information on Akomfrah's works is available at the website of *Smoking Dogs Films*, the artist studio Akomfrah co-founded in 1997 with other two former members

began experimenting with the design of single- and multi-channel audiovisual dispositives, in a hybrid environment that combines elements of both the gallery's white cube and the movie theater's black box.[3] While his single-channel installations focus on relatively circumscribed topics and develop a more intimate relationship with the viewer, the larger multi-screen format enabled Akomfrah to expand the historical and conceptual scope of his most ambitious projects. Multi-channel exhibition gave Akomfrah the possibility to exponentially increase the complexity and depth of his essayistic practice, allowing him to dispense from an exclusive focus on individual agents and exceptional historical events and to bring into visibility environments, processes, and social and ecological entanglements.[4]

With the trilogy of installations dedicated to the Anthropocene, Akomfrah repositioned his continued interest in the aftermath of European colonialism from a national to a planetary context, while expanding the political focus of his previous works to encompass human interactions with the physical world. In these installations, the question of blackness, which chiefly animates Akomfrah's previous essay films, is explored in relation to the asymmetrical impact of the climate crisis and

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of BAFC, Lina Gopaul and Devid Lawson. See, https://www.smokingdogsfilms.com/projects/

3. Throughout the article, I define Akomfrah's installations as audiovisual dispositives. The notion of dispositive was originally introduced by Jean-Louis Baudry in 1970, with the intention of redirecting the focus of film theory from the textual fixation of semiotics and the ontological questions based on the assumed properties of cinematic images to an understanding of the cinematic experience, the effects produced by the cinematic medium on viewers, and the perceptual and cognitive operations that the medium enables viewers to perform through their interaction with technically mediated images. In the broadest sense, an audiovisual dispositive links together three elements: a technical apparatus for the production, processing, and exhibition of moving images (the camera, the projector, the screen, etc.); the content and formal features of the images; and the sensorial conditions determined by the material circumstances of the viewers' emplacement vis-à-vis the images. I use the locution dispositive instead of device, to signal the distinction between the dispositive and a mere technical apparatus. Also, I follow Maria Tortajada and François Albera's suggestion to translate Baudry's French "*dispositif*" with the corresponding word in English, to avoid confusing Baudry's concept with the notion of *dispositif* elaborated by Michel Foucault, which is commonly left untranslated in English editions of his work. See Baudry 1975. For a convincing argument in favor of the use of the term dispositive in English, see Albera and Tortajada 2015, 21–44. For a broader overview of the historical vicissitudes and the theoretical value and limitations of the concept of the dispositive for a theory of audiovisual media, see the essays collected in Albera and Tortajada 2015.

4. On the essayistic tradition within documentary cinema see the pioneering contributions of Rascaroli 2009 and Corrigan 2011. For a contextualization of Akomfrah's work within the essayistic tradition, see Alter 2018, 272–87.

the intensifying effects of prolonged and compounded social and environmental violence. In a 2017 interview for *The Guardian*, Akomfrah introduced *Purple*, a six-channel video installation dedicated to the cumulative effects of climate change, alluding to the consequences of the racialized logic sustaining the differential degrees of exposure and vulnerability to environmental violence:

> In a way, this is a person of colour's response to the Anthropocene and climate change, which is not just a white, European fixation, though it is often presented that way. When I stand on a street in Accra, I can feel that it is a city that is literally at boiling point. It is way hotter than it was in the 1960s or even the 1980s. We need to start looking at climate change in radically different ways, not just as part of a western-based development narrative. It's a pan-African concern of great urgency, but how long it will take people to see it as such is a whole other problem. (O'Hagan 2017, np)

With *Purple*, the aesthetic and conceptual complexity of Akomfrah's multi-channel installations probably reaches its highest point. Through the imposing material architecture of the six-channel audiovisual dispositive and the incorporation of heterogeneous footage shot in ten different countries and across four continents, *Purple* conveys with intense sensory immediacy the colossal proportions of the global environmental crisis. Ian Bourland defines it as "arguably the most persuasive work ever produced on the violent course of the Anthropocene" (Bourland 2017, np). He emphasizes the novelty represented by the installation's expanded, systemic historical perspective within Akomfrah's *corpus*: "While Akomfrah's earlier work tended towards the entanglements and antagonisms of human culture, *Purple*, scored in soaring and elegiac tones, bores into the collective psychosis of modernity writ large" (Ibid.). Calling attention to the novelty of the work, Bourland does not fail to notice, however, *Purple*'s indebtedness to the first installment in the trilogy, *Vertigo Sea*. In a 2017 interview with Gareth Harris, Akomfrah himself declared that "without the concerns that infused and informed *Vertigo Sea*," he would not have been able to make *Purple* (Harris 2017, np). He further explains: "I think *Vertigo* gave me a sense of the way different themes can be brought into a conversation. […] Trying to find a way of getting them all to speak in relative harmony is the thing that *Vertigo* has licensed me for" (Ibid.). By focusing on *Vertigo Sea*, in this essay I will elucidate the role of the installation in laying out the thematic and aesthetic foundations for the inquiry into the contemporary crisis pursued across the whole trilogy. As Bourland notes with reference to *Purple*, through these installations, Akomfrah is "trying to find

layers that were, as he says, 'always already there,' but of which we are only partially aware" (Bourland 2017, np).

In the first part of this essay, I will concentrate on *Vertigo Sea*'s mapping and genealogical reconstruction of the contemporary crisis, which the installation traces back to the predatory system that spread out of Europe at the inception of the modern age. In doing so, I will show that the emphasis put on oceans and seafaring allows Akomfrah to articulate a coherent, systemic perspective on the integrated global infrastructure of domination organized around the accumulation of capital. The installation's counter-history of globalization envisions the terrestrial unification of the planet as the manufacture of a paradoxical world, whose unity must be perpetually reconstituted by disposing of parts of the whole. In *Vertigo Sea*, race and blackness mark the exclusion from a world that is no longer conceived as the home of the human species in its entirety. My reading will draw attention to the fact that, while its genealogical reconstruction positions the production of blackness at the heart of the global system of capital accumulation, in *Vertigo Sea*'s mapping of the contemporary crisis, the fact of blackness—in Frantz Fanon's famous formulation—stretches out into new social domains, as the installation creates multiple connections across heterogeneous contexts of dispossession, expulsion, and de-realization.[5] In the second half of the essay, I will examine the installation's engagement with aquatic ontologies, in order to show how *Vertigo Sea* can mobilize an alternative set of aesthetic and epistemological principles to tackle the key contradictions of our age, by resorting to a paradigm of flux, interdependence, and non-linearity. As a machine capable of bringing into visibility the latency of the past and of future possibilities, *Vertigo Sea* maps the present in the guise of a systemic field of non-simultaneous temporalities, multiscalar entanglements, and virtual connections. Rejecting the apocalyptic tone of most audiovisual works dealing with the contemporary social and environmental crisis, the audiovisual dispositive of *Vertigo Sea* is designed to foster a prognostic intelligence, which urges the viewers to envision an alternative future to the accelerating catastrophe of our times. Ultimately, I contend that the crucial significance of *Vertigo Sea*—and of Akomfrah's trilogy more in general—lies in its vigorous invitation to imagine, against all odds, the possibility of a world and a future that everyone can share.

5. See Fanon 2008, 109–140.

The Ticking Clock of Globalization

Initially exhibited at the 2015 "All the World's Futures," the fifty-sixth edition of the Venice *Biennale* curated by the late Okwui Enwezor, *Vertigo Sea* offers a complex examination of the contemporary global landscape of crisis. The installation is an ingenious audiovisual dispositive, which comprises three large rectangular screens of equal size, aligned horizontally at a short distance from one another inside a darkened room. Through the angular positioning of the two lateral screens, a slightly concave semicircle is created in front of the seating area destined to the viewers, with the 7.1 surround audio system intensifying the immersive quality of the image display. Akomfrah pairs the epic proportions of the three-channel HD color video installation with a patent anti-monumental approach to the history of Western modernity and globalization. Yet, while close attention is frequently given to the specificity of minute detail, the installation strenuously pursues, by means of editing and the juxtapositions of sounds and images, an incessant reconstruction of systemic interconnections. As images alternate and juxtapose on the three screens in rapid succession, the soundscape explicates a dual function, by serving as a connective tissue and by providing points of anchorage. During the engagement with the densely layered and incessantly transfroming audiovisual fabric of the installation, viewers experience a perceptual and cognitive vertigo that fulfills the promise encapsulated in the title of the work.

As it juxtaposes a rich variety of audiovisual materials, *Vertigo Sea* constructs historical links and conceptual resonances, to develop an inquiry into the roots of the twenty-first-century deadlock. The material is organized into eight main sections, followed by the closing credits, while the beginning of each section is marked by the appearance of an intertitle on the central screen. On the visual level, the installation incorporates archival still and moving images, original materials mostly consisting of meticulously staged *tableaux vivants*, and a copious amount of footage produced by the Natural History Unit of the British Broadcasting Corporation. An equally composite and layered soundscape matches the heterogeneity of the images. The soundtrack combines sparse musical accompaniment and sound effects, direct sound associated to the BBC footage of marine life, and several voice-over inserts. These include, most recognizably, excerpts from BBC news broadcasts and the audiobooks of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), Heathcote Williams' *Whale Nation* (1988), Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke*

Zarathustra (1883–1892), and John Newton's *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade* (1788). Each section of the installation explores a specific perspective on the historical role of the sea in shaping global social arrangements since the early modern era. When joined together, the eight sections form an overarching constellation, which is both a conceptual mapping and a genealogical reconstruction of the total crisis of our age.

Vertigo Sea opens by positioning the viewers in a state of anxious anticipation. A subtle use of sound allows Akomfrah to convey with dramatic immediacy an undefined sense of urgency. Before the appearance of the images, with the three screens displaying a dark blue background, the sound of a ticking clock fades in. As it intensifies and continues unfolding with mechanical indifference, the title "Vertigo Sea" appears on the central screen, replaced at a short interval of time by the intertitle announcing the beginning of the installation's first section, "Oblique tales on the aquatic sublime." The whistling noise of an electronic device is slowly overlayed onto the rhythmical punctuation of the clock's ticking. The increasing volume and the high pitch of the distorted artificial sound amplify the disquieting feeling produced by the unceasing march of the clock. Provocatively, *Vertigo Sea* begins with the reminder that we are running out of time. The expectation of an undefined, imminent threat thus infuses a visceral sense of urgency into what will unfold on the screens in the subsequent forty-eight minutes.

With a gong chime accompanying and accentuating the startling effect of their appearance, the first set of images effectively illustrates the tension between acceleration and stasis, weightlessness and gravity, that lies at the heart of the conceptual and affective economy of *Vertigo Sea*. Displayed onto the central screen, a sepia-toned still image with the close-up of a black man's hand holding a pocket watch seemingly anchors the ticking sound that opened the installation. Although it allows to locate the sound source and dispel the eerie effect of disembodied acoustic phenomena, the matching of image and sound creates a pronounced tension between the stillness of the picture and the emotionally charged soundscape. By running counter to the kinesthetic effects of the sonic experience, the arresting quality of the image amplifies the emotional impact of the ticking sound. At the same time, the juxtaposition of sound and image produces an uncanny feeling, as we listen to the mechanism of a clock whose hands we can see are deadly still. Sensorial and affective collisions of this kind reappear throughout the work, for

Vertigo Sea repeatedly juxtaposes the urgency conveyed by a bewildering sensorial stimulation and the suspended temporalities of abandonment encapsulated in some of its most captivating images.

While the viewers are invited to indulge on the picture displayed at the center of the installation, the images on the lateral screens subtly announce *Vertigo Sea*'s systemic vantage point on the contemporary crisis. Both lateral images are aerial views of the ocean, and in both shots the camera gradually pulls out to a longer shot scale. In spite of their formal commonalities, these views seem to suggest two contrasting interpretations of the human relationship to the sea. On the right-hand screen, the ocean is presented in its primeval aspect. We see what appears to be an aerial or a satellite image of the sea, with scattered clouds disrupting a clear view of the water. This shot brings together the sea and the sky, the domains from which land-dwelling humans have traditionally been excluded. Largely withdrawn from human experience, until recently these spaces marked the boundaries of a non-human beyond. In his analysis of the ocean through the lens of elemental media philosophy, John Durham Peters suggests that it was precisely because of its close association with the sky that, until the inception of the Early Modern era, the sea was granted a sublime status. As he recalls the ancient belief about dolphins transporting the souls of the dead, Peters notes that "[m]uch of the sublimity of whales and dolphins comes from their inhabiting a zone parallel to the stars: like angels, dolphins haunt us as beings that dwell in sublime ethereal or maritime climes, in contrast to sublunary humans" (Peters 2015, 71).

Formally speaking, the shot on the left resembles the image appearing on the right-hand screen, but in this case a boat is visible at the center of the frame. This aerial view thus repositions the mythical qualities of a conventional aquatic imaginary within the material context of global infrastructural networks of navigation. The vessel inscribes the ocean in the domain of history. Metonymically, the boat points at seafaring and the taming of oceans through navigation. In his influential study of cultural techniques such as eating, drafting, or the production of the sign-signal distinction, Bernhard Siegert affirms that the ship is not a simple tool but a second-order cultural technique, as "it transforms the sea, hitherto devoid of any sense of place and history, into something inscribed by both" (Siegert 2015, 70).[6] Since time immemorial, nautical

6. Thomas Macho distinguishes between first-order techniques, such as cooking or tilling the land, and second-order techniques, which entail symbolic work, as is the case with

techniques significantly contributed to shape the self-understanding of humans as cultural beings, that is, beings which transform the environments they inhabit through their technical imagination. Due to its capacity to produce space out of emptiness, Siegert notes, seafaring precedes all other techniques including writing as the "original cultural technique of hominization" (Ibid.). Whereas the image projected on the left screen of *Vertigo Sea* may, for the moment, only recall this premodern, broad anthropological understanding of navigation, subsequent references to the nautical world will gradually center the thematic focus of the installation around European colonialism, taken as a decisive turning point in the long history of seafaring. Linked to archival and fictional evocations of European conquest and predation, throughout the installation nautical references will progressively define the ship as a key logistical medium of colonization and capture.[7]

Although the colonial context remains implicit if we pay attention to the lateral shots exclusively in terms of their subject matter, the formal features of the pictures provide an immediate hint at the temporal extension of the installation's genealogy, by pointing towards the breaking point of modernity. The aerial views of the ocean recall the tradition of pictures composed from a bird's eye perspective, which began appearing in late-fifteenth-century maps, such as those contained in Hartmann Schedel's 1493 *Nuremberg Chronicle*. The noticeable placement of views taken from a disembodied perspective at the outset of the installation foreshadows *Vertigo Sea*'s self-reflexive interest in the role of images and visual technologies within the epochal, planetary reconfiguration of the human experience initiated during the early modern era.

Peter Sloterdijk connects the early-sixteenth-century craze for transcendental points of view to the epistemological revolution sanctioned by the first circumnavigation of the planet, completed in 1522. While the most direct material consequences of the *Victoria*'s return to Spain were the progressive extension of international markets and the rise of the European colonial system, on a symbolic level, the circumnavigation

writing and painting. See Macho 2013. In the introduction to *Cultural Techniques*, Siegert challenges the sharp distinction proposed by Macho and calls for the development of a processual rather than an ontological definition of the two terms, "[i]n order to situate cultural techniques before the grand epistemic distinction between culture and technology" (Siegert 2015, 13).

7. In the context of the studies on the infrastructural aspects of media, Liam Cole Young defines the ship, along with the document, as the paradigmatic medium of European colonization, for it allowed modern Europeans to reconfigure the sea in the guise of land, making it measurable and mappable, and thus available for exploitation and conquest. See Young 2021.

came to signify the overcoming of humanity's ancestral earth-bound condition. The "*mappamundo*" is, according to Sloterdijk, the emblem of this metamorphosis. With the manufacture of terrestrial globes finding a new life as an effect of the Earth's circumnavigation, these miniaturized replicas of the planet would introduce modern Europeans to the idea of watching the world from a point of view external to the planet itself: "The map absorbs the land, and for imagining spatial thought, the image of the globe gradually makes the real extensions disappear" (Sloterdijk 2017, 28). At the same time, modern Europeans would learn to identify themselves with abstract points localized inside the mathematized space of a technical projection. This is why the *mappamundo* should not be treated as a simple object, but rather as an optical device that produces aesthetic operations having concrete epistemological effects. By enabling the virtualization of the world and the self, the *mappamundo* provided the psychological and epistemological foundation for the processes of de-realization that would sustain the constitution of a unified world where "[a]ll that is solid melts into air."[8]

Vertigo Sea's pairing of the bird's eye perspective with the image of a vessel can be thus read as an oblique allusion to the entanglement of optics, political economy, and colonial conquest underlying the long history of Western modernity. In his most recent book, *Projecting Spirits* (2022), the media archaeologist Pasi Väliaho emphasizes the centrality of optical projection to the epistemological revolution of the early modern era. Visual devices such as the camera obscura and the magic lantern eloquently spoke to a new sensibility for the contingent, the accidental, and the unforeseen. With the affirmation of financial capitalism in the late seventeenth century and the "virtualization of things and beings into the anticipated realities of future markets," Valiäho shows how projection supplanted divine providence as the hegemonic governmental paradigm of Western modernity (Valiäho 2022, 28). The cognitive task of projection was that of virtualizing the real, of endowing solid things with plasticity and a propensity for metamorphosis. By substituting the actual for the possible, projection ultimately aimed to subject contingency to the speculative designs of capitalist rationality. Valiäho observes that, in England, by the beginning of the eighteenth century, "optical media became cognitive relays allowing the subsumption of material relations under abstract and invisible, noetic, and even imaginary

8. The reference is, of course, to Chapter One of Marx's and Engels' *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848): https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm

designs, facilitating thus the development of a new economic concept of the world as *tabula rasa* for man-made projections" (Valiäho 2022, xiv). Highlighting the operational quality of aerial images, *Vertigo Sea* hints at the role played by optical media and technologies of vision in the long history of globalization.

The web of meanings and conceptual associations emerging from the analysis of the few aural and visual images that inaugurate *Vertigo Sea* gives a concrete sense of the complexity of the work. By looking at these images, we can also get a better sense of the functioning of Akomfrah's three-channel audiovisual dispositive more broadly. Whereas the static close-up displayed on the central screen constitutes a point of anchorage, the views of the sea appearing on the lateral screens mobilize this gravitational center, by expanding its contextual implications. Pulling out to a longer shot scale, camerawork in the images appearing on the lateral screens highlights, perceptually and kinesthetically, the movement of abstraction that the installation performs on the image of the man holding the clock, by positioning it in relation to the oceans, seafaring, and the operations of optical media. By means of the perpetually shifting associations produced by the matching of images and sounds, the installation constructs successive points of attention and continuously repositions them across a range of interconnected contexts. Within the expanding framework suggested by the lateral views of the ocean, the intense sense of urgency associated with the mysterious picture displayed on the central screen reverberates across the broader historical and conceptual constellation of *Vertigo Sea*.

While the first section of the installation resolutely positions the viewers in the context of a precarious present, *Vertigo Sea*'s second section—"Kiss me with rain on your eyelashes: Arran | 1832"—begins by outlining the historical background of the contemporary crisis. As it develops the analysis of the present in a genealogical direction, *Vertigo Sea* constructs a counternarrative of the long history of globalization. The installation invites us to consider globalization as the constitution, for the first time in human memory, of a unified social world extending across the whole planet. The emergence of a planetary consciousness represents the leading motif of "Kiss me with rain on your eyelashes," which opens with early-twentieth-century archival footage of departing transatlantic vessels. Displayed on the central screen, we first see a series of two consecutive shots, taken from land, of a ship leaving an overcrowded dock. These are followed by a companion shot picturing a departure, although this time the camera is positioned on board the ship

itself. Marking the beginning of the installation's genealogical descent, this shrewd visual transition prompts viewers to embark on a journey across space and time.

The genealogical reconstruction pursued in the second section of *Vertigo Sea* is marked from the outset by a pronounced ambivalence. On the one hand, the inclusion in this section of the lush BBC footage picturing dolphins and seagulls freely roaming waters and skies seemingly points towards the liberating aspects connected to the overcoming of an earth-bound condition.[9] From this perspective, transatlantic ships can be seen as enablers of unrestrained journeys and multipliers of possible horizons. The archival footage presents these departures as privileged symbolic moments: a standing crowd, waving hands, salutes the vessels launched towards the ever-repeating enactment of a distance-breaking ritual. On the other hand, as it extracts these images from their intended context, *Vertigo Sea* pairs them with lateral *tableau* shots of desolated landscapes and the sound of strong, whirling winds, distorted artificial noises, and, significantly, the return of the ticking clock heard at the beginning of the installation. Disentangled from the celebratory framework promoting the marvels of technology and empire, the images of departing vessels are here mobilized in the context of a symbolic universe tainted by mourning and loss.

The vast historical picture traced throughout *Vertigo Sea* primarily revolves around the ruination left behind by Western modernity. Images of wreckage multiply in the second section and will reappear across the whole installation. Several *tableaux vivants* with Victorian-age settings show a variety of objects connoting Western modernity—clocks, domestic furniture, compasses, lamps, strollers—scattered around desolated coastlines. Among these *tableaux*, one stands out as particularly emblematic, for it shows a multitude of broken clocks that seem to suggest the fraudulent nature of modern time and Western progress. By shifting attention from the point of departure to the destination, these *tableau* shots invert the perspective on transoceanic navigation encoded in the archival images of departing vessels. Seen from the shores of the colonies, the march of Western modernity appears as a progressive process of devastation. The perspective of the colonized subject is that of

9. An association that is reinforced, at the conclusion of "Kiss me with rain on your eyelashes," through the inclusion of an excerpt from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in which Friedrich Nietzsche develops a reflection on wandering in terms of an interior journey.

Walter Benjamin's angel of history: in the chain of events that colonialists call progress, they can only discern "one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage" (Benjamin 2006, 392).

The awareness of the duplicitous lines along which the unification of the world has been pursued by Western modernity is most clearly crystallized, within the installation's second section, in the images of an early home movie, probably dating to the second quarter of the twentieth century. Within a static medium shot, we see three white children playing with an assortment of toys in a middle-class home interior. Among the toys on display, a rag doll of a black man catches the viewer's eye. While it signals the emergence of the consciousness of a unified planetary existence, as a condensed, crude image of reification and commodification, this doll also reveals the racial divisions and hierarchies on which the European colonial powers built their vision of a planetary unification. The installation reminds us that, whereas the globalized world is for some a world without frontiers, for the vast majority of the planet's population globalization has historically meant a condition of unwarranted exposure.

Taking a polemical stand against the historical amnesia of popular and academic discourses on the topic, in *In the World Interior of Capital* (2005) Sloterdijk defines globalization as a project of planetary unification pursued under the logic of capital accumulation. He situates the unfolding and accomplishment of this project between two temporal extremes, the spread of European oceanic expeditions in the second half of the fifteenth century and the conclusion of the Second World War. According to Sloterdijk, we can only make sense of the political *impasse* of our times, by looking at it through the lens of the founding aspirations that propelled the process of globalization. He crucially remarks that, an ever-growing production of vulnerabilities is the unavoidable correlative to the global unification achieved under the logic of capital. "Even though the scattered peoples of the world have, until recently, existed in their endospheres," Sloterdijk writes, "they are forced by the distance-destroying 'revolution' of modernity to admit that from now on, because they are reachable by mobile others, they live on one and the same planet: the planet of the unconcealed" (Sloterdijk 2017, 140). Throughout *Vertigo Sea*, Akomfrah emphasizes the link between the unification of the world and the intensifying production of social and ecological vulnerability.

A World That Is Not One

If we now return to the installation's opening section and the image of the man holding the pocket watch, we may be in a better position to appreciate its significance and function. While the pictures initially displayed on the lateral screens prefigure the spatial and temporal extension of the installation's genealogical excavation, the captivating image appearing on the central screen functions as a point of convergence between synchronic and diachronic perspectives. The view of the man running out of time subtly positions the question of race as *Vertigo Sea*'s key vantage point on the aftermath of the colonial adventure that prompted the creation the globalized world of our times. Undertaking the two-fold challenge of mapping the systemic crisis of the present and illuminating its historical and political roots, *Vertigo Sea* reconstructs the contours of a paradoxical world, of an internally fractured social whole and a totalizing system of incorporation founded on the production of disposable human surpluses. A world where blackness is the epitome of human disposability.

To map the historical present, *Vertigo Sea* adopts a symptomatic approach. In "Oblique tales on the aquatic sublime," the installation looks at contemporary migrations as a paradigmatic social product of the operations of power prevailing across the interconnected world of capital. The soundscape of this sequence is thematically organized around two sets of vocal inserts concerning contemporary trans-Mediterranean crossings. In the first half of "Oblique tales on the aquatic sublime," we hear the testimonial account of an African migrant, while in the second part we listen to a set of radio news reports on migratory flows. A series of four *tableau* shots picturing motionless black men punctuate the critical moments of the events recalled in the radio broadcast. In the first excerpt, the speaker connects migration to a leap into the unknown: "There were twenty-seven of them on board. None have been to sea before. They came from all across the [African] continent, travelling northwards towards the cost." The tone of the chronicle shifts from the biographical to the statistical, with the second vocal insert: "Numbers reported dead or missing here this year are the highest ever, nearly five hundred. Last month, on one day, fourteen dead bodies were found floating in the sea." Just before the appearance of a captivating *tableau* with the image of a black man staring motionlessly at a TV screen covered in static, we hear the beginning of the last excerpt: "The migrants' boat started taking on water…" The speaker continues: "The people's traffickers told them that the crossing would take less than an hour. The pilot swam back to shore, they headed on."

With the progression of the journalistic chronicle, the focus of the nature film footage sampled by Akomfrah gradually shifts from animal life—with images of turtles, shoals of fish, and water birds predominating in the first half of "Oblique tales on the aquatic sublime"—to the majestic proportions and the overwhelming force of oceanic currents and waves. Then, in conjunction with the beginning of the last excerpt from the news broadcast, the prevalent point of view on the ocean changes, as shots taken from underwater begin to significantly outnumber the views taken from above the surface of the sea. Through sensorial, kinesthetic, and affective means, *Vertigo Sea*'s first section progressively articulates a viewing position capable of conveying the radical precariousness of the migrants' lives as an embodied experience. Immersed into a deluge of sound and images, the viewer experiences the installation as someone who must learn to navigate the perilous territories of the unknown.

Emphasizing the growth of global migratory flows and the expanding production of human superfluity, "Oblique tales on the aquatic sublime" positions the migrant at a point of convergence between the ontological derealization of blackness and the ongoing expansion of the condition of vulnerability that Sloterdijk associates to the dwelling on "the planet of the unconcealed." To be made superfluous is to be stripped of the right to have rights, a condition whose historical embodiment is the slave. The focus on contemporary migrations from Africa highlights the perniciously resilient global afterlives of trans-Atlantic slavery. As it superimposes the experience of contemporary migrants and snapshot of black lives, the installation not only connotes blackness as the cardinal marker of human disposability, but it also hints at the historicity of blackness itself. As Bryan Wagner incisively puts it, "Africa and its diaspora are much older than blackness. Blackness does not come from Africa. Rather, Africa and its diaspora become black at a particular stage in history" (Wagner 2009, 1).

While blackness does not predate the Atlantic Slave Trade, it survived the abolition of slavery.[10] *Vertigo Sea* tracks this survival, by calling attention to the racial lines determining the degree of exposure to contemporary forms of social and environmental violence. As a continu-

10. Whereas there is an overwhelming consensus concerning the emergence of blackness in conjunction to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Frank B. Wilderson III points out that the racialization of slavery was first introduced as a consequence of the Arab invasion of the African continent in the seventh century. See Wilderson 2017, 19–21.

ation of slavery's ontological derealization by other means, racism perpetuates the fundamental violence that expropriates beings of their humanity, in order to reconstitute them as Black.[11] Achille Mbembe describes black existence in terms of a "vacant life," a life vacated of being: "the Black Man is the one (or the thing) that one sees when one sees nothing, when one understands nothing, and, above all, when one wishes to understand nothing." (Mbembe 2017, 2). Mbembe traces the invention of Blackness to the advent of international capitalism: "The term 'Black' was the product of a social and technological machine tightly linked to the emergence and globalization of capitalism. It was invented to signify exclusion, brutalization, and degradation, to point to a limit constantly conjured and abhorred." (Ibid., 6). Put in conversation with the visual and aural recollections of slavery that appear throughout the installation, the journey of the destitute African migrants recalled in the opening section of *Vertigo Sea* trace a direct continuity between enslavement and subsequent forms of racialized subjugation. Contemporary migrations are a powerful reminder that the production of blackness remains a key objective for the operations of capital in our world.

As it emphasizes the significance of race in the historical constitution of Western modernity's project of terrestrial unification, *Vertigo Sea* directly connects the ruthlessness of the violence perpetrated against humans with that inflicted on the physical world. Beginning with this installation, the environmental crisis would acquire a preeminent relevance in Akomfrah's work, allowing him to reposition the key interests of his previous films within an expanded planetary context. Bourland situates this new direction in Akofrah's work within the wider framework of contemporary black British art. If today black artists have emerged among the guiding voices within the panorama of the British visual arts, this is at least in part due to the fact that, Bourland explains, "the themes and methods elaborated in their work provide crucial modes of reconciling terrestrial problems that go beyond questions of nation and to the core of human survival in the twenty-first century" (Bourland 2019, 130). By recontextualizing the vantage point of blackness from the local dimension of the nation to the planetary scope of globalization, *Vertigo Sea* reinscribes the social question of blackness in

11. For instance, Achille Mbembe observes that, in the late nineteenth century, French statesmen could argue against applying The Declaration of the Rights of Man to African people in the colonies, on the basis of the enduring assumption that they were not human. See Mbembe 2017, 76.

larger reflection concerning the systemic entanglement of human and nonhuman processes and temporalities. The installation connects social and environmental violence within the framework of a globalized world built around a unified system of predation.

Blackness first emerged through the equation of racially marked bodies with matter and the inorganic. From the point of view of capital, humans, animals, and the physical world are all equal; they are nothing but resources. The whale and the slave are the twin figures of extermination in the necropolitical landscape reconstructed in *Vertigo Sea*. In her review of the installation's exhibition in Toronto, Jill Glessing perceptively observes that the two main organizing axes of *Vertigo Sea*'s counter-history of globalization, the whaling industry and the slave trade, are paradigmatic instances of extractive capitalism (Glessing 2017, 38). Extractivism is openly thematized at the beginning of *Vertigo Sea*'s seventh section. A series of shots picturing an open-pit mine in an arid mountainous setting are interspersed with images of forests covered in snow and howling wolves. By introducing images of Andean miners carrying baskets of sulfide ores, *Vertigo Sea* alludes to the racialized constitution of the extractive logic of European colonialism. The geographer Kathryn Yusoff argues that mining played a decisive role in the violent dispossession and ruthless objectification of black and indigenous people; a dispossession that she identifies as the repressed origin of Western modernity (Yusoff 2018).

Not only mining created the immediate, concrete demand for stocks of forced labor, but it also contributed to the establishment of an imaginary equation between racially marked bodies and natural resources. Extractive practices therefore became a primary imaginary enabler of the ontological derealization enforced by the White-Master onto the Black Slave, for extraction required, Yusoff argues, "both slavery (first for mining) and its continuance as a mode of labor and psychic extraction of pleasure and sadism, which in turn codified Blackness in proximity to the qualities and properties of the inhuman" (ibid., 57). Racism, conversely, enabled the government of black bodies in the guise of natural resources. As Mbembe explains, "[t]he plantation regime and, later, the colonial regime presented a problem by making race a principle of the exercise of power, a rule of sociability, and a mechanism for training people in behaviors aimed at the growth of economic profitability" (Mbembe 2017, 81). The Andean miners featured in *Vertigo Sea* effectively visualize the radical derealization of human beings transformed into mere sources of locomotive and mechanical power. The installation

reveals that, while for the inhabitants of the Global North the threat of becoming a receptacle of abstract labor power—a human battery of sorts—is mostly confined to the hypothetical sci-fi scenario of films such as *The Matrix* (1999), this is the actual material condition in which millions of people survive, from day to day, in the Global South.[12]

If, on the one hand, *Vertigo Sea* consistently emphasizes the violence inflicted on human beings, on the other, it places a prominent stress on hunting and the slaughter of animals. Images of whaling, in particular, are pervasive throughout the installation. Archival footage of the harpooning, disembowelment, and dismemberment of cetaceans covey with intense immediacy the violence that Western modernity unleashed over the physical world more broadly. While environmental violence takes multiple shapes in the installation—from images of oil spills and atomic explosions to views of melting icebergs—the killing of animals, ranging from polar bears, to seals, deer, and elephants, serves to define the logic underlying the systemic domination of the non-human world in predatory terms. In this context, the primary focus on whaling allows Akomfrah to highlight the industrial scale and systemic design of the extermination. Producing the first estimate of the enormous number of whales killed by industrial fishing globally during the twentieth century, the marine scientists Robert Rocha, Phillip Clapham, and Yulia Ivashchenko laconically concluded that the "total is close to three million animals, making it (at least in terms of sheer biomass) perhaps the largest hunt in human history" (Rocha et al. 2015, 47). At the same time, through the erasure performed by the whaling industry, *Vertigo Sea* also alludes to the broader mass extinction event that we are currently living through.[13]

By superimposing racial and environmental violence, *Vertigo Sea* draws attention to the continuity between the social apocalypse endured by the colonized and their heighten exposure to the direst consequences of the current ecological catastrophe. Éric Alliez and Maurizio Lazzarato emphasize that, for the Amerindian populations, the end of the world begun in 1492: "genocide precedes and leads to the ecocide *to*

12. While mining is overtly thematized in this section, by envisioning whaling and slavery as extractive practices, *Vertigo Sea* invites us to adopt an expanded understanding of extraction. In *Politics of Operations*, Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson identify extractivism as the overarching logic of neoliberal capitalism. They show that extractive operations today reach considerably beyond the traditional practices of mining, land grabs, and resource dispossession, to include an array of disparate phenomena, ranging from datamining and gold farming to processes of financialization and the capture of labor in the form of biocapital. See Neilson and Mezzadra 2019, 133–67.

13. On the current mass extinction event, see Kolbert 2014.

come" (Alliez and Lazzarato 2018, 348). Similarly, Laura Pulido notes that, for the indigenous communities of the former colonies, "global warming is a continuation of a centuries-long apocalypse" (Pulido 2018, 120). The climate crisis, however, not only represents a continuation of colonial violence, but it also marks a threshold of intensified acceleration. In his book on the "environmentalism of the poor," Rob Nixon famously defined environmental violence as slow, and therefore invisible: "a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2011, 2). Invisible, and yet incremental, "its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales" (Ibid.). According to Nixon, the compounded effects of social and environmental violence manifest themselves in the emergence of a novel and more acute form of alienation. To inhabit a dying land, Nixon argues, constitutes the most radical form of displacement, "one that, instead of referring solely to the movement of people from their places of belonging, refers rather to the loss of the land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable" (Ibid., 16). The polar bears swimming amidst melting ice sheets and the destitute migrants daring the high waters that appear throughout *Vertigo Sea* are signifiers of such an epochal loss of grounding.

Pushing against the commonplace idea that the world is shrinking due the impact of communication and transportation technologies, Bruno Latour advances the suggestion that what is shrinking is not so much the human world as rather the life-sustaining environments of the planet. By claiming that it is the Earth which is shrinking, rather than the world, Latour calls attention to the progressive diminution of inhabitable land and cultivable soil, as a result of ecological depletion, the increasing amount of carbon dioxide emissions, the growing acidification of the oceans, the rising amount of radioactive fallout, the expanding desertification of the planet, and the unprecedented number and scale of climatic calamities (Latour 2018). The realization that the Earth is shrinking revokes the promise of modernity, as it becomes apparent that the planet is incapable of containing the ideal of an unlimited development: "We must face up to what is literally a problem of dimension, scale, and lodging: the planet is much too narrow and limited for the globe of globalization" (ibid., 16). The environmental catastrophe thus more acutely reveals the incompossibility of unfettered private ap-

propriation and the sharing of a "common world" (Ibid., 1). Latour interprets Donald Trump's announcement, in 2017, that the United States would withdraw from the Paris Climate Accord as the symptom of an unprecedented historical situation: "it is as though a significant segment of the ruling classes (known today rather too loosely as 'the elites') had concluded that the earth no longer had room enough for them and for everyone else" (Ibid.). "Consequently," Latour continues, "they decided that it was pointless to act as though history were going to continue to move toward a common horizon, toward a world in which all humans could prosper equally" (Ibid.).

Vertigo Sea suggests that the shrinking of the Earth not only has intensified the production of blackness, but it has also created the conditions for its larger social proliferation. The fact of blackness in *Vertigo Sea* extends into new, heterogeneous contexts. The transition from the fourth to the fifth section of the installation builds an unequivocal analogy between the racial violence of the *Zong* massacre of slaves and the political violence of the "death flights" in post-WWII Latin America. The closest we get, chronologically, to the present, the more the installation configures blackness as a mobile signifier. While *Vertigo Sea*'s genealogical reconstruction of globalization reveals that the unified world of global capitalism is built on the production of superfluous people, the proliferation of precarious lives documented in the installation's opening section shows that, with the shrinking of the planet, human superfluity is destined to expand. *Vertigo Sea* thus visualizes, in no ambiguous terms, what Mbembe refers to as the "becoming Black" of the contemporary world.

In the introduction to *Critique of Black Reas*on, Mbembe highlights the parallel between the advance of neoliberal capitalism and the ongoing transformation of legions of exploited workers into disposable people. His words take us back again to the dispossessed migrants of *Vertigo Sea*'s opening section: "There are no more workers as such. There are only laboring nomads. If yesterday's drama of the subject was exploitation by capital, the tragedy of the multitude today is that they are unable to be exploited at all" (Mbembe 2017, 3). While in early capitalism the term Black only referred to people of African origins, "neither Blackness nor race has ever been fixed. They have, on the contrary, always belonged to a chain of open-ended signifiers" (Ibid., 6). Today, for the first time in human history, the term black has been generalized "and the systematic risks experienced specifically by Black slaves during early capitalism have now become the norm for, or at least the lot

of, subaltern humanity." (Ibid., 4)[14] Focusing on the historical significance of blackness and its progressive social extension, *Vertigo Sea* alerts us to the lines of division along which the unification of the planet was achieved and is currently sustained. The installation calls attention to the difficulty, but also to the vital necessity of thinking the world as one, inviting us to reclaim the capacity to imagine a common future on a shared planet.

Machines of Dialectical Vision

By the turn of the 2010s, the increased analytic and thematic complexity of Akomfrah's projects had gradually outgrown the potential of the single-channel format of exhibition of movie theaters and the television. The gallery allowed Akomfrah, as several other filmmakers working in the tradition of the essay film, to experiment with more flexible conditions and technologies of exhibition. This flexibility put filmmakers such as Chris Marker, Harun Farocki, Agnès Varda, Jean-Luc Godard, and Isaac Julien in the condition to design innovative audiovisual dispositives and spectatorial experiences. Like Akomfrah, many of these filmmakers were attracted by the non-linear, oblique, and dynamic associative logic enabled by multi-screen display. Writing in praise of the expanded possibilities that gallery installations offer to the tradition of the essay film, Ross Gibson analyzes the potentiality of multi-channel exhibition by comparing the single- and multi-screen versions of Alexander Sokurov's *Spiritual Voices*. With a screen time exceeding the five-hour mark, the single-channel version of *Spiritual Voices* documents the life of Russian soldiers stationed on the Tajik-Afghani border in the mid-1990s.[15] The film is a pensive meditation on waiting and the expectation of incumbent threat. Rare confrontations with unidentified tribal forces punctuate a monotony riddled with anxiety, in a hallucinatory atmosphere recalling the existential condition described, at the outset of the Second World War, by the Italian novelist Dino Buzzati in *The Tartar*

14. The idea of blackness as a mobile signifier is vehemently contested by the scholars converging around the conceptual framework of Afro-pessimism, such as Wilderson, Saidiya Hartman, and Jared Sexton. Wilderson argues that, while blackness is a historical construct, such a historical experience has sedimented into a specific ontological condition, which cannot be transferred onto different social groups without losing its specific relevance (Wilderson 2017). For an overview of the Afro-pessimist conceptual perspective, see Wilderson et al. 2017.

15. To collect the footage included in the film, Sokurov spent a total of three months, within a period of a year and a half, living among the servicemen of the 11th Frontier Post of the Russian Army's Moscow Border Detachment.

Steppe. While the film was initially released within the film festival circuit and on television in 1995, in the early 2000s Sokurov turned *Spiritual Voices* into a five-channel installation, by displaying the five consecutive parts of the original work simultaneously.

Gibson notes that, in the multi-screen version of *Spiritual Voices*, thematic lines emerge that are significantly divergent from the main topics of the original film. Most importantly, the understanding of the audiovisual material develops according to a radically different logic, if the five parts are viewed simultaneously: "With its polyphony and its interlacing panoply of imagery, the five-screen array generates a pulsive and sometimes convulsive representation of war as a non-linear phenomenon" (Gibson 2020, 112). As Gibson observes: "One of the most striking peculiarities is the way the installation presents an experience that feels like a memory charged daydream that floats adrift from mundane sequential experience. This contrasts with the long-form version, which carries the viewer in a more focussed line of selective causation and step-by-step disquisition" (Ibid., 113). In Gibson's reading, the multi-screen display of *Spiritual Voices* deepens the perceptual field of the unfolding present, innerving present perception with the retrospective power of memory and prospective anticipatory energies. Through this complex sensorial and intellectual experience, the gallery exhibition of *Spiritual Voices* "activates a mode of cognition that is not linear and disquisitional so much as it is spatial, associative, and endlessly hypothetical" (Ibid., 114).

Musical metaphors abound in the descriptions of multi-screen installations. Like Gibson, Patricia Zimmermann also resorts to the notion of polyphony to define the unity of heterogeneous elements pursued by *Vertigo Sea*'s multi-channel format of exhibition (Zimmermann 2020). Conceived in these terms, the audiovisual dispositive of *Vertigo Sea* performs the "layering of different melodies and voices to create new resonances, a combinatory art depending on both vertical and horizontal vocal movements" (Ibid., 63). Akomfrah's disposition towards a polyphonic organization of audiovisual materials predates, however, his turn to multi-channel gallery installations. As Stoffel Debuysere perspicaciously notes in his analysis of Akomfrah's early feature films from the 1980s, "[t]he force of Akomfrah's films lies in their singular ability to construct twilight worlds between multiple temporalities and realms of experience, situated in the wrinkles that join and disjoin future pasts and present futures" (Debuysere 2015, 75). Yet, while the early essay

films already combined heterogeneous elements and perspectives to organize "twilight worlds between multiple temporalities and realms of experience," the multi-channel format of exhibition allowed Akomfrah's polyphonic interests to develop to their fullest extent.

As *Spiritual Voices* demonstrates, one of the key possibilities that multi-screen display offers filmmakers is that of thickening the perception of the present, both on the sensorial and affective level, as well as on the semiotic and cognitive level. While the focus on the aquatic allows *Vertigo Sea* to move across different temporal and spatial extensions and to combine a multiplicity of vantage points within a unified perspective on the history of globalization, oceans in *Vertigo Sea* are more than historical and geopolitical markers. Aquatic ontologies provide the installation with a perceptive epistemological and aesthetic model attuned to the polychronic fabric of the historical present. Through the lens of the oceans, conceived as a medium of converging temporalities, *Vertigo Sea* invites viewers to imagine the present in the guise of what Peters calls a "field of nonsimultaneity." In a passage of *The Marvelous Clouds*, he analyzes the forms of long-range communication and the "auditory multitasking" that whales and dolphins developed by living in marine environments (Peters 2015, 93). Peters speculates that, "[p]erhaps cetaceans live in what medieval mystics called the time of the now—a plural now in which many different times cross" (Ibid., 95).

Whereas the "time of the elongated now" is present in several locations within the human and the physical world, the sky and the sea are privileged examples of such "storehouses of the fullness of time": "The nocturnal stars are a field of nonsimultaneity, appearing together to our eyes though they mingle huge differences in temporal origin" (Ibid.).[16] In the transition from the fifth to the sixth section, *Vertigo Sea* contrasts the vision of the oceans as reservoirs for resource extraction—a meaning embedded, for instance, in the footage documenting the whaling industry—with an understanding of seas as memory banks and reservoirs of time. At the beginning of the sixth section, while majestic views of the ocean are displayed on the lateral screens, the picture of two whales swimming at the surface of the water is shown on the central screen. As we hear the sound made by the cetaceans pushing air through their blow holes, a vocal insert introduces us to their world: "Deep down, in another country—moving at different tempo." What happens deep down we have

16. Other examples of "storehouses of the fullness of time" referenced by Peters are the DNA and the lithosphere, as well as libraries and museums.

already learned from the vocal insert that concludes the installation's previous section: "Free from land-based pressures larger brains evolved. | Ten times as old as man's | the accumulated knowledge of the past | Rumors of ancestors. | Memories of loss. | Memories of ideal love."

By envisioning the present as a field of nonsimultaneity, *Vertigo Sea* responds to one of the crucial challenges that, according to Joseph Masco, the Anthropocene poses to contemporary visual cultures: "how to see what has already happened, but cannot be seen as already-happened yet?" (Masco 2018, 90) Through images of polar bears struggling among melting ice sheets, elephants killed in trophy hunts, oceans depopulated by the fishing industry, as well as through its vast and heterogeneous panorama of human precariousness, *Vertigo Sea* indexes current processes of extinction and exhaustion in their very becoming. Yet, by taking the sea as a reservoir of time, the installation also configures the present as the intersection of multiple temporal trajectories. Not only *Vertigo Sea* brings forth the awareness of forthcoming loss, but it also makes a strong claim on the undetected potential that the past might be keeping in store for the present.

Peters' reflection on the time of the now builds on the concept of *Jetztzeit* that Walter Benjamin developed in his theory of revolutionary action contained in the theses of "On the Concept of History" (Benjamin 2006, 395). The "now-time" is a field of emerging possibilities, a messianic time in which past potentialities can be suddenly actualized. The actualization of past potentialities occurs within what Benjamin calls, in a fragment of the *Arcades Project* (N3,1), a "dialectical image" (Benjamin 2002, 462–63). The fragment begins by differentiating images from the essences of Husserlian phenomenology. Benjamin explains that images are characterized by a "historical index" that not only connotes them as belonging to a specific time, but which also implies that "they attain legibility only at a particular time" (Ibid., 462). "Each 'now,'" Benjamin writes, "is the now of a particular recognizability" (Ibid., 463). Crucially, the dialectical image joins past and present in a tensive relation, rather than neutralizing their specificity through a simple equation: "It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectic at a standstill" (Ibid.). To illustrate the goal informing the construction of dialectical images, Max Pensky quotes another fragment of the *Arcades Project* (N7a): "The materialist presentation of history leads the past to bring the present

into a critical state" (Pensky 2004, 181).[17] He comments that, for Benjamin, "[t]he task was to cultivate a particular capacity for *recognizing* such moments" (Ibid.). From this perspective, the dialectical image is primarily aimed at fostering the capacity to foresee critical ruptures.

As Giorgio Agamben observes in a compelling essay dedicated to the lives of pictures, Benjamin's dialectical image is a vibrant, pulsating field of intelligibility and action. The standstill of the dialectical image, "does not indicate simply arrest but a threshold between immobility and movement" (Agamben 2011, 68). As the model of a tense, dialectical field of nonsimultaneity, the aquatic allows *Vertigo Sea* to construct constellations of then- and now-times within a unified, dynamic framework. Agamben shows that, in the constellation of past and present, "the objects lose their identity and transform into the two poles of a single dialectical tension" (Ibid., 70). This is how past potentialities are actualized within the present. In "On the Concept of History," Benjamin writes that "to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with now-time, a past which he blasted out of the continuum of history." The founders of the French Republic did not see their creation, however, as the mere copy of a Roman institution. Rather, Benjamin emphasizes, "[t]he French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate" (Benjamin 2006, 395). Taken as an epistemological model for the production of historical intelligibility, the dialectical image most fundamentally is, according to Agamben, "an unresolved oscillation between estrangement and a new event of meaning" (Agamben 2011, 69). In other words, through dialectical images, a multiplicity of apparently uncorrelated elements is grasped in a sudden unity. Dialectical images allow us to see the now-time in a previously unimaginable light.[18]

If by sensory and affective means the fibrillating opening segment of *Vertigo Sea* immerses viewers into an experience of utmost vulnerability, the dynamic juxtaposition of images and sounds positions them in an equally tense semiotic field of emerging events of meaning. The installation's audiovisual dispositive enables Akomfrah to simultaneously conjoin sensory, bodily immersion and a cognitive engagement with the contemporary crisis from the perspective of a dialectical unity. Generating dialectical forms of seeing, thinking, and sensing, the audiovisual dispositive of *Vertigo Sea* crystallizes the stakes and the meaning of the

17. For the fragment N7a, see Benjamin 2002, 471.

18. Agamben specifies that "[t]he *Dialektik im Stillstand* of which Benjamin speaks implies a dialectic whose mechanism is not logical (as in Hegel) but analogical and paradigmatic (as in Plato)" (Agamben 2011, 69).

contemporary crisis in the unresolved tension between the timeless abyss of blackness and the "great acceleration" of global capitalism and its anthropogenic impact on the planet's life-sustaining systems.[19] With the intention of elucidating and intensifying tensions and contradictions, Akomfrah revivifies the practice of dialectical montage initially developed by Sergei Eisenstein and the Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s, while the multi-channel format of exhibition allows him to expand the boundaries and potentiality of the montage aesthetic to an unforeseeable degree.

The text in which Eisenstein most overtly and systematically addresses the intersection of cinema and dialectics is the 1929 essay "The Dramaturgy of Film Form." Here, Eisenstein praises the potential of the dialectical method for enabling cinematic editing to produce "filmic reasoning" (Eisenstein 2010, 161–80). While conventional films only direct emotions, Eisenstein observes that, through the use of dialectical montage, the opportunity arises for filmmakers to "direct the whole thought process" (Ibid., 180). At its most basic level, his editing style is informed by a few fundamental principles widely shared by the most influential Soviet filmmakers of the era. The key idea behind the Soviet theory of montage is that the shot should not be considered as the minimal unit upon which cinematic signification is built. For them, meaning in the cinema is rather created by means of the matching of shots. Through this fundamental re-orientation, the Soviet filmmakers pursued a cinema of ideas, in opposition to the commercially driven and crowd-pleasing cinema of the action developed in Hollywood. Their aim was to visualize abstract ideas, rather than illustrating dramatic actions and clarifying the psychological motivations of the characters. Jacques Aumont argues that, with Eisenstein's intellectual montage, "cinema is no longer a machine for looking at the world, nor even for interpreting it [like in Dziga Vertov's cinema], but a machine for thinking" (Aumont 2020, 42–43).

Aumont links Eisenstein's dialectical approach to editing to Benjamin's understanding of "montage as an epistemology which revealed new regions of consciousness" (Ibid., 44). The consciousness Eisenstein

19. The notion of "great acceleration" was developed by the environmental historian John Robert McNeill in a book by the same title that he co-wrote with Peter Engelke in 2015. They argue that the ongoing climate crisis has been undergoing a stage of exponential acceleration since approximately 1945. As the title of the book suggests, the notion is developed in conversation with Karl Polanyi's analysis of the "great transformation" that brought to the establishment of a capitalist mode of production in the eighteenth century. See McNeill and Engelke 2015 and Polanyi 2001.

is interested in is, of course, the collective historical consciousness of the working classes. As pointed out by Antonio Somaini in his introduction to the English-language edition of Eisenstein's writings on the history of cinema, film itself, "with its capacity for manipulating time by arresting, inverting, accelerating, slowing down, fragmenting, and recomposing the continuity of the temporal flow [,] could be considered as a powerful epistemic tool for the construction of history" (Somaini 2016, 37). The model of historical intelligibility constructed through the dialectical principles of Eisenstein's montage relies on the identification of immanent contradictions. Building on Yuri Tsivian's observation that, in Eisenstein's thinking, "the smallest indivisible unit always consists of two things, not one," Luka Arsenjuk pushes against the conventional idea that Eisenstein's method is directed towards a grand synthetic resolution of dialectical oppositions (Arsenjuk 2018, 8). Arsenjuk instead suggests approaching Eisenstein's dialectics through a "logic of division" that continuously assembles and disassembles a unity through "immanent traversal." Eisenstein's dialectical approach to film form, Arsenjuk argues, always assumes that "unity is constitutively self-divided" (Ibid., 10). This is because, for Eisenstein, film form must construct an aesthetic response to the immanent antagonism that structures human societies. Arsenjuk concludes that, to understand Eisenstein's concept of montage, one should focus on the "'unity of opposites,' a gesture of synthesis that inheres not in the act of gathering a multiplicity of moments […] but in the concreteness of a contradiction" (Ibid., 23).

Eisenstein's dialectical understanding of montage and his pursuit of immanent contradictions and emancipatory openings permeate Akomfrah's whole body of work. His first feature, *Handsworth Songs* (1986), a collaborative project produced by the Black Audio Film Collective, overtly combines dialectical montage and avant-garde aesthetics with the revolutionary impulse of black oppositional politics. Throughout his decades-long career, Akomfrah continued developing the dialectical logic of division and the immanent traversal of Eisenstenian montage. In this perspective, multi-channel audiovisual display provided him with an incomparable potential. The multi-screen format allowed Akomfrah to multiplicate the dialectical potential of montage by applying it not only to the vertical, temporal level of subsequent images, but also to the simultaneous, horizontal matching of images across the different screens. At the same time, his installations work at the intersection of the vertical and horizontal axes of montage, expanding the asso-

ciative potential of film editing. As a machine for the production of dialectical images, *Vertigo Sea* responds to the problem of bringing into visibility what cannot be directly seen. By making visible the long shadow of slavery and blackness that follows the African migrants encountered at the beginning of the installation, or the extinction to come indexed by the images of whaling and starving polar bears, *Vertigo Sea* brings into visibility latent phenomena, which are "withdrawn from perceptuality and representability" (Horn 2020, 102). Through its dynamic associative work, the installation keeps drawing out what remains unapparent within the present, the lingering contours of the past, but also the seeds of future possibilities.

As a machine producing dialectical forms of looking and thinking, *Vertigo Sea* effectively tackles the three main challenges that, according to Eva Horn, confront the visual cultures of the Anthropocene epoch: the latency of phenomena, the entanglement of heterogenous processes, and the question of scale and multiscalar relations (Horn 2020). The goal of Akomfrah's audiovisual dispositive, however, reaches beyond the mapping of a complex totality. By putting a major emphasis on the contradictions of the present, the installation aims at propelling the dialectical awakening of unforeseen potentialities, arising from the sudden coming-together of past and present. According to Bertell Ollman, the vital importance of the dialectical method for the present age consists precisely in its capacity to reveal the potential, by which he means "the form in which the future exists inside the present, but until now it has been a form without a particular content, just because it was open to every conceivable content" (Ollman 2008, 22). While the present and its genealogical reconstruction emerge as the main concerns of *Vertigo Sea*, the installation's orientation is unmistakably towards the future. Image makers should ultimately consider themselves, Akomfrah believes, as "custodians of the future": "All the images that we make are a plea for a future, a plea for what I am calling 'an utopian moment,' a plea for an afterlife."[20]

A Future in Common?

It was precisely by means of the dialectical method, Ollmann argues, that "Marx sought to steal the secret of the future from its hiding place in the present" (Ollman 2008, 16). In his influential reconstruction of

20. Akomfrah expressed these thoughts during an interview made on the occasion of *Vertigo Sea*'s exhibition at the Bildmuseet of Umeå University. The recording of the interview is available on the museum's website: https://www.bildmuseet.umu.se/en/exhibitions/2015/john-akomfrah--vertigo-sea/

the methodology subtending Marx's dialectical materialism, Ollman describes dialectics as a dance articulated in four consecutive movements (Ollman 2008).[21] With the first step, Marx develops a systemic view of the present, observing the crucial interactions within the historical present from a multiplicity of vantage points. The second step involves the research of the historical roots of the present crisis. Here, the present provides Marx with the necessary orientation in his analysis of the past, as it allows him to select relevant processes and to set the temporal extension of his genealogical inquiry. The detour through the past aims at identifying, with the third step, the central contradictions innerving the present. The specific importance of this step consists in the fact that, within these contradictions, "the present comes to contain both its real past and likely future" (Ibid., 18). The temporal opening towards a possible future then propels the fourth step, in which Marx adopts the lens of communism as a vantage point from the future, in order to identify, within the present, the future's potential—its virtual existence within the present. Ollman concludes by stressing that "the future proves to be as important in understanding the present and the past as they are in understanding the future" (Ibid., 22). Such an unconditional orientation towards the future is at the heart of *Vertigo Sea*, as the sound of the ticking clock, which reappears at critical moments in the installation's reconstruction of the contemporary crisis, keeps reminding viewers.

Vertigo Sea's sumptuous choreography of images and sound is organized around the first three steps in Ollman's dance of the dialectics, as it transports us from the urgency of the present, through a genealogical reconstruction of the roots of the contemporary crisis, and back to the present, this time with a new awareness of its central contradictions. And while *Vertigo Sea* does not look back at the present through the lens of an alternative future, it emphatically celebrates the very possibility of futurity. Against the prevailing fatalism of contemporary audiovisual depictions of the social and environmental crisis, *Vertigo Sea* articulates a strong belief in the openness of the future. In my previous discussion of "Oblique tale on the aquatic sublime," I have purposefully omitted a crucial element. The radio broadcast chronicling the journey of the twenty-seven African migrants concludes on a hopeful note. After creating a sense of suspense by leaving us with the migrants on an unmanned boat—"The people's traffickers told them that the crossing would take

21. Ollman 2008. Ollman articulates this idea in greater detail across the essays collected in the volume published under the very title of *Dance of the Dialectic*. See Ollman 2003.

less than an hour. The pilot swam back to shore, they headed on…"—the speaker concludes, with an abrupt turn in the tone of his delivery: "on what was to become one of the most dramatic survival stories from this year's crossings." These words imbue the conclusion of *Vertigo Sea*'s opening section with a sense of marvel and hope, setting in motion the installation's search for the possibility of a viable future.

While *Vertigo Sea* documents a series of apocalypses—the ontological derealization of blackness, the extinction of animal species, or the environmental consequences of nuclear testing—at the same time, the installation strenuously rejects catastrophism. Ultimately, the installation is an ode to survival and hope. This orientation finds a direct embodiment in the series of *tableau* shots featuring a fictional Olaudah Equiano, the freed slave, nautical explorer, and renowned abolitionist, whose memoir, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789), represents one of the earliest literary articulations of a black voice and subjectivity. *Vertigo Sea* thus refuses what Sloterdijk calls, in a recent essay, the "prophetic reason" of Anthropocene narratives. The apocalyptic logic of these discourses, Sloterdijk suggests, confronts us with a pressing task. What we most urgently need today, he claims, is "to explain the Being-towards-the-end of modernity," in order to address the question of "why modernity, for immanent reasons, has been laid out in anticipation of a total ending" (Sloterdijk 2015, 333-334 and 331). In his reconstruction of the apocalyptic logic of the Anthropocene, Sloterdijk credits Wilhelm Ostwald's *The Energetic Imperative* (1912)—where mentioned is made, for the first time, of the inherent limits of the planet's resources—as the "beginning of an analytics of finitude that Heidegger would translate from the scientific to the existential sphere" (Ibid., 334). In a time in which the being-towards-the-end of modernity is undergoing an unprecedented acceleration, a radical reorientation is required: "what we need is a prognostic intelligence which asserts itself precisely in the gap between 'late' and 'too late'" (Ibid., 337). This is the gap in which *Vertigo Sea* situates the viewers.

Whereas the installation does not envision an alternative future, its prognostic work is based on a precise historical and political diagnosis. Through the interplay of detail and context, and by continuously moving across heterogeneous temporal and spatial extensions and vantage points, the installation consistently practices the type of diagnostic observation that Michel Foucault recommended to the historian: "Effective history studies what is closest, but in an abrupt dispossession, so as to seize it at a distance (an approach similar to that of a doctor who

looks closely, who plunges to make a diagnosis and to state its difference)" (Foucault 1977, 156). Based on such a diagnostic vision, the installation offers an unequivocal prognosis of the lethal consequences of the current processes of extraction, dispossession, and expulsion. This kind of prognostic intelligence is based, according to Sloterdijk, on a more sensible reconfiguration of the relationship between being and knowing in a time of catastrophic acceleration: "Whereas for a large part of human education to date people have had to 'learn from their mistakes,' the prognostic intelligence must become prudent before misfortune occurs" (Sloterdijk 2015, 337). To perform a meaningful prognosis, Sloterdjik suggests that we need to learn from past apocalypses. Following Jean-Pierre Dupuy, he claims that "only experienced apocalyptics can perform future policy-making because only they are courageous enough to consider the worst a real possibility" (Ibid.). *Vertigo Sea*'s invitation to look at the contemporary crisis through the vantage point of blackness, the most radical apocalyptic event of modernity, provides the foundation for a judicious form of prognostic intelligence. The life of the black migrants encountered at the beginning of *Vertigo Sea* is a post-apocalyptic form of existence, a life suspended in a temporal limbo following the end of the world.

If we are to learn from blackness, the lesson can only be a radical one. At stake there is nothing less than the future and the possibility of enacting a meaningful change. As Mbembe notes, the condition of blackness initially imposed on the people of Africa, at its most fundamental level consisted in the "dispossession of the future and of time, the two matrices of the possible" (Mbembe 2017, 6). Nixon identifies an analogous erasure of futural horizons at work in contemporary forms of environmental violence. The displacement that defines the condition of those who dwell on dying lands is essentially a form of temporal dislocation: "When refugees are severed from environments that have provided ancestral sustenance they find themselves stranded not just in place but in time as well" (Nixon 2011, 162). The biopolitical rationale of territorial displacement is here supplanted by procedures of necropolitical expulsion from the universal chronology of globalization. "The problem is not that such people have been reduced to statistics but that they've been reduced to nonstatistics, a whole different level of dehumanization—indeed, one definition of surplus people" (Ibid.). This radical displacement in time is the temporal matrix of the historical experience of blackness and of its contemporary proliferations.

In the past forty years, the uninhibited experimentation of neoliberal economics has produced a new, generalized form of consciousness based on a radical sense of ephemerality. In *Out of the Dark Night*, Mbembe connects the incapacity to achieve a sufficient degree of subjective consistency and coherence to a specific form of temporal experience, which he calls "temporariness." "In Africa in particular," he writes, "temporariness can […] be described as the encounter—a very regular occurrence—with what we cannot yet determine because it has not yet come to be or will never be definite. It is an encounter with indeterminacy, provisionality, the fugitive, and the contingent" (Mbembe 2021, 29). "Today," he continues, "the tragedy is less in being exploited than in being utterly deprived of the basic means to move, to partake in the general distribution of things and resources necessary to produce a semblance of life. The tragedy is to not be able to escape the traps of temporariness and immediacy" (Ibid., 30). That is, the tragedy today is to be condemned to the temporal and existential abyss of blackness.

To reclaim the future, one should abolish temporariness, but the abolishment of temporariness, in turn, implies the obliteration of the condition of blackness. However, if blackness is the quintessential social product of what Marx famously referred to as *ursprüngliche Akkumulation*, to eradicate blackness necessarily entails obliterating the practices of primary accumulation hidden at the heart of global capitalism.[22] In the chapter dedicated to the formation of industrial capitalism included in the concluding section of Volume I of *Capital*, Marx identifies practices of colonial dispossession as "the chief moments of [primary] accumulation" (Marx 1990, 915). In the material processes unfolding in the colonies with little to no restraint—"the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of the [American] continent, the beginning of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins"—Marx identifies the trigger of "the commercial war of the European nations that [had] the globe as its battlefield" (Ibid.). This war is what structured and organized the planetary unification described by Sloterdijk and the formation of an integrated world market, necessary to the establishment of industrial capitalism.

22. I suggest translating *ursprüngliche* as primary, rather than primitive, to emphasize the constitutive role these practices play not only in the genesis, but also in the continuous reproduction of capitalist social relations. My proposal is indebted to the terminological analysis of Werner Bonefeld and Massimiliano Tomba. See Tomba 2009, 55-56, and Bonefeld 2011, 385-386.

To abolish primary accumulation would eventually entail nothing less than the dismantling of capitalist social relations altogether. Rather than a singular historical event, primary accumulation is a continuous, ongoing process that supports and complements capitalist exploitation. Numerous scholars have contested the once prevailing understanding of Marx's primary accumulation in terms of a prehistoric stage in the development of capitalism. Challenging the theory of underdevelopment and the historicist paradigm of discrete developmental stages, in the 1970s Samir Amin called attention to the pervasiveness of processes of primary accumulation in the Global South and to their role in sustaining structural asymmetries between centers and peripheries (Amin 1974). Three decades later, at the outset of the twenty-first century, David Harvey similarly highlighted the continuing role of primary accumulation in preserving the asymmetrical relationship between the Global North and the Global South (Harvey 2003). He showed that the distinctive operative principle of contemporary forms of imperialism is what he calls "accumulation by dispossession," which is nothing but another name for Marx's primary accumulation.

The aftermath of the 2008 financial collapse and the growing awareness of the dramatic repercussions of the climate crisis gave the omnipresence of primary accumulation a wider visibility, and scholars such as Massimiliano Tomba (2009), Werner Bonefeld (2011), Saskia Sassen (2014), William Clare Roberts (2017), and Alliez and Lazzarato (2018) highlighted the urgency of reconceiving the role of primary accumulation within global capitalism. Bonefeld argues that primary accumulation perpetually accompanies the economic exploitation of wage laborers as a shadowy reminder of the foundational principle on which capitalist social relations are built: the divorce of labor from the means of sustenance and production. The perpetual replication of this foundational process of separation is, Bonefeld claims, "the innate necessity of capitalist social relations" (Bonefeld 2011, 388). As Alliez and Lazzarato incisively put it, "capitalism is not a 'mode of production' without being at the same time a mode of destruction" (Alliez and Lazzarato 2018, 353). Destruction must continue incessantly because, "[s]ince non-capitalist or non-market social relations are always reconstituting themselves, [primary] accumulation must be conceived as the ever-renewed work of dismantling these non-capitalist relations" (Roberts 2017, 4).[23] While

23. Roberts articulates these ideas in conversation with the work of Massimo De Angelis. See Roberts 2017, 3-5.

contractually sanctioned forms of labor attenuate and seek to dissimulate the primary and essential social violence of capitalism, true human emancipation can only arise from the overcoming of the logic of separation.

Not only is primary accumulation a permanent feature of the capitalist mode of production, but, as Tomba shows, its current intensification is an unavoidable consequence of the acceleration in the pace of technological innovation. In order to maintain a stable rate of extraction of relative-surplus value, a dramatic increase in the extraction of absolute-surplus value produced through forms of primary accumulation becomes necessary: "Capital needs to create geographical areas or productive sectors where it can produce an enormous quantity of absolute surplus-value. The primary violence of the accumulation must be repeated ever anew" (Tomba 2009, 60). Alf Hornborg convenes that an enhanced rate of technological innovation necessarily increases, rather than diminishing, global inequality: "the affluence of high-tech modernity cannot be universalised, because it is predicated on a global division of labour that is geared precisely to huge price and wage differences between populations. What we have understood as technological innovation is an index of unequal exchange" (Hornborg 2015, 60). Whereas there has never been a contradiction between the contemporaneous deployment of slave labor in the colonies and the capitalist exploitation of wage labor in the metropolitan areas, their transversal global complementarity has never been as visible as today. With the shrinking of the planet and the becoming black of the world, absolute surplus value is, as Tomba suggests, "the form of extortion of surplus-value most adequate to our times" (Tomba 2009, 62).

Both Tomba (2009) and Roberts (2017) call attention to the emphasis that Marx puts on the role of the state in the processes of primary accumulation and the significance of the modern state's implication in the operations of capital. The historical role of the state, Tomba argues, consists in the integration and synchronization of the practices of extra-economic violence necessary to create the conditions for capital accumulation. For this reason, he argues that, in order "[t]o understand the permanence of [primary] accumulation now, we need a kind of 'historiography of the present' that would allow us to understand the current combination of different temporalities in the attempt to synchronise them through the intervention of extra-economic violence" (Tomba 2009, 56). While the work of synchronization and integration performed by the state is necessary to capitalism, Roberts emphasizes the state's

symmetrical dependency on capital accumulation. Such a lack of autonomy carries the direst consequences for the struggles over emancipation: "Policies of [primary] accumulation are attempts by the state to secure the conditions of economic growth. This dependency of the state upon capital makes the state into an enemy of all attempts to refuse, evade or escape capitalism" (Roberts, 2017, 2).

If the production of blackness is contingent upon the existence of the extra-economic violence performed by the modern state, emancipation cannot be pursued through a reformist agenda. Bonefeld argues that, to build what Johannes Agnoli calls "a society of the free and equal," it is not enough to seize bourgeoise institutions. They must be subverted and replaced with social institutions based on the rejection of capitalism's foundational violence (Bonefeld 2011, 396-397). Roberts suggests that such a future cannot be pursued through communitarian isolation, but only through universal solidarity: "if Marx was right about [primary] accumulation, it is not the desire to secure a form of life outside of capitalism that contains the germ of a post-capitalist world, but the need for large-scale, even global, cooperation" (Roberts 2017, 16). And he continues by noting that: "Capitalism poses not a moral or ethical problem, but a practical and political one. Surmounting this problem does not require a new or common ethical sensibility, or a change of heart, but a novel set of institutions" (Ibid.).

Crisis and Critical Capacities

Confronted with the becoming black of the world and the shrinking of the planet, political palliatives such as green technologies or the carbon quotas are a blatantly insufficient response. Only a radical solution can be appropriate to the task. While *Vertigo Sea* does not envision an alternative future, the installation takes the viewers to the thresholds of the fourth step in the dance of the dialectics, at the critical threshold separating us from the radically new. As it intensifies the tension between the deepening abyss of blackness and the unrelenting acceleration of global capitalism, *Vertigo Sea* produces an experience of crisis for the viewers by means of sensory, kinesthetic, affective, and cognitive overstimulation. Taking the ocean as an aesthetic and epistemological model for the understanding of the present crisis in the guise of a dynamic, pulsating field of dialectical tensions, the installation aims to perturb the ahistorical and acritical fixity that characterizes the depictions of the aquatic within Western visual cultures. In a time of ocean acidification, melting ice sheets, and severe disturbances to marine currents,

Nicholas Mirzoeff marvels at the survival of the marriage of convenience, sanctioned in the early modern era, between the biopolitical capture of the sea and an aesthetic propensity to depict oceans as primigenial environments unaffected by human industriousness (Mirzoeff 2012).[24] Mirzoeff highlights the ironic contradiction between the frenetic activity of enclosure and dispossession taking place at sea and the catatonic unresponsiveness of visual cultures to the progressive territorialization of the oceans. He goes on to show that, on the backdrop of the current historical acceleration, contemporary depictions of the aquatic mostly remain unaffected, and the ocean continue to be endowed with atemporal connotations.

Stability itself is at stake in the naturalization of the physical world: "There is a remarkable investment (in all senses, whether economic, psychoanalytic, or emotional) in the imaging of the marine as elemental, primordial and unchanging, a dialectical corollary to the biopolitical struggles over land" (Ibid., 135). Inscribing the spectacle of wilderness manufactured by the BBC Natural History Unit within a historical counter-narrative of globalization, *Vertigo Sea* shakes the comfortable torpor of Western visual cultures. Endorsing the principle of nonsimultaneity defining aquatic ontologies, the installation grafts alternative modes of intelligibility on its reconstruction of the present as a thickened, dynamic field of tensions and contradictions. An uncompromising attack on the induced inertia and unresponsiveness characteristic of Western visual cultures, *Vertigo Sea*'s whirling panoply of sounds and images aims at restoring the generative potential of the experience of crisis, the experience of critical thinking and decision making, in order to gain access to the opportunities offered by the unforeseen and the incalculable.

At the same time, the recuperation of the experience of crisis in *Vertigo Sea* does not occur within the framework of the culture of fear prevailing within the contemporary media landscape. To the contrary, as a dispositive instigating dialectical ways of seeing and thinking, *Vertigo Sea* demands from the viewers a sensorial, affective, and intellectual engagement, which defies the disempowering effects of the culturally pervasive rhetoric of fear. While the strategies of naturalization de-

24. Mirzoeff shows how, in the seventeenth century, sovereign claims began being made over what was previously considered *res nullius*, the property of no one. Aquatic enclosures were thus created, duplicating the practices of appropriation deployed on land in the same period. See Mirzoeff 2012, 135–36.

scribed by Mirzoeff work towards the dissimulation of the present cataclysm, the current popularity of the idiom of crisis can paradoxically have an even stronger disabling impact on the potential of critical experience. According to Masco, if the concept of crisis is itself in crisis today, this is primarily due to its very cultural pervasiveness (Masco 2017). Such a discursive saturation, he suggests, diminishes the concept's capacity to act as "an affect-generating idiom, one that seeks to mobilize radical endangerment to foment collective attention and action" (Ibid., 65). Masco argues that, in the twenty-first century, we have moved from the "crisis-utopia circuit" of the mid-twentieth-century modernist culture to a "crisis-paralysis circuit, a maker of a greatly reduced political horizon" (Ibid., 66).[25] "What happened," Masco wonders, "to the once vibrant social debate about alternative futures and the commitment to making long-term investments in improving the terms of collective life?" (Ibid., 75) He concludes that, "[t]he crisis in crisis today is the inability to both witness the accumulating damage of [the global capitalist] system and imagine another politics" (Ibid.). Against the paralysis provoked by the culture of fear, *Vertigo Sea* seeks to mobilize the perceptual, intellectual, and imaginative capacities required for the emergence of the radically new.

An even more radical threat, however, looms over the potential inherent to the experience of crisis. Bernard Stiegler draws attention to the disabling effect that processes of automation have on this form of experience (Stiegler 2019). He outlines the potentially catastrophic repercussions of such processes on theoretical thinking itself. "*Krisis,* which has a long history—in Hippocrates, it refers to a decisive turning point in the course of an illness—is also the origin of all critique, of all decision exercised by *to krinon* as the power to judge on the basis of criteria" (Ibid., 33). In our automatic society, the work of theory is "delegated to algorithms and executed through sensors and actuators but outside of any intuition in the Kantian sense, that is, outside any experience" (Ibid., 32). Critical thinking reaches a point of impossibility: no unforeseen decisions are taken, and we always fail to arrive at a radical turning point. Distinguishing between future and becoming, Stigler suggests that today our task is to reclaim the conditions of possibility for a

25. Masco explains that, through the continuous invocation of precariousness and resilience, "the twin logics of a neoliberal order that abandons populations in pursuit of profit," contemporary discourses on crisis constrain thinking and action "by evoking the need for an emergency response to the potential loss of a status quo, emphasizing urgency and restauration over a review of first principles" (Masco 2017, 73).

critical vision of the future—or, from the future—that might break the spell of the recursive inhuman becoming of automated societies (Ibid. 43–45). When Akomfrah presents image makers as the "custodians of the future," he is articulating a belief in the potential of images to serve as portals onto futural possibilities. Images can therefore produce an anticipation of the new capable of undermining the logic of repetition and preventing the retreat into fatalistic abandonment. According to Gilbert Simondon, invention can only occur through images and the imagination (Simondon 2023).[26] He describes images, either mental or material, as intermediary realities between subject and object, abstraction and concreteness, and past and future, which can "bring their reserve of implicit power and implicit knowledge to moments when problems must be solved" (Ibid., 9). He adds that "the image is the basis of anticipation, allowing the prefiguration of near or distant futures" (Ibid., 16).

Endowed with the capacity to actualize and reconfigure the past, in order to invent the new, the image represents, for Simondon and Akomfrah, a reservoir of possibilities that can be mobilized against the governmental paradigms of biopolitical and necropolitical projection. Discussing the "planning of collective life" in the mid-1960, Simondon highlights the extension of the process of virtualization described by Väliaho (2022) and Sloterdijk (2017) from the spatial domain to the temporal realm: "[t]he necessities of long-term forecasts [*prévision*] for action have introduced rationalization into the dimension of the future" (Simondon 2023, 17). Simondon stresses the epochal transformation that the virtualization of time imposes on our experience of the future: "time begins to be organized like space; the future is annexed to knowledge and no longer the privileged field of the optative, of desire, or of volition" (Ibid). According to Simondon, it is only through images and the imagination that we can preserve the capacity to resist the "prospective rationalizations" of contemporary automated society: "the image recovers its density and force which carries it towards the anticipation of the collective future, beside and beyond the prospective rationalizations, which are not true inventions, but extrapolations" (Ibid.).

As *Vertigo Sea* concludes, the sense of urgency attached to the sound of the ticking clock heard at the outset of the installation continues to resound in the minds of the viewers. Just before the closing credits, and with the lateral screens already displaying a homogeneous dark blue

26. "Imagination," Simondon emphasizes, "is not just an activity of image production or evocation, but equally the mode of receiving images concretized as objects, the discovery of their sense, of the perspective of a new existence for them" (Simondon 2023, 14).

background, on the central screen an image lingers on. We see a protracted shot of a large flock of birds freely crossing a sky lit in the warm light of what appears to be a new dawn. Contrary to the migrants that we encountered in the installation's opening section, these birds' movement proceeds unobstructed. Positioned at the conclusion of a sensorial and semiotic roller-coaster, this image succinctly encapsulates the idea of a shared world, as the necessary premise to the conceptualization of a future in common. While the closing credits begin to unfold, punctuated by photographic portraits of slaves and Latin-American *desaparecidos*, viewers are prompted to imaginatively and conceptually enact the fourth step in the dance of the dialectics. And, if "[t]o foresee *[prévoir]* is not just a matter of seeing, but of inventing and living," as Simondon argues, then "true forecasting *[prévision]* is to a certain extent a *praxis,* a tendency to development of an action already begun" (Ibid.). On the backdrop of the prognostic vision articulated across the installation, viewers are thus compelled to imagine and pursue a future that everyone can share, a future where, finally, "[t]he expropriators are expropriated" (Marx 1990, 929).

DEDICATION

I want to dedicate this essay to the memory of a dear friend, Robert Cargni, who introduced me to the work of John Akomfrah, and whose passionate and dedicated curatorship has provided an incommensurable source of inspiration to generations of film enthusiasts in Philadelphia and beyond.

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BIOGRAPHY

Peter Lešnik is Assistant Professor of Film and Media at the School of Advanced Studies of the University of Tyumen. He graduated from the University of Pennsylvania with a dissertation on Michelangelo Antonioni's adaptations, which he is currently revising for publication. His scholarship spans across a range of topics in film and media studies, including European cinema, adaptation, color cinematography, and environmental studies.

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The Neotenous Image: On the Technical Adaptation of Alienation

Xindi Li

ABSTRACT: There is an animus that comes with the animatronic sparkle of cute things. When an animated character is described as cute, it also becomes carved out as a receptacle for violence and disposability. This article tracks the simultaneous alienation and intimacy that is produced through the animated image, in the context of how it generates a vital force that also marks its life as a commodity. I argue that cinematic animation uniquely captures its own technical development, in which the image retains and reworks its prior forms. This is what I term the *neotenous image*. It is through this image that technical and economic alienation are not only captured but magnified, in its shared dimension with the conditions of commodity production. Using the film *Tamala 2010: A Punk Cat in Space* (dir. t.o.L, 2002) as a parable for this type of image and mode of production, I show how cuteness functions not only as an aesthetic category, but a channel for the reproductive force of animated image-commodities. It is in these commodities that intimacy and alienation are able to reproduce each other dialectically, in their contradiction. Using Bataille, Marx, and Simondon, I show how the cute image-commodity's perpetual sacrifice and rebirth models a visual economy that exploits and expands the temporality of crisis, rather than simply being a result or representation of it. In this way, the neotenous image names the developmental logic of the technical object in, and as, the historical condition of a capitalism that incessantly thrives on the novel, cute thing.

KEYWORDS: animation, alienation, commodity fetish, media studies, technical development.

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• *Correspondence:* Xindi Li, UC Santa Cruz.
• e-mail: xindixindixindi@gmail.com
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Introduction: Parables of the Cute

The cute is ubiquitous in its seduction. When I project a still from the film, *Tamala 2010: A Punk Cat in Space* (directed by t.o.L, 2002), everyone in the classroom agrees that the eponymous robot cat is cute. She blinks her large eyes, her face rearranging momentarily into the ASCII emoticon "UwU" with the accompanying sound effect of a xylophonic *plink*. Her mouth (the "w" of UwU) always appears to be in a smile no matter the situation, as it figuratively depicts an upturned, feline lip curl. Like the rhetoric I will often deploy in this article, Tamala speaks in parataxis. Paratactical speech can be compared to the way in which children speak, yet the use of this device is most famously biblical. And so with the cute: it appears at once disjointed and declarative, naive and commanding, transcendental and profane. It appears to be an objective trait (we all agree something is supposed to be cute), as well as a product of objectification: the cute often asks us to collapse the desire to *consume* it and the desire to *be* it. It also appears as an analytic object, thus embodying this same series of logical contradictions. As an ideal and aesthetic category supposedly recognizable to us all, the cute is paradoxically sensual and inaccessible, a remote surface that demands to be felt up close.

Cuteness incites endearment and attraction, while belying a sense of emptiness underneath. The word itself is an aphesis, in which a word's initial unstressed vowel is foregone: if cute is round lines and buoyancy, then its etymological ancestor, "acute" (from Latin *acus* or needle), indicates a sharpness that blurs the boundaries between the physiology of organism and tool, revealing the dulling of cute in its aphetic adaptation.[1] "Cute" is thus on the receiving end of "acute"— a stuffed animal that is the receptacle for a knife—as well as its masochistic offspring. Violence is already implied in the cute object, as its vulnerability can invite both caress and abuse. Cute is then the Damocles sword of epithets: neotenous and feminine, the cute thing is nonthreatening and dismissed based on one's attraction to it, always bubbling while promising nothing beneath the surface. A receptacle implies that the cute has depth, but instead it wears its internal logic on the surface. The cute is

1. In linguistics, aphesis is a specific form of apheresis, in which the word's initial vowel is foregone. Aphesis refers specifically to the loss of the unstressed vowel. When I say cute is dulled, I don't mean to imply that cute doesn't retain some of its ancestral sharpness in becoming a receptacle for that sharpness. Wan-Chuan Kao and Jen Boyle write on the etymology of "cute" as derived from "acute": "To be cute is to be in pain; cuteness is a figure of Roland Barthes's punctum or Georges Bataille's point of ecstasy." See Boyle and Kao (2017, 17).

surficial in the Deleuzian sense: it doesn't oppose surface to depth, instead staging their reciprocal emergence. Rather than an object characteristic, the surface braids together a relation of bodily affect with incorporeal time, and in so doing, the surface doesn't seal off depth but reveals it (Deleuze 1990). This article homes in on the cute image in and as the sliding of planes on a surface, which is also classically one component of animation, in and as the production of movement in time.

Likewise for literary theorist Sianne Ngai, the cute is a relation, albeit a commodity one: she calls the cute a "minor aesthetic," invoking the simultaneous dismissal and compliment of cuteness as the aesthetic repertoire of the commodity. Quoting Walter Benjamin, Ngai reminds us that cuteness belongs to the everyday life of objects, which I have been calling its profane register: "If the soul of the commodity which Marx occasionally mentions in jest existed, it would be the most empathetic ever encountered in the realm of souls, for it would have to see in everyone the buyer in whose hand and house it wants to nestle" (Benjamin 1973, 55; cited in Ngai 2012, 4). One needs to look no further than the surface for this phenomenon. Consider as an example recent internet trends: K-pop hand gestures mimicking two-dimensional hearts, cat ears worn by online streamers, and the continued globalization of Japanified cartoons are a few examples of a seemingly infinite archive. The surfaces of the cute thing appear three-dimensional, round and cherubic, abolishing distance through intimacy while maintaining its remoteness. The cute maintains its withdrawal paradoxically, through the mediatic limit that it constitutively is—a flat screen that projects all surfaces and induces consumptive desire. It is in this other sense that cuteness is surficial, casting off animatronic sparkle as it thrives within an inscrutable plane. Likewise, recent accelerationist thought has turned to cuteness as a framework for understanding 21st-century aesthetics and politics, building on and updating Marx's analysis of technology and the commodity form.[2] The surficiality of the cute is not simply a flat plane or a visual aesthetic, but an ontological mode of the commodity in and as image. This image-commodity projects the semblance of life, independently of the relations that have created it. Today, the popular and scholarly interest in cute is a resurgence disguised as a novelty: the cute commodity perpetually convinces us of its own life force and its youthfulness through its imaging.

2. See Ireland and Kronic (2024).

In this way, the Japanese experimental film *Tamala 2010* functions as a parable of cuteness *par excellence*, illuminating both the technical production behind its imaging and the aesthetic logic of the commodity. Directed by the art and design duo t.o.L (Trees of Life), the film privileges disparate regimes of animation; from a simulation of the classical two-dimensional sliding planes of limited animation, to intercut sequences of a parallel three-dimensional world, to a few brief, camera-captured scenes—all pointedly presented without seamless integration. This is how the film weds the development of the *technological* creatures we see on screen (Tamala is robot-cat-girl) with the *techniques* of image production. This development, we will soon see, demonstrates a *neotenous image* by utilizing the assumed succession of several technical regimes, from the animation stand to 3D computational modeling to photographic cinematography, to confound the developmental trajectory of the image. While these respective imaging techniques may at first appear to succeed each other, *Tamala 2010*'s deployment of these distinct techniques does not resolve them into a single, linear mode of development in the image. Instead, they each bud from the shared stolon of the computational animated image, where older modes are retained as potentials to be tapped rather than nostalgic relics. This neoteny is coextensive with the plot: Tamala coquettishly reports that she is one year old, but the film shows that she is in fact programmed to be sacrificed over and over throughout millennia in order to be reborn as a living commodity for the monopoly Catty & Co. The film is apt in demonstrating how the cute thing solicits care and violence simultaneously, especially in situating the character Tamala within a Bataillean sacrificial economy.[3] The twin excesses of cuteness and cruelty operate together as the engine of an indefinite expenditure, in which she must be sacrificed to forward Catty's existence.

But *Tamala 2010* shows us that excess itself is paradoxically *contained* through consumptive sacrifice, demarcated as a necessary surplus to continue a capitalist economic existence. Although the film was largely relegated to the status of obscure media following its initial release, its recent rerelease on Blu-Ray (complete with supplementary academic commentary) speaks to the film's continued relevance. That this rerelease coincided with the writing of this very article aligns with my analysis of its logic of deferred renewal and the uncanny afterlife of the cute commodity. Also, the film is continued in several spinoffs and a

3. See Raine (2011, 203).

promised feature-length sequel, *Tamala 2030: A Punk Cat in Dark,* and its prescience demonstrates how the cute continues to posit itself as novel through the cycles of renewal and destruction.[4] This perpetual production of novelty raises a central question: how is this surplus, of life in the cute object that is produced by the technical form, contained and managed within capitalist systems that depend on both continual expenditure and renewal?

To address this, I turn to what Georges Bataille identifies as an "overlooked" dimension of Marx: the sacrificial economy. In order to eliminate material obstacles and return man to an intimacy with his own being, Marx proposes to free the economy of things from all that is extraneous to it. While most interpret this liberation as the removal of material obstacles that hinder human freedom, Bataille rereads Marx to propose a reversal: to free the world from that extraneous *of* things means to free the world from that extraneous *to* things. In other words, to carry Marx's project to its limit is not to emancipate man *from* things, but to dissolve the very separation between them. By inverting Marx's image of man-enslaved-by-things to things-enslaved-by-man, Bataille means to show vis-à-vis sacrifice how Marx *reduces* the commodity in its thingliness to the condition of man. Not only does this rereading of Marx take the soul of the commodity quite seriously (and literally) but it also performs a profane adequation between man and thing, in bringing man down to the level of the thing. The tacit proposition animating Bataille's rereading is therefore that an intimacy, rather than utility, can only truly be felt when things are freed from their economic order in the instance of sacrifice and thus negation. Intimacy is used here not as an affect nor affection towards an object, but as the violent fungibility between man and thing, a condition in which subjects and objects become interchangeable through sacrificial expenditure.

While cute is certainly not a term that Bataille would use to describe the Aztec sacrifices in ancient Mesopotamia, I argue that what is novel about the cute is that it has today become coextensive with a sacrificial economy mediated by technical images. The cute no longer exists as an aesthetic flourish atop economic excess, but instead tethers this sacrificial economy to the technical apparatus of its production. Yet the cute

4. Following *Tamala 2010*'s original release, there have been a few spin-off short films directed by t.o.L: *Tamala on Parade* (2007) and *Tamala's Wild Party* (2007), and *Wake up!! Tamala* (2010). While I don't write about these here, or other Tamala media mix such as books, toys, and other merchandise, the film is increasingly relevant in both its ongoing and prior production, despite being paradoxically known as a piece of "forgotten" or "obscure" media.

invokes intimacy in and for the utilitarian ends of sacrifice and renewal, thereby staging its own contemporaneity. Cuteness is always already an image, and thus a technical regime: neither man nor thing, but mediating and exploiting qualities of both, often with cartoonish flattening and distortion. It is a technical regime not just because it is produced by a technological apparatus, but because of this precise mediation between man and thing, consumption and production. Throughout this piece, I call this mediated form the *image-commodity,* and my contention is that *Tamala 2010* makes its surface limits visible, both through the imaging regimes of its production and the plot's dystopic depiction of a capitalist order in crisis. The cute image-commodity functions as a modality of capitalist endurance under crisis. It puts forth a theory of technical and economic adaptation grounded in neoteny, the evolutionary strategy that retaining juvenile traits allows a species to evolve from within in order to perpetuate itself. The cute thrives not in spite of crisis, but through it.

To give a brief historical background, Tamala is not only a hybrid of several species but also a parody of several of her media predecessors. Her character design references Astro Boy (a robot-boy and prototype for many anime and manga conventions, introduced by Osamu Tezuka in 1952), Doraemon (a robot-cat, predominantly marketed to boys starting from 1969), and Hello Kitty (a cat-girl, marketed to girls by Sanrio beginning in 1974). So situated, it should come as no surprise that the boom of cute, machinic-anthropomorphic animals (or perhaps machinic-zoomorphic humans) in cartoons emerged in the middle of the 20th century, alongside a postwar cybernetic imaginary that reconceptualized the human and nonhuman as parts of a single communicative system.[5] Crucial to these mobile character designs, which can be easily displaced from their original context and shuttled into various media such as manga, anime, and toys, is their hybridity: they frequently combine traits of robot/animal/child, and exploit the overlap that already exists between these species categories. This focus on the character design and transformation of the characters leads to an experience of their vitality, as creatures that take on a life force of their own.[6]

As several scholars of Japan studies have pointed out, *kawaii* (Japanese cute embodied by phenomena like Hello Kitty) became hegemonic

5. For more on anthropomorphic animals in wartime animation, see Lamarre (2010). For a wartime system that incorporates human and nonhuman components, see Galison (1994). For its postwar reckoning and a detailed history of the waves of cybernetics, see Hayles (1999).

6. See Lamarre (2011b, 114).

in the transnational expansion of Japan's soft-power capital, asserting the nation as both influential and benign.[7] This geopolitical softening was entangled with domestic social and economic transformations: in *Millennial Monsters*, Anne Allison posits that the craving for, branding, and fetishization of ever-youthful, animal-like cartoon characters during the dawn of the new millennium in Japan served as surrogate or "shadow families" in response to growing antisociality within Japan's shifting labor and kinship structures (Allison 2006, 91). Allison describes cute Japanese goods as assuaging "intimate alienation," a structural condition in which people remain profoundly disconnected from one another even as they are shuttled together daily between public spaces revolving around work and school. Such goods exert the dual appeal of what she calls "polymorphous perversity" and "techno-animism." In other words, there is a life force that animates these mass-produced toys and gadgets that promise transformation and recombination, and as such supports the further desire for consumption. Marketed as healing agents to repair a growing social rift, they also exacerbate this rift further. This intimate alienation is in part a result of Japan Inc., a post-Fordist model of big business organized around corporations linked to the government that became a template for the nation, a fantasy of abundance that burned out after the economic bubble burst in the 1990s. The aftermath saw a rise in "inexplicable" violence, bullying, social withdrawal, and other ruptures in the fabric of the social. The attachment to cute characters and commodities multiplied, not only domestically but in the global export of "Cool Japan," resulting in parallel enterprises of the cute and the cool abroad. The cute became a surrogate salve for intimacy in the wake of alienation, even as it economically contributed to that alienation through its embeddedness in late-capitalist production. The failure of Japan Inc. did not mark the disappearance of cute, but its entrenchment in and contemporaneity with crisis.

What interests me here is not only the *adoption* of a menagerie of cute objects as a substitute for intimacy, but also the *adaptation* of the

7. While it's not my goal here, nor do I have the space, to address in depth the transnational flows of Japanese soft power that undergird the animation of these cute creatures, such points have been cogently discussed by the scholars cited below. I briefly touch on some of their points in the body of the article in order to hone in on the techno-animist or techno-vital force undergirding the boundaries where image and referent become less rigid, and why the cute is situated on this faultline. One other takeaway from these scholars that is tacitly present in my argument is the notion that Japan is an area that is specific in its *relationality* to other areas, but I neither dwell on the uniqueness of Japan nor find it productive to do so. See Kinsella (2013); Lamarre (2009); and Yano (2009).

image of cute in and as a technical mode. Throughout this article, I use the term techno-animism as shorthand for how cute little creatures project a semblance of vitality, a mechanical effect generated by the force of the animated image—which carries over in their displacement from that image to merchandised goods. This techno-animist adaptation deepens a mode of alienation between humans and objects by exploiting the very affinities that make those objects feel alive. Thus, the cute is a medium and therefore a technical mode *of* alienation. But the cute is also an adaptation strategy *to* alienation. Ngai has suggested that the cute object works like Winnicott's transitional object (such as a doll or blanket), enabling the infant's transition from the world that is exclusively part of the self into a world that is outside of oneself (Ngai 2012, 89–90). This type of object is, for my purposes, a means of mediating and adapting to the world outside of oneself. Otherwise said, it is a technical means of living with alienation, rather than overcoming it.

I begin the first section by analyzing *Tamala 2010* as a film that harnesses a techno-animist force in order to stage a form of adaptation that is known as neoteny. I do this in order to demonstrate that neoteny functions as a technical mode of adaptation, rather than a biological strategy of evolution. In the second half of this article, I develop the political economic dimension of technical neoteny by returning to Marx's suggestion that the commodity possesses a kind of vital force in its imaging. Taking this assertion quite literally, I contend that capital adapts from within through a logic of sacrifice and renewal. Capital is sustained by the very crises it produces, generating a mode of time that appears to reproduce itself endlessly—but not eternally.

I. The Technical Life of Images

Tamala is so sleepy. When we encounter her for the first time she's getting out of bed, stretching and yawning, a small tear rolling down her cheek. Her feline malaise takes on the vulnerable, anthropomorphic quality of a child. Tamala's sleepy teardrop reappears shortly after she's reborn at the end of the film. Like most of the characters in the film, her head is round and too big for her body; her exaggerated proportions are infantile. Her puerile voice (she's voiced by Hisayo Mochizuki, an actress known for playing young girls and childish women) and the bubbly sound effects emphasizing her steps serve a similar purpose, casting in a playful light her more aggressive traits throughout the film. Tamala smokes cigarettes, skateboards, fronts a punk band, lands a roundhouse kick onto other characters (including a vacuously infantile kitten), and

signs off with a blasé "fucking goodbye" in English. The aggressive action done *by* Tamala is the flipside of the violence done *to* Tamala: she's eventually eaten by the sadistic German shepherd in police getup, Kentauros. Her skull, bones, and pack of cigarettes plop to the ground, horrifying the only witness, her boyfriend Michelangelo. This scene sets in motion her eventual rebirth and the revelation that Tamala is just one component in the machinery of the ancient sacrificial cult Minerva, which has evolved into the conglomerate Catty & Co. Catty uses Tamala as a mascot in its advertising and monopolizes the world of the film, its logo a stylized rendering of Tamala's eyes. Both the violence done to and by her are tempered by the cute in that it produces a vitality, a renewable life force produced by the pliant lines, round contouring, and ebullient noises that make her up: in *Tamala 2010*, violence never results in tragedy.

Whereas in life, a cute kitten's endearing qualities are indeed based on their vulnerability to violence, the animated anthropomorphic kitten incites violence because she can outlive it. Anime and media studies scholar Thomas Lamarre in his three-part series on the "speciesism" of 20th-century Japanese animated characters, contends that the technical ensemble of animation production led to an emphasis on the animation of animal and animal-like characters in cartoons. The result of this ensemble can be seen in animation's formal elements, including an emphasis on geometric shapes and fluidity of lines, fewer expectations for verisimilitude in motion, and fixity of camera—thus equating the deformability of characters with a kind of vitality or resilience. In other words, such elements channel the mechanical force of the moving image onto the characters, which Lamarre formalizes as "techno-animism" or "techno-vitalism" (Lamarre 2011b, 113). Animated violence deforms but never destroys, and deformation is for that reason also vital renewal. This susceptibility to deformation is exemplified by the squash-and-stretch, one of the foundational techniques of animation, which emerged in the 1930s and was later formalized by Disney animators Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston. The elasticity of the animated body in motion forms a recursive circuit: deformation is always followed by a return to the original shape, so securing the *endurance* of deformation.

Why is it that this vitalism always has a prefix? And why is it that while the root appears to be substitutable, the prefix *techno-*, which references *technics*, is fixed? Lately, the term technics has seen a boom in popularity, especially in media philosophy, for how it conceptualizes the relation of development that proceeds between *technique*, as embodied

or operative action, and *technology*, as an objectified form. Technics names the processes that bind these together, in which techniques like doing and making co-evolve with the technical objects made. It is apt, then, as the term overcomes the binaries of inorganic/organic, machine/organism, and nature/culture by showing how these oppositions are produced within, and continually negotiated by, technical processes. Seen this way, adding the prefix *techno*-to *animism* and *vitalism* is no mere modification of life. Rather, it is a surplus, inhuman life force that can be taken and reinvested. This surplus of life in Lamarre's use of "techno-animist" emphasizes a technical quality through *animation* as medium, *animality* as species, and *animism* as an experience of life channeled by a technical force. If these aspects are realized as technical force and then redoubled into the cute image, they also produce an excess and a potential that are ready to be mined.[8]

At the technical basis of animation in the era of the animation stand—an apparatus that combined layered celluloid drawings with a fixed or limited-motion camera—techno-animism is channeled into the moving image through character design (Lamarre 2011b, 113). If cinema animates the human body, then animation privileges the nonhuman and inhuman: populated by robots, spirits, and nonhuman animals, there is an extra-sensuousness to the life forces of the little creatures in the animated image. Lamarre writes that the plasticity of animated characters do not "*represent* the force of the mechanical succession of images" but instead "affords the actual experience of it"—and such characters channel their own technical force through the succession of images, "experienced as an animal force, as vitality, as life itself."[9] The plasticity of the character, as Lamarre points out elsewhere, is what allows the character's vulnerability to violence and renewability

8. The cute of gestures and expressions in living beings are already technical prior to being captured by a camera—that is, they are techniques. However, this also happens in gestures that mimic and anticipate the flat screen mediating images: From heart fingers to viral dances, these performances develop in tandem with the presence of a camera. And cute images are able to reproduce, therefore carrying on the life of, such techniques. Neither are representations of the other, but they instead form a series of technical operations that together bring about the animated image-commodity.
Further, these imaging techniques are made most apparent in their *failure*. From Kim Jong-un's attempt to form the K-pop popularized heart fingers when meeting with South Korean President Moon Jae-in in 2018 to critiques of the Chinese Communist Party commissioned Marx anime, *The Leader* (2019); these attempts at cuteness fall flat not only because they're seen to be done in bad faith, but in their failure to work as circulable *images* that successfully synthesize the very remote—the alienated—into the mendacious and the intimate.

9. *Emphasis mine*.

thereafter.[10] As the moving image is channeled into a plastic embodiment of that force, we're not, for example, surprised when Wile E. Coyote is alive in a subsequent episode after an anvil falls on him. This plasticity to the image is what Sergei Eisenstein has famously rendered "plasmaticity," due to the fact that there is a loosening between the image and its referent (Lamarre 2011b, 117). Lamarre's argument focuses on the transformation in Japanese wartime animation of "racial others into cute nonhumans," which has two major effects on the aforementioned loosening: 1. Through a sense of play, there seems to be an overcoming of racial, ethnic, and national divisions and conflicts; 2. The plasticity of animation, channeled into the humanlike animals through the force of the moving image, makes "decoding happen materially." This implies that the material operations of the medium itself, which are technical and kinetic, are expressed in the image. The animated image overcomes certain antagonisms that it portrays through not only synthesis, but also plasticity, thus its formal distinction from live-action cinema. We can see this in *Tamala 2010*, as her character is a synthesis of not only referents to characters like Astro Boy, but also species—she's not completely girl, nor robot, nor cat, though she retains traits of all of these without purporting to represent any one faithfully. She invites the viewer not to decode these separate aspects of herself, instead fabulating the mythos of her own being by drawing on the technical force that has produced her. Life is introduced into the social and political vis-à-vis the technical. As already mentioned above, we can understand techno-animism from here on as shorthand for this surplus, inhuman life produced by the animated image. This surplus life will later become important for a political economic understanding of how the image-commodity entrenches alienation.

These techno-animist qualities are exploited with a twist in *Tamala 2010*. The film typically emphasizes a flat, planar image by utilizing a black-and-white palette, minimal shading, and sliding planes that animate background objects with a bobbing motion reminiscent of late 1990s and early 2000s Flash games. Its minimalist, geometric style draws on both postwar Japanese anime like *Astro Boy*, as well as Takashi Murakami's postmodern art movement, the superflat. The aesthetics of *Tamala 2010* thus invoke a temporal gap, employing both 20th and 21st-century aesthetics. This emphasis on the planar, sliding quality of characters moving in their milieux is exploded when the film abruptly

10. See Lamarre (2010).

cuts to the third dimension. The giant robot-cat-deity Tatla—depicted headless, ascending an elevator, and as an idol of the cult of Minerva—is the only 3D-rendered character in the film. These computer-generated (3D-CGI) scenes are cut to between Tamala's superflat, planar animation. While visually distinct, they retain a parallelism with the 2D scenes: after Tamala is beheaded by Kentauros, Tatla regains her head, appearing as the engine of Tamala's rebirth. The Tamala-Tatla relation, and the interplay between 2D and 3D image which that relation structures, remains ambiguous until the film's apotheosis. In the culminating scene, a now-cephalic Tatla and Tamala are on screen together for the first time (Figure 1). Anticipating Tamala's resurrection, this sequence pulses with vibrancy as the frame is rendered for the first time in bold, superflat planes of color. It is also in the montage leading up to Tamala's rebirth that the film introduces another formal rupture: a brief live-action shot of a low-angled, underexposed view of trees swaying in the wind against a fractured, pale sky.

Plotwise, all of this is anticipated by the revelation that Tamala is perpetually reincarnated by Tatla. The latter is worshipped by the ancient cult Minerva (now Catty & Co.), who use the former in their ambitions to return to power. Tatla's code commands, "buy things, destroy things, buy things so that the world will advance infinitely." While Tamala's own intention is to return to her real mother on her home planet Orion, Tamala is continually reborn and sacrificed to forward Catty & Co.'s interplanetary expansion. This absurdist, conspiratorial exegesis happens in a flash-forward presentation given by the wizened academic cat Professor Nominos.[11] It is in the scene of Tamala's reincarnation that Tamala and Tatla are given back their heads after both being portrayed acephalically. The viewer is encouraged to glean from their characterization that Tatla is somehow simultaneously an evolution of Tamala as well as her ancestor. More uncanny than cute, Tatla appears as a towering, robotic feline figure, ascending a futuristic, noir cyberpunk metropolis throughout the first half of the film. Her tail a wire, her character design is where species meet: she conjoins the materiality of a robot, the figure of a human, and certain features of a cat. Voiced by Béatrice Dalle in the film's only French-language role, she more explicitly than

11. Professor Nominos is, as it would appear, cute Michelangelo's future form (his full name is Michelangelo Nominos). Later, the two meet as the elderly Nominos reveals to his past self the plot on Tamala's life. What's pertinent to this article is that Nominos, like Tamala, also lives forever. However, his flesh rots and he trails maggots everywhere, including onto Michelangelo's couch. This decay provides a foil to Tamala's own eternal life by emphasizing her neoteny and renewal.

Tamala invokes the figure of a gynoid. Her ancestrality, on the other hand, is gestured to in an earlier scene, when we see a headless statue of Tatla that is marked, "Symbol of the ancient religious cult of Minerva, suppressed approx. B.C. (Before Cats) 4000 [.] A Goddess destroyed and reborn in infinite succession, according to legend." Tatla, according to Professor Nominos, is a goddess of communication. Through the conspiracy, he posits that she controls the postal system, phone lines, fiber optics, and the REM sleep of children under the age of one. And so scenes of Tatla are cut to when Tamala dreams. The viewer is also frequently reminded that Tamala is robotic herself, even as her figurative image is positioned beside the three-dimensional Tatla. This dyad of Tamala-Tatla is riddled with features of heterogeneous technical regimes that also link them together in a shared genealogy.

Even though we are encouraged to think that Tatla is Tamala's predecessor, this priority confounds what we know about their technicity, as Tatla appears in the more "advanced" mode of 3D-CGI. The dyad of Tamala and Tatla stages a problem of priority and reproduction: *who came first, and by what logic of technical development?* If, as Bataille writes, "reproduction leads to the discontinuity of beings but brings into play their continuity," then Tamala's reincarnation through Tatla demonstrates how technical reproduction complicates any stable distinction between origin and descendant (Bataille 1986, 13). It is not simply that what appears to be constructed by a newer technology (Tatla) might be temporally prior, while what draws on an older animation style (Tamala) might in fact be secondary. Rather, their relation reveals technical forms that do not necessarily precede nor succeed on another, but adapt without a fixed origin.

Figure 1. Tamala and Tatla meet. Film still from *Tamala 2010: A Punk Cat in Space*, directed by t.o.L (2002). Screenshot by author.

Now that we have set the scene for the film, I can establish my argument regarding this priority. The techno-animism of Tamala happens in this scene through both representational and material means: the existence of Tatla and Tamala on the same plane reveals an incongruity in their respective imaging techniques. First I demonstrate how these techniques, which so far I have called the two-dimensional and three-dimensional, reveal the image as an *obstructive surface*. Throughout this article, I use the term *surface* not to mark illusion or lack, but to name a zone of technical plasticity—where the image, while reduced and delimited, nevertheless bears the latent capacity to stretch, deform, or reconfigure itself anew. These surfaces are obstructive not simply in their visual flatness or depth, but in their exposure of technical constraints. They form a reference to the techno-animation behind the image, a life force that threatens to break through the screen and reproduce otherwise. The 2D animation, with its planar, superflat logic, initially appears as a limit that can be ruptured by another technical force. Yet the 3D-CGI, when made visible as rigged and rotational, also obstructs: it reveals its own apparatus, its axis-based calculations, and in doing so discloses a different kind of reduction—one that operates under the guise of depth and realism. After Tamala's resurrection, the film returns to its original, flattened plane, but now we perceive this flatness as a choice instead of a default; a surface that retains the memory of other imaging regimes. Yet these distinct imaging regimes share a technological basis at their core: the techniques and the logic of computational modeling. In my analysis of the different regimes used

here, animation becomes not a linear mode of development that proceeds directly from 2D to 3D, or vice versa, but instead two incompatible imaging systems that share one logic. This is what I call the neotenous image, as it reveals two technical tendencies of producing movement that result in an impasse in the development of the image: rather than successive development through different imaging regimes, different imaging regimes are preserved here to exploit their various potentials. It is the technical tendencies of these regimes working in tandem to produce neoteny as a mode of time, that allows the image-commodity to reproduce itself—as we will soon see in Part II.

The sequence of Tamala's rebirth is unusual in its display of technoanimism because the film's titular character in fact *both* represents the mechanical force of images—though in this case it's not only a gesture to the sequencing of frames—in addition to channeling her own vital force, as in Lamarre's description earlier. After Tamala dies, Michelangelo sits mourning her on a bench when an eerie mechanical paw reaches out from underneath. Later we see the same scene repeated with Tamala's own round paw reaching out, as she climbs out from under the bench to reveal that she has been reborn. This visual match implies that the mechanical paw is both her paw and also not, referencing directly a succession that is technical in nature. This succession should seem counterintuitive, considering Tamala herself is already part robot. Another interpretation is that this mechanical paw belongs to Tatla. However, this is even more unsettling in terms of imaging, as it suggests that, in principle, Tatla could inhabit the same 2D realm—and be rendered using the same linework—as Tamala. These parallel scenes bookend when Tamala and Tatla converge in the composite scene, depicted respectively in 2D and 3D. When considering the visual match on Tamala's paw and the (more archetypal) robotic paw, their meeting not only highlights Tamala's status as part-machine but also the technical basis of her rebirth. Between the dyad of giant 3D robot-cat and miniature 2D robot-cat, a theory of technical development appears through the play on dimensionality. In representing the mechanical force of images, Tamala does not simply imply a mechanical *succession* of the biological, in the manner of a stereotypical depiction of a cyborg. Instead, this succession stages in the technical domain a biological impetus, that is evolutionary adaptation.[12] What animates technical succession is in

12. Lamarre differentiates in his piece, "The biopolitics of companion species," between animal-like representations of human populations versus the imaging of those populations. The former says, in the example of Japanese wartime cartoons with little companion species, that monkeys represent the Chinese and bunnies the Koreans. The latter instead sublates the difference among races into species difference, in which there are no equivalents drawn between a certain species and a certain ethnic group. Instead, the sublation of the difference functions as a biopolitical means of integrating the various ethnicities into one mass where difference operates negatively. Tamala does something

fact a vital force, as implied by techno-animism. Because Tamala is not merely portrayed as robotic, but instead channels this vital force through her formal contrast with Tatla, their technical succession should also be understood as a form of evolutionary adaptation.

Central to an understanding of its technical basis, the film comes in the era after the animation stand: the camera is no longer static but simulated; motion is produced by keyframing parameters like the rotation of digital models; and Tamala's digitally animated 2D form is CGI-composited into the hybrid environments she traverses. As such, both Tamala and Tatla are computational images—though Tamala is arguably better disguised, as her scenes are shown with camera pans and a limited style that imitates 2D cel animation. Jacob Gaboury, in his book *Image Objects,* demonstrates how the materiality of the contemporary world is shaped by computer graphics (hence the term *image object*) and vice versa. In so doing, Gaboury attends to the digital apparatus of image-making: he argues that most computational images operate by way of their invisibility, designed as they are to mimic and reproduce the formal elements of media that have preceded them. Because the computational image is arguably the medium that is evaluated exclusively on the success of its disguise, "if an image reads as computer graphics, it has failed its simulation" (Gaboury 2021, 4). Tatla, however, fails in this simulation egregiously. Not only does her character design display her robotic core, but her virtual skeleton is stretched and rotated in an axis—in a direct exposition of the rigging process behind computational modeling (Figure 2).

In this composite scene, where Tamala and Tatla are shown together against a blank background, the hyperbole of both regimes used to create the characters is revealed. Tamala, divorced from her usual milieu, is much more faithfully superflat: the character is no longer depicted in limited linear perspective, which showcases depth in her gliding across the scenery, and this blank space cannot privilege scale between background layers. The composite 2D and 3D image exploits the gap in Tamala-Tatla's characterization in an inversion of depth in the image, to expose their imaging techniques: on the one hand, there is the foreclosure of any depth beyond the surface; on the other, depth operates on a computational plane that has calculated dimensions mathematically across x, y, and z axes—through which lighting and movement emerge. Not only are these direct displays of two disparate technical modes of animation, in which one is supposed to succeed the other, but also displays of two different temporal modes. Let me start with the former.

Tamala's 2D modality might appear to reference the "analog" animation stand, with the image's plasticity indexing a putatively more

similar here, in which she is not simply representing a robot and a cat chimera, but mediating the technicity between biological and mechanical life.

naturalistic illustration technique, while Tatla's 3D-CGI suggests a more advanced technical force by being explicitly "digital," thus explaining her character's emphasis on the technological and mechanical. To clarify, I'm not arguing that Tamala and Tatla shown together posits a succession of technical regimes where the three-dimensional has succeeded the two-dimensional. In fact, the term *dimension*, which I've been using up until now as a standard name for the 3D-CGI graphics of Tatla's scenes, is misleading: it may conjure up some relation to Einsteinian spacetime or worse, evoke the idea that the perception of depth provided by 3D graphics is somehow an expansion of the two-dimensional. Rather, there is a technical difference between these two types of images that is based on their divergence in perspectival technique—or in the distinct ways they play with it. Tamala's monochromatic milieu in the majority of the film is flat and limited in its reference to classical animation, but when she encounters Tatla, the scene is injected with color, pushing the image into an overtly superflat style characterized by the collapse of depth cues and heightened surface effects (Figure 3). This momentary production of an unambiguously superflat image can be read, following Murakami's original intentions, as *nonperspectival* in being non-Cartesian—its 2D imaging rejecting classical linear perspective.

However, Lamarre has critiqued Murakami's understanding of the superflat as oppositional to Western geometric perspective: Lamarre posits that the superflat relies on an *orthogonal logic* of depiction, rather than a lack of one (Lamarre 2009, 120). The latter uses diagonal lines to divide the image into a set of planes, such that depth is imparted through proportional reduction and overlap. This, importantly, forms one obstructive surface and logic of seeing. In a statement evocative of the Deleuzian surface, Lamarre points out that in the idiom of the superflat, "depth appears on the surface" (Ibid., 110). Consider Figure 3, in which the planes of Tamala's room appear as if converging on the single point of Tatla's eye peering through the window: this logic is disrupted by the other objects in the room, most easily seen in orthogonal edges of the bureau and books. Color is made use of here in such a way that all objects in the scene are homogenous in their vibrancy. Tatla's eye, the only element rendered in linear perspective, appears oddly situated in its projection of one-point perspective into the room—as if breaking through the flat plane. So Tatla appears to look not at Tamala, but directly at us. The convexity of Tatla hollows out the superflat, exposing its obstruction.

Tatla's appearance in the same scene as Tamala then creates a multi-perspectival, anamorphic image. To show how this image formed using obstructive surfaces creates a temporal problem, I propose that

we treat the idea of anamorphosis in a manner following Jacques Lacan's analysis of Hans Holbein's 1533 painting, *The Ambassadors*. In its mapping of space through linear perspective, Lacan identifies the question of "apprehending a temporal function" or instantaneity, and it is anamorphosis that establishes this relation of vision to time (Lacan 1998, 87). At the painting's bottom center, between the two ambassadors, appears a flying streak. It is only when the viewer turns with a lateral position to the painting, do they see that the streak is a skull. Lacan identifies in this the visibilization of "the subject as annihilated" (Ibid., 88). Holbein's painting explodes linear perspective by integrating it within a new technical paradigm of embodied viewing. In his writing on cinema and animation as coeval paradigms, Lamarre calls anamorphosis the "mutation of one-point perspective," where in promoting its technism, an "impotentiality" of the image is uncovered (Lamarre 2011a, 138). This temporal function in *The Ambassadors* happens through the delay in seeing that is conducive to bodily technique, and thus reveals the technism of Cartesian perspective. The impotentiality in *Tamala 2010* is the coming together of two technical regimes of perspective, one based on orthogonal and the other on linear logic, which exposes a gap between two successive temporal regimes that are coeval. The temporal function of this image is not delay like in Holbein's painting, but neoteny: two developmental tendencies of the image are apprehended simultaneously (more on this soon). This gap is brought to light in the movement that results from these perspectival arrangements.

Particularly out of the ordinary in this scene is Tamala's immobility: when depicted alongside Tatla against a blank background, she merely bobs and floats (Figure 2), and when confined to her room she is bound in *kegadoru* (or "injured doll") bandages, such that the only sign of life is her blinking (Figure 3).[13] The superflat notoriously deals with movement on a lateral plane, in which the lack of emphasis between foreground and background encourages a lateral movement of the eyes across a dehierarchized, still image.[14] Her limited mobility is anomalous in a film about her travels through interplanetary space—and it is in major part her buoyant movement throughout the film that provides the flat planes through which she moves a sense of depth. It's as if her existence in the same image as Tatla must be restricted, since Tatla's ability to stretch and rotate a full 360 degrees operates in a different range

13. *Kegadoru* (ケガドル) emerged as both a medical fetish and fashion trend in Japan around the turn of the century. French photographer Romain Slocombe documented this fetish, in which young Japanese women are wrapped in bandages implying faux injuries, in his book *City of the Broken Dolls*. While I don't address the cute's structure of fetishism as specifically erotic in this article, there is quite obviously an erotic dimension at play in the life of cute objects. This dimension is implicit in my analysis of the intimacy such objects induce. See Slocombe (1997).

14. See Lamarre (2009, 111).

of motion. Tatla, as an avatar of the computational model, generates the sense that she is able to move through any spatial plane—as all of such a model's movements have been indefinitely calculated. Yet if Tamala begins to glide or move in her buoyant way, beyond blinking or bobbing, that movement will disrupt the indefinite open set of Tatla's range of motion. In other words, despite the computational model's ability to generate all senses of movement, thus freeing animation from its limited means, it is Tamala's gliding that exposes a limit in the model's imaging technique. The two technical regimes are thus *both* obstructive surfaces, expressed through their different orientations to generating movement in time. Let me explain.

The two regimes, though visually distinct, interpenetrate each other when considered through the logic of the moving image. While one may appear to be the ancestor or reincarnation of the other within the 2D/3D dichotomy, it may come as a surprise that 3D modeling still operates according to an underlying orthogonal logic. Orthographic projection is a common technique in 3D modeling across engineering, architecture, and animation: it relies on projection based on orthogonal perspective to eliminate depth distortion and ensure uniform, measurable scale. John May calls the electrical (or digital) image-model that comes after drawing "postorthography" (May 2017, 19). Unlike the orthography of hand-drawn images that are predicated on the "linear historical time" of drawings and clocks, May argues that postorthography operates in the "real time […] of statistical thought," as "models contain *simulations* of all possible future drawings." In other words, the computational model needs not to *capture* an already extant object—instead it *constructs* the image-object vis-à-vis calculations of vectors and planes.[15] The computational image is statistical because it anticipates all possibilities of light, shadow, depth, perspective, and even movement beforehand in an unseeing calculation, that later becomes an image. When interpolated into the moving image, as Tatla is, this model provides an imaging regime based in the indefinite time of the open set. The open set of the computer model already begins indefinitely: rather than the capture of a real object, it is based on calculation. As such, it is differential rather than numerical. This shared basis in orthographic modeling, which is statistical and anticipatory in its differential nature, makes it such that the formally divergent dyad of Tamala-Tatla can be generated through the same computational regime—even though they index different potentialities of motion.

The anamorphosis of Tamala-Tatla results in a composite of potentialities and regimes, that share the same technical basis of orthogonal, computational modeling. In the first regime, the imitation of older

15. See Gaboury (2021).

modes of animation results in a planar mode of time based on Tamala's gliding on the surface. This produces the instant of seeing from various perspectives all at once. Meanwhile, Tatla's exposure of the digital model reveals an infinitely calculable temporality that is at odds with Tamala's surficial one.

If Tatla, as she stretches and flexes in this scene showing off the rig behind her production, has exposed the real time of the computational image, it is perhaps easy to argue that Tamala is a computational image in disguise as a superflat, retro, analog image. However, as we have seen earlier with the visual match on robotic paw(s), it is difficult to say which image better or more faithfully captures either organic or mechanical modes of being. To again examine their different logics of motion: Tamala's movements are interpolated expressively in the Bézier curvature of her squash-and-stretch buoyancy, while Tatla's are interpolated exactingly, as she is clearly modeled on the mechanics of the human body with human limitations to movement—limitations that are later deformed with her own stretching.[16] Is Tatla, then, "more organic" because her range of motion is usually more faithful to a human and Tamala's to a toy? Of course not. In the transformation from a newer form of animation that better imitates human motion (Tatla) to an imitation of an older form of animation that plays with deformation more naturalistically (Tamala), and back, we can see that there is an impetus to unite the two under one genealogy, but not where the origin of that impetus comes from.

Moreover, these are two different means of approaching motion with regard to perspective: one which wears its depth on the surface, by imitating an older form of animation; the other by producing a newer mode of animation, while imitating an older form of depth. But both actually proceed from a virtual projection at their basis: there is no view of an object that is orthographic to the naked human eye, as the point of showing an orthographic object is to provide animators, architects, and engineers with scalar measurements. Orthogonal views assume multiple perspectives in both instances, and in the case of Tamala and Tatla the abyss between such perspectives reveals an impotentiality of a statistical, calculable imaging regime. The anamorphosis created here is temporal. This is not to say that Tamala appears on a different plane of time than Tatla, but rather that she exposes the underlying logic of Tatla's mode, as the separation of the image into logical planes (the orthography of Tatla's modeling) is worn on the surface in Tamala's superflat. In other words, Tamala's image asks us to *see* orthographically—despite

16. Bézier curves are used to both form the shape of round objects, as well as "model the smooth movement of objects through space, like the bounce of a ball or the tactile drag of an icon as you move it across your screen" (Ibid., 94).

the fact that Tatla's image has exposed the orthographic technology that is computational modeling.

Tamala's immobility gestures towards a potential in her movement that promises to break through the total set, when composited with an image in which all space and movement are infinitely calculable. It is her movement's contrast with Tatla's that exposes the impotentiality of an image that anticipates all possibilities. There is thus a potential activated in their composite image—that is, through what is properly cinematic in the synthesis of these images—that opens the image up to adaptation and return. In the composited cinematic image, object simulation falls away to privilege a temporality that becomes other than the time of the apparatuses that produced it, that is, the time of computation and statistics. This potential of cinema is echoed in the earlier shot of the swaying trees, which gestures to the idea that animation and cinema are not discrete or sequential forms, but rather coexisting tendencies that mutually adapt the other. To ask which came first—Tamala or Tatla, the organic or the mechanical, 2D animation or 3D modeling, cinema or animation—would lead to an abyssal problem of genealogy.

Figure 2. Tatla shows off her own stretchiness.

Figure 3. Tatla peers into Tatla's room, which is rendered in superflat style.

To sum up, the anamorphosis that occurs in *Tamala 2010* posits two technical regimes of animation as a transformation of one *into* the other, without a necessary priority of one *over* the other. Also diegetically speaking, we should recall that 3D Tatla is reincarnated as 2D Tamala in order to bring the cult of Minerva back into power through the monopoly of Catty, to the point where Catty and Minerva become another dyad that keeps reproducing itself in time. At the narratorial level too, an originary progenitor is perpetually referenced without any originary moment. The image is flattened back into cute Tamala only to restart the cycle of her rebirth, rather than to show Tatla as her evolution or final form. Tatla is both supposed to generate Tamala, as well as become her successor. The diegetic idea that Tamala is not only reincarnated *by* Tatla is mirrored at an extra-diegetic level, where both emerge from the same orthographic modeling regime, in that she is also a reincarnation *of* her. They are both 'newer' forms of animation that, in their alternative forms of depiction, poorly hide that they share a one technical basis.

Cute is therefore not an original locus nor a telos of technical development; instead, it is an aesthetic that captures a modality of development that can be called neotenous. This modality happens *between* individuals rather than through them, which is why the dyad is a necessary form here. While the concept of neoteny remains debated among evolutionary biologists, who first proposed its definition as the retention of juvenile traits in adulthood, neoteny's appearance in animation is well documented. Stephen Gould, for example, described how characters like Mickey Mouse appear to age in reverse, looking younger and

younger in their appearance over time (Lamarre 2011b, 122). Repurposing this idea to show how the nonhuman animal in anime captures a politics of life, Lamarre proposes a conceptual shift from "cute" to "neoteny" in order to understand cute as a "process and potential" rather than an enumeration of features (Ibid., 126). He writes, "Neoteny implies a cuteness that is not simply cute. It implies an evolutionary force or process that is nonlinear, nonteleological and immanent to the organism […] What is more, neoteny entails a surplus or excess that crosses species" (Ibid.). Neoteny is a form of adaptation that is not about succession. It would be more accurate to describe neoteny as the retention of anachronisms that allows for a new individual to form without classical reproduction—like the budding of saltwater hydrozoans, the schizogeny of protozoa, or a starfish growing a new arm.[17] Likewise, Tamala and Tatla emerge from the same stolon, that is the computer. To further this concept in terms of technicity, the animated image itself captures a modality of development alternative to the character design of nonhuman animals and the figure of the robot, which should be dismissed as a fantasy of the technical object anyway.

The neotenous image is given to us in *Tamala 2010* not solely as a style or in the traits of character design, but as a temporal form that reveals the technicity of the image. It captures the simultaneous retention and recombination of several distinct imaging techniques that reference historical modes of producing an image: the limited motion of the orthographic superflat, the sliding planes of 2D animation, 3D computational modeling, and even photographic cinematography—all mixed together without resolving them into a clear sequence of development, nor integrated so that they all become components of a cohesive image. Rather than a linear evolution of media, the neotenous image dramatizes a recursive adaptation, wherein the difference between "older" and "newer" modes becomes confounded through computational simulation. However, the new composite image retains the active potentialities to transform the image otherwise. This technical neoteny is above all foregrounded in how the image becomes cinematic in its movement, and what kinds of temporality it presupposes. By staging two different interpolations of movement—the statistical smoothness of Tatla's rigged CG body and Tamala's Bézier-curved bounce—the film makes visible the various tendencies of animation-cum-cinema. In this way, the neotenous image reveals an originless technical succession that mirrors the commodity form's own endless rebirth: it is cute not because it is new, but because it promises to stay new, indefinitely.

What the cute gives us in Tamala is an exact formulation of the temporal protocol proper to neoteny: a constant redoubling of a lack of origin

17. See Simondon (2020, 201).

as that origin's constant renewal. We've seen how in *Tamala 2010*, neoteny is a form of adaptation that not only refers to developing biological traits, but also technical ones. The deployment of neoteny in Tamala is a way to grasp the pluripotentiality of a being coming into formation in the process of technical development.[18] Neoteny's aesthetic dimension, which is still crucial for understanding how such development appears, is what I have so far referred to as the cute, surficial image. As such, neoteny in *Tamala 2010* demonstrates a form of originless adaptation that is indefinite but not eternal. Moreover, it is indefinite *because* it is originless: neoteny requires the (dis)continuity of the image's reproduction to persist as a set of anachronistic tendencies that can be exploited at any point. On screen, violent sacrifice is this image's engine of asexual reproduction. Technical neoteny, while promising intimacy, is not sexually reproductive: the image must be reproduced in its *consumption*. This promise of continuity amid violent sacrifice is both what converts cuteness into an aesthetic register of neoteny, and furthermore, what makes the mode of neotenous development proper to a capitalist political economy.

This technical neoteny differs from the neoteny of strictly biological life: the pluripotentiality of technicity in *Tamala 2010* is determinative of her alienation as a commodity. What makes Tamala, the brand that is inseparable from the character, endearing is that she will perpetually be cute and one year old—and that her potential will always be tapped into for her renewal as a commodity, through the commodity's rebirth. Neoteny here isn't wholly indeterminate potentiality; what makes the neoteny of the technical-object-as-commodity cute is that it promises its continuing existence in the face of violent sacrifice. The promise of life channeled through the cute commodity is one of intimacy, which is not merely a paradox to its partner, alienation, but the engine that produces alienation. The resilience of the image-as-technical-object should not be seen in a vacuum, but as an adaptation of such an image to and as a species of capital. It can only maintain itself by tapping into neoteny as a technical mode of development.

II. Intimacy and Alienation of the Image-Commodity

Tamala 2010 self-parodies. It both incites and thwarts any easy readings of its plot as a conspiracy of consumptive desire, begging for some

18. For the pluripotentiality of neoteny, see Ibid.
In the afterword to Muriel Combes' book on Simondon, Thomas Lamarre points out that neoteny is not a "literal movement backwards in linear time," but "one way to grasp concretely the role of pluripotentiality or preindividual being in the context of evolutionary development." See Lamarre's "Afterword: Humans and Machines" in Combes (2013).

academic analysis on the cute commodity circulated under capitalism.[19] In the flashforward I alluded to earlier, Professor Nominos gives a lengthy exegesis of the first half of the film in a presentation titled "Circulation and Negative Theology in the Age of Capitalism: On the Affinity between Catty & Co. and the Ancient Cult of Minerva." Again, it is here that he conspiratorially expounds on how Tamala must perpetually be sacrificed and then reborn, thus remaining one year old interminably. Nominos uses the fact that Tamala has appeared as a mascot in various advertisements since 1869, and sporadically over the next 150 years, to explain how Catty & Co. has become synonymous with the cult of Minerva. Tamala's rebirth fuels the dual agenda of propagation and return to her real mother on Orion. She promulgates the consumption of Tamala-branded products wherever she goes in her voyage of attempted return to her origins, upon which the film hints that the capitalist project will have been completed and thus terminated. Indeed, the desire to consume in *Tamala 2010*—as well as to consume Tamala herself—is portrayed as a search to retrieve a lost intimacy with the universe, what Bataille has described as an attempt to manifest transparency in the world that has separated beings from things (Bataille 1991, 57). This separation is what characterizes the economic order of commodities outside the realm of sacrifice, which are exchangeable only in the profanity of their utilitarian relation. Sacrifice, by contrast, resacralizes things (Bataille's example is slaves) as participants in being. In the realm of sacrifice, the separation between beings and things is temporarily returned to its intimate, unalienated state.

The film is populated with a dizzying array of overt references to film, literature, and advertisement: Tamala is seen holding Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* as she falls asleep in the museum of extinct animals; the Minerva cult operating as both a postal service and corporate monopoly directly borrows from Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying Lot 49;* Stanley Kubrick's infamous bloody twins from *The Shining* have a cameo; as does Kentucky Fried Chicken's mascot, the Colonel, with an axe through his head. However, one crucial covert influence that undergirds major plot points is the work of Bataille. With his secret society of sacrifice aptly named *Acéphale* ("headless") and his writing on economies of sacrifice that exploit excess in *The Accursed Share*, it appears as no coincidence that both Tamala and Tatla are depicted headless prior to the former's resurrection. Bataille's Acéphale is simultaneously

19. Choose-your-own-adjective capitalism (cybernetic capitalism, carceral capitalism, platform capitalism, slop capitalism, etc.) has been a trend in academia for quite some time now. More than ever, this diagnostic seems less often to periodize changing relations of production and more often as a signal of individual academic branding and following this, neologism coinage.

anthropomorphic and incomplete, man and God, ecstatic and agonized—just like the Tamala-Tatla dyad.[20] The cuteness of Tamala herself, Emily Raine has proposed, represents both the profanity of utilitarian consumption, as well as its sacrificial object (Raine 2011, 200). Because Tamala's sacrifice serves to maintain and reproduce Catty & Co.'s hegemony, her expenditure as the excess or "accursed share" is necessary to ensure future returns. Not only does she return, reincarnated, but she also brings about future returns, economically speaking, as a consumable commodity renewed for continued circulation.

Here I interject to address the parable of the film: while the reel (or filmic) Tamala is a commodity, her character has followed in the footsteps of her animated predecessors, whose displaceability from the cinematic frame enables their merchandisability as toys, candies, and other goods. It's no secret that the popularity of a character helps to fuel their future appearance on screen. The process of Tamala's imaging already carries her status as image-commodity to real life. A parable is not a metaphor: the reel Tamala and the real Tamala coincide in their reproduction. This is what I henceforth call the image-commodity. It will be expounded upon soon, in a reading of Marx's oft-cited passage on the commodity fetish.

Tamala the character, like all commodities, is a mystified index of social relations: her form obscures the labor and technical conditions that produce her. Unlike all commodities, the film exposes the remediation of those relations as a step normally thought to be subsumed within mystification. The film stages those social and technical relations through the neotenous image and its production. In what follows, I extend this logic through the figure of sacrifice—not as a narrative motif, but a structural operation that visibilizes the commodity's reproduction in its destruction and rebirth. Sacrifice becomes a privileged instance of experiencing intimacy between human and commodity, which, following Bataille's reuptake of Marx, also becomes a moment of *adequation* (the alignment of man and thing). I argue that the liberation produced by sacrifice, wherein the categories of subject and object are momentarily undone, is not a reversal of alienation, but its adaptation. Through neoteny as a technical mode of production, sacrifice allows capital not to transcend alienation but to exploit it, incorporating rupture as part of its continuity. This brings us back to what I call the "intimate alienation" induced in *Tamala 2010* through the effervescence of her

20. In "The Sacred Conspiracy," an article for *Acéphale*, Bataille writes, "*Human life is tired of serving as the head and reason of the universe. To the extent that it becomes this head and this reason, to the extent that it becomes necessary to the universe, it accepts servitude."* See Bataille (1936). *Emphasis in original*.
For the contradictions embodied by the Acéphale, see Biles (2020, 221).

character's techno-animism: the commodity appears alive and endearing, but solely in order to reproduce its own disposability.

Tamala is a brand, an anthropomorphic robot cat, a commodity designed for consumption. Unlike Hello Kitty (whose lack of mouth, according to Sanrio, is so that she can "speak from the heart") and contra Marx's joke of the speaking commodity, Tamala is a *thing* that is given speech. This is underscored in the film when she delivers one of her signature kicks-in-the-head to another cute kitten who only utters a refrain of a child's song, "la-la-la." Tamala may be infantile, but she is not *that* kind of cute: she is a commodity that speaks, and her vitality is conveyed in the casual profanities she tosses off ("fucking goodbye"). In this capacity for speech, she also has a favored refrain: "Wait just a moment longer." Yet this phrase begets action rather than waiting. While it surfaces repeatedly (in a postcard delivered by the postal cat, in Tamala's dreams of returning to her home planet Orion, and during her final encounter with Tatla) it never culminates in fulfillment. The film ends not with Tamala's homecoming, but with another moment of indefinite deferral, a loop coiling back on itself that restages the beginning. The utterance is both a mandate to the viewer, and a mantra for Tamala herself, of a deceptively short duration—a moment—that can be telescoped outwards into an interminable cycle of rebirth.[21] Here we can add one more "part" to Tamala's robot-cat-girl assemblage, the part that is alien. Her deferred encounter with her home planet is alien not only in the extraterrestrial sense, but also in her perpetuation of herself as a commodity, expressing that Tamala is "an alien object exercising power over [man]" (Marx 2007). We have now seen in this section how an origination problem is also an alienation problem: Tamala cannot return home. I now turn to Marx and Bataille to show how this alienation is a structural component of the image-commodity itself, one that enables its endless renewal.

Marx's joke of the "soul" of the commodity, in the same register as his subjunctive invocation of a commodity who "speaks," forewarns the reader against attributing an inherent value to the *thing* (as one does in the oft-quoted case of commodity fetishism) (Marx 1976, 176). Marx claims that it is due to the commodity's own reflection of a social relation between labor onto a social relation between objects that a mysterious substitution happens: "Through this substitution, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time supra-sensible or social" (Ibid., 165). We should note that Marx makes two technical analogies in the sentences that directly follow:

21 Tatsumi Takayuki points out that Tamala's waiting is enlarged into what she describes as the "incredibly lengthy drama of Death and Resurrection." See Takayuki (2006, 76).

> In the same way, the impression made by a thing on the optic nerve is perceived not as a subjective excitation of that nerve but as the objective form of a thing outside the eye. In the act of seeing, of course, light is really transmitted from one thing, the external object, to another thing, the eye. It is a physical relation between physical things. As against this, the commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, *have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this*. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. *There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own,* which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. (Ibid.)[22]

In the instance of the commodity's genesis, it is delinked physically from the material relations that birthed it—labor and human life. Despite his mocking tone, Marx incessantly animates the commodity in his description. Ngai likens Marx's "If commodities could speak, they would say…" line to asking his reader to imagine as if commodities were like child actors on a stage, a personification of cute that he both wants to highlight his disdain for, but can't help using (Ngai 2012, 61). A similar animation of the commodity happens above, in which Marx highlights their autonomy and expression.

In this passage, Marx deems his first analogy insufficient, as the optical is a shared perception based on a physical relation. The second is more apropos, as the religious is for him a shared delusion that nonetheless informs our social relations, while mystifying them. Here he leaves something unsaid: the second analogy is also based on imaging, as it is a hallucination that overlays the world in a misty delusion. However, this delusion has material consequences on the world itself. The insufficiency of the first analogy lies in the obvious fact that *worlds produce images*, whereas the second works for the commodity because it relies on *images that produce worlds*. The commodity is the latter while purporting to be the former. This is no mere mystification or a trick that promises to reveal something, only for one to discover that there's nothing underneath. Its implications are sensuous and material—like Marx's description of the fetishism that dupes the worshipper into thinking the object of worship will reveal its true character. The commodity's secret lies not primarily in the obfuscation of labor, but in its

22. *Emphases mine.*

absence of expression and its lack of universal value based on its inability to communicate its intrinsic value.[23] This conflation of the two metaphors in Marx's own critical desire to uncover the fetish causes him to miss that there in its absence of expression and its lack of speech is an *imaging surface*. This surface promises animation and beckons its admirer to desire it, to bring it close, to use it.

To understand better how this imaging surface operates, Tamala is a perfect progeny from Marx's misty realm of religion, as she is serene and Christlike in her eternal sacrifice (Figure 4). In the sequence where she is resurrected, the film depicts her crucified, her eyes closed and feline mouth curled (as usual) into a tranquil smile. This image draws incongruously together the cute and the Christian into a tableau of placidly received suffering, underscoring how a corporeal vulnerability is the precondition for forming intimacy.[24]

Figure 4. The passion of Tamala.

Bataille, in his opus describing economies of consumption and sacrifice through religion, maintains that intimacy is not expressed by a thing,

23. I borrow the idea of a "commodity who speaks" from Fred Moten's reading of Marx via Ferdinand de Saussure, but I use the idea in a very different context than Moten does. Importantly, Moten makes this observation in the context of the Transatlantic slave trade, where the turning of African slaves from bodies into flesh takes on an ontological dimension with resulting implications for the afterlife of slavery. See Moten (2003, 13).

24. Elizabeth Howie describes the parallelisms of the ascetic body and the cute in her chapter, "Indulgence and Refusal: Cuteness, Asceticism, and the Aestheticization of Desire" in Boyle and Kao's edited volume (2017, 19).

except when it is "essentially the opposite of a thing, the opposite of a product, of a commodity—a consumption and a sacrifice" (Bataille 1991, 132).[25] Since intimacy is part-and-parcel of consumption, intimacy is the negation of a thing-as-commodity. This tracks with his pivotal argument about Aztec sacrificial economies, namely that consumption of things is the way that separate beings communicate with—that is, intimate to—one another. But this, for Bataille, is a problem. He writes, "Everything shows through, everything is open and infinite between those who consume intensely. But nothing counts then; violence is released and it breaks forth without limits, as the heat increases" (Ibid., 39). If nothing counts, violence and thus intimacy have the threat of becoming banal. To counteract this threat, violence must be sanctioned and funneled into sacrifice. The victim of sacrifice, identical to the thing in its consumption, is "given over to violence," given over to intimacy and rid of thinghood for good. Here Bataille's sacrificial economy draws a strange *adequation* between man and thing, in which sacrifice turns man into a thing to be consumed.

In the context of capitalist modernity, Tamala's sacrifice marks a shift from sacred expenditure to Marxian alienation: here, sacrifice strips the commodity of its *exchange value*, reducing it to pure *use value*. This might seem at odds with Bataille's description of "use," but we should note its context. Bataille first deploys the term to distinguish the victim's surplus status from "the mass of *useful* wealth" (Ibid., 59).[26] We should recall here that for Marx, the commodity is a contradiction in its unification of use value and exchange value, two oppositional entities. Whereas use value is "only realized [*verwirklicht*] in use or in consumption," exchange value appears relative in how commodities are exchanged and serves to extinguish the commodity's "sensuous characteristics" (Marx 1976, 126-128). While its reality as use value can be revealed by its exchange relationship once the commodity has come into circulation (what, in the language of neoclassical economics, would be called its utility-function), Marx is clear that a thing can take on use value without exchange value—something, he says, unmediated by labor. The purpose of *removing* a thing from exchange, then, is so that it takes on use value in the act of consumption.[27] The ontology of the commodity comes into being by fusing the two values and appearing as if

25. Here Bataille describes the church as a thing, "little different from a barn," impenetrable and without meaning other than through its materiality. However, through the correspondence of the church to the "needless consumption of labor" and thus its destruction, its intimacy is expressed.

26. *Emphasis in original*.

27. The commodities that workers purchase with their wages are distinct from assets in that they allow the worker to subsist through consumption, rather than through investment or accumulation. This distinction is what allows Marx to map the class relation onto the logic of when use and exchange values manifest themselves.

the paradox it embodies by doing so is "natural." Sacrifice thus temporarily rescues use value from exchange value: it turns the human into a thing and the thing, however briefly, back into a human.

Bataille takes this logic further in his heterodox reading of Marx, where he reframes the adequation between human and commodity through the Calvinist deferral of man's encounter with intimacy into another world. He argues that Marxism inherits the technical rigor of Protestantism to pursue "clear and distinct knowledge of things," while implying that returning man to the "intimacy of his being" can be achieved through liberation (Bataille 1991, 135). While most interpret liberation to mean "freeing the world of material obstacles," Bataille points to a much-overlooked part of Marx: "It was by going to the limit of the possibilities implied in *things* (by complying with their demands without reservation, by replacing the government of particular interests with the 'government of things,' by carrying to its ultimate consequences the movement that reduces man to the condition of a *thing*, that Marx was determined to reduce *things* to the condition of man, and man to the free disposition of himself" (Ibid.).[28] If the adequation of man to things was perfected, they would no longer enslave him. Then man would be able to finally stop putting things between him and himself. In other words, Bataille shows through Marx how freeing the world from all that which is extraneous *of* things is also to free the world from that extraneous *to* things. Marx's critique of capitalism, Bataille concludes, is not that things are now liberated from man, but that they're liberated "without rigor" and any other end besides chance and private interest (Ibid., 136). By rethinking *man-enslaved-by-things* to *things-enslaved-by-man*, Bataille means to show how an adequation between man and thing, in man's "return" to thing, is the capitalist form of sacrifice that milks the thing of its presumably mute intimacy. What Bataille has shown through the commodity is that the fetish denies that there is vitality on both sides of its mute expression—the techno-animist and the strictly human—through the mastery that the latter must express over the former. The distinction between the commodity and the consumer comes to a head in a sacrificial instance: there can be no exchange if all things are interchangeable.

My detour through Bataille recasts sacrifice in a capitalist context, where it no longer negates use in a sacred or unproductive sense. Instead, the commodity sparkles with the promise of intimacy and vitality. Through the profane, nonrigorous liberation of things, sacrifice becomes

28. *Emphases in original.*
Fascinatingly, in the English translation by Robert Hurley, the closing parenthesis is omitted here. Whether accidental or not, this lack of closing parenthesis turns a potential side note into a definitive juncture of Bataille's analysis of Marx.

a mode of reproducing alienation, now mediated by the techno-animist intimacy of the cute, animated, and seemingly autonomous image-commodity. In the conspiratorial world of *Tamala 2010*, this liberation helps to explain why the Minerva religion transforms into the monopoly Catty & Co., which makes Tamala ubiquitous through the commodification of her image in advertising. The imaging regime of the film, on the other hand, enacts this logic of the speaking, dying, endlessly returning commodity as a mode of technical development that I have called neotenous. This transition from sacred to capitalist sacrifice is not just narratorial, but hinges on a shift in technical regimes. The very processes that produced Tamala as an animated figure are also what enable a historical mutation: from intimacy as a temporary resolution to alienation, to intimacy that persists *within* and even *as* alienation itself.

In his description of Aztec human sacrifice, Bataille writes that the victim's "destruction rids him of his thinghood" and eliminates "his usefulness once and for all" (Ibid., 60). His throughline between Aztec sacrifice and Protestant, capitalist sacrifice is made through the former's adequation of man-to-thing, and the latter's adequation of thing-to-man. While the earlier type of adequation is preserved in the later one, how this preservation happens in capitalist sacrifice is through the *animation* of the commodity—which as an image, animates the world. To put this differently, the more primordial adequation between man and thing adapts in a capitalist sacrificial economy, tapping into the intimacy that results from the former to forward the alienation of the latter. All commodities must be images today.

The alienation that results from the animated image-commodity preserves itself through the perverse intimacy of its sacrifice. Whereas Marx provides us with an understanding of alienated labor from the human side, I follow the French philosopher of technicity Gilbert Simondon, who appends Marx, so that I can buttress this idea of the technical life of the commodity. Simondon claims, "The technical object, taking the place of the slave and being treated as such across relations of property and custom, has only partially liberated man: the technical object possesses a power of alienation because it is itself in a state of alienation" (Simondon 2017, xiii). Here, the technical object's consolidation of human, nature, and machine may assuage a certain alienation of the human to others of our own species (implied in Simondon's invocation of the supplanting of slave economies), but it further entrenches our alienation from production and its process through the technical object's own alienation. For Simondon, alienation is not simply crystallized in the processes of production and commodification in general, but also from within, when there is a rupture between the technical *knowledge* of production and the *use* of machines as the means of production (Ibid., 250). Alienation here is conceived of as a segregated relation, rather

than a severed one, that is exploited by the capitalist into knowledge and use.[29] Due to this segregated relation, the alienation of the technical object results in the expropriation of the fruits of the worker's labor, not the other way around.[30] To restate Bataille's sacrificial economy in a different register, the liberation of the human-as-worker is bound up with the liberation of the thing-as-technical-object.

The logic of alienation so far hinges not only on political economic or symbolic cycles; as the presence of Tatla continues to remind us throughout the film, it is technical processes that make them possible. The technical object is part of a co-evolutionary process that anticipates the human in its development, rather than an instrument that simply bends to human needs. While Simondon's famous example is the Guimbal engine, in this case I have foregrounded the animated image itself as a technical object, and *Tamala 2010* dramatizing its development. Technical objects then shape what the human becomes, preserving earlier capacities and tendencies in forms that adapt forward and refer to a mutual origin, that human and object keep positing in their *relation* to one another. This is how technical development, or this shifting relation, is neotenous: it retains juvenile or budding forms that remain malleable, allowing the system to adapt self-referentially without full resolution.

But this open-ended potentiality doesn't guarantee freedom. In the context of capitalist production, it becomes a means of reproducing alienation. To paraphrase Simondon, alienation occurs when technical objects are severed from the conditions that once supported the grounds of their becoming (he calls this the associated milieu) and are replaced by systems of labor segregation and standardized mediation.[31] We can conclude that the becoming of the technical object within the conditions of capitalist production far from precludes overcoming its original impetus—alienation. Technical adaptation persists, but in forms that now serve crisis endurance and commodity reproduction; Tamala included.

Tamala 2010 stages the neotenous image as the engine of a capitalist sacrificial economy, one in which alienation and intimacy are not opposites but dialectical forces that prolong its existence as a commodity. By splicing together two divergent imaging regimes—superflat 2D animation and 3D-CGI modeling with an exposed rig—the film utilizes their incompatibility as potentialities for further development. This incompatibility becomes the site where technical alienation both mirrors and

29. For more on how alienation provides a pivotal conjunction between Marx and Simondon on human relations with technical objects, see Fritz (2021).

30. For the question of alienation as a result of technicity, as well as the development of cinema as a technical object, see Hackett (2015).

31. Simondon describes alienation as a break in which "the associated milieu no longer regulates the dynamism of forms" (2017, 62).

drives economic alienation. The problem of origin, which earlier was introduced through the relation between Tamala and Tatla, returns as a structural feature of alienation: Tamala in and as image-commodity is endlessly sacrificed and made anew, suspending the question of priority in favor of perpetual adaptation. On the one hand, Tamala's eternal reproduction is the invocation of intimacy that happens in violent sacrifice, resulting in the adequation between man and thing. This is neotenous, as an instance in which the image of the thing is liberated from its exchange value and retains its originary thingliness. Yet, her sacrifice exactly prolongs this segregated labor relation that can be called alienation, when exchange and use values are reunited in her rebirth. What makes Tamala endearing is that she will perpetually be cute and one year old, and that her potential will always be tapped to renew herself as a commodity through the commodity's rebirth. Tamala's image is liberated through a form of sacrifice that adequates human and thing by adapting the human to technical alienation.

Rather than excising economic alienation, technical alienation and human alienation become mutually entwined and thus perpetuated via their adaptation to and through one another. Neoteny isn't an indeterminate potentiality *because* of its promise of continued existence. Rather, this continued existence is secured in the successful adaptation into an image-commodity; one that preserves multiple developmental potentials through, rather than in spite of, its segregated relation to labor. This makes the potential that is in neoteny *determined* in the sense that it will mandate the endurance and development of intimate alienation—as an internal contradiction of capital's mode of production. The conceit of *Tamala 2010* is that when commodities speak, they only have a single utterance: Wait just a moment longer.

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Biography

Xindi Li is PhD candidate in History of Consciousness at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and senior lecturer in Film and Media Studies at the School of Advanced Studies, University of Tyumen.

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Marx, Engels and the Communist Revolution Between Determinism, Telos and Self-Emancipation

Joshua Graf

ABSTRACT: It seems that history has tricked the communist movement. It has cast into doubt the certainty of a revolutionary outbreak and victory in the most developed capitalist countries. Former tsaristic Russia had a successful revolution, but shortly after became a highly bureaucratized state–in many respects not very different from other modern state apparatus. This has caused much confusion about the value of the notion of revolution in Marx and Engels. Therefore, this essay attempts to rediscuss the ideas of Marx and Engels in terms of the communist revolution. Ii is argued that they insisted upon a consequent internationalist approach, with the aim of self-emancipation of the working class, and did not approve proxy politics. Furthermore, they backed down from any sacral doctrine, and persist on the necessity of concrete analysis of concrete situations to come to the most promising strategy. This shows that they were not just thinking abstractly about revolution – and that their method is useful also in revolutionarily unfavorable conditions.

KEYWORDS: Marxism, Revolution, Marx, Engels.

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• *Correspondence:* Joshua Graf, PhD Candidate University of Osnabrück
• e-mail: Joshua-graf@t-online.de
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Introduction

Nowadays Marx and Engels are mainly acknowledged as important theoreticians. Even in parts of mainstream academia one grants them at least partly an important theoretical heritage and even important insights into the capitalist society. This merely academic and theoretical approach towards Marx and Engels dismisses their inherently political project (Schieder 2018, 8). In contrast to this way of embracing Marx and Engels as scienticists while simultaneously erasing their political ambitions, I want to insist that one cannot comprehend them adequatedly without acknowledging the centrality of the concept of revolution (Bohlender et al. 2020). Therefore one must once again quote Engels` famous characterization of Marx at his funeral, when he rightly stated that Marx was "a revolutionist." The same goes for Engels as well.

In contemporary times of a multi-crises capitalism, some regional upheavals accur, but there still exists a lack of a severe and international radical opposition towards capitalism (Graf 2023, 273–75). In fact the "TINA"-narrative (there is no alternative) is still quite common (Fisher 2013, 7), while even stalwart radicals seem to suffer from revolutionary despair.

This is because of the current world-wide situation and the feelings of impotence against the huge supremacy, that modern states have in terms of power and violence.

Reflecting this situation, I argue that it is time to critically rediscuss Marx and Engels` approach towards their ultimate goal and reason, the big elephant, which is often ignored, namely the communist revolution.

With my essay I want to point out how Marx and Engels supported an open-minded and undogmatic approach towards the question of revolution at their times. My thesis is that, while every generation of communist must develop their own concrete ideas and approach through a sharp analysis of the status quo, the traditional reflections from Marx and Engels can still function as a guideline, worthy of a reconsideration even today.

Revolution – definition and material conditions

First, we need clarity about what should be understood under revolution. Marx once famously described revolutions as "the locomotives of history" (MECW 10, Class struggles in France [1850], 122). Engels explains:

> that the producing class takes over the management of production and distribution from the class formerly entrusted with that task but now no longer

> capable of it, and this, in effect, is socialist revolution. (MECW 45, E to Lavrov [1875], 109)

Marx furthermore declares openly that the ultimate goal of the communist revolution was the abolition of all classes (MECW 39, M to Weydemeyer [1852], 65). It is remarkable that one often finds the term "social revolution" (ibid.) as this this refers to a peculiarity of the communist revolution. While the bourgeois emancipation declared universal emancipation, it actually stopped after granting political freedom and formal equality. The class rule, for good reasons, was not to be challenged. Therefore political emancipation from feudal shackles was already granted, at least in some Western countries, but the relations of property remained untouched. This was to be changed through the communist revolution.

As we now have an understanding for the term (social) revolution, many more questions are to be answered. One must examine the material base of the revolutionary thoughts, as well as the traditional question of the revolutionary subject.

Starting with the material conditions Marx claims:

> A radical social revolution is bound up with definite historical conditions of economic development; these are its premisses. (MECW 24, Note on Bakunin *Statehood and Anarchy* [1875], 518)

Already earlier he articulates:

> Men build a new world for themselves, not from the "treasures of this earth", as grobian superstition imagines, but from the historical achievements of their declining world. In the course of their development they first have to produce the material conditions of a new society itself, and no exertion of mind or will can free them from this fate. (MECW 6, Moralising Criticism [1847], 319–20)

Same goes for Engels who formulates:

> In the beginning, however, each social revolution will have to take things as it finds them and do its best to get rid of the most crying evils with the means at its disposal. (MECW 23, The Housing Questiuon [1875], 348)

All quotes have in common that they refer to a material base of the revolution. The conditions, which must be discussed are not abstract, but they exist in the "old" world. That means must deal with the concrete existing circumstances. Now how to revolutions occur? Marx points out:

> For revolutions require a passive element, a material basis. Theory can be realised in a people only insofar as it is the realisation of the needs of that

> people. (MECW 3, Contribution to Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law – Introduction [1844], 183)

Engels formulates a similar thought, when stating:

> Everyone knows nowadays, that wherever there is a revolutionary convulsion, there must be some social want in the background, which is prevented by outworn institutions from satisfying itself. (MECW 11, Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany [1852], 5)

Here a first controversial comes in. As revolutions require a severe state of popular unhappiness with the existing conditions, there has always been an overly optimistic approach to this. It is necessary to dive into the discussion of alleged determinism in Marx and Engels.

Capitalism`s inevitable tendency to produce crises has been interpreted as a guarantee for a revolutionary outbreak, sooner or later. Engels has many quotes, which prove his determinism on this. In the Anti-Dühring he elaborates:

> On the other hand this same large-scale industry has brought into being, in the bourgeoisie, a class which has the monopoly of all the instruments of production and means of subsistence, but which in each speculative boom period and in each crash that follows it proves that it has become incapable of any longer controlling the productive forces, which have grown beyond its power; a class under whose leadership society is racing to ruin like a locomotive whose jammed safety-valve the driver is too weak to open. In other words, the reason is that both the productive forces created by the modern capitalist mode of production and the system of distribution of goods established by it have come into crying contradiction with that mode of production itself, and in fact to such a degree that, if the whole of modern society is not to perish, a revolution in the mode of production and distribution must take place, a revolution which will put an end to all class distinctions. (MECW 25, Anti-Dühring [1877], 145–46)

Additionally, he states:

> But since that time modern industry has developed the contradictions lying dormant in the capitalist mode of production into such crying antagonisms that the approaching collapse of this mode of production is, so to speak, palpable; that the new productive forces themselves can only be maintained and further developed by the introduction of a new mode of production corresponding to their present stage of development; that the struggle between the two classes engendered by the hitherto existing mode of production and constantly reproduced in ever sharper antagonism has affected all civilised countries and is daily becoming more violent; and that these historical interconnections, the conditions of the social transformation which they make necessary, and the basic features of this transformation likewise determined

> by them, have also already been apprehended. (MECW 25, Anti-Dühring [1877], 253–54)

Engels comes to a teleological approach, which overemphasis the role of the material conditions, when he stresses:

> that revolutions are not made deliberately and arbitrarily, but that everywhere and at all times they have been the necessary outcome of circumstances entirely independent of the will and the leadership of particular parties and entire classes. (MECW 6, Principles of Communism [1847], 349)

For Engels capitalism`s inherent contradictions, led him to an overly optimistic point of view. This has been even radicalized and interpreted as a collapse theory.

For Marx things are more complicated. Undoubtedly he also has many teleological quotes. While reminding one of the needed material and social conditions, he clearly tended to be overly optimistic, when writing:

> A new revolution is possible only in consequence of a new crisis. It is, however, just as certain as this crisis. (MECW 10, The Class struggles in France [1850], 135)

However, unlike Engels, Marx finally came to the insight not to interpret crises as an evidence for the inevitable collapse of capitalism. Contrary through partially destroying capitalist wealth, the system prepares itself for a new round of accumulation. Crises are therefore not mainly negative but have the power to be a stabilizing element of capitalism.

Besides this mechanical materialism, there is also the question whether the impoverishment of workers will become so harsh, that their uprising is the necessary consequence. In the manifesto it says:

> The modern labourer, on the contrary, instead of rising with the progress of industry, sinks deeper and deeper below the conditions of existence of his own class. He becomes a pauper, and pauperism develops more rapidly than population and wealth. And here it becomes evident, that the bourgeoisie is unfit any longer to be the ruling class in society, and to impose its conditions of existence upon society as an over-riding law. It is unfit to rule because it is incompetent to assure an existence to its slave within his slavery, because it cannot help letting him sink into such a state, that it has to feed him, instead of being fed by him. Society can no longer live under this bourgeoisie, in other words, its existence is no longer compatible with society. (MECW 6, Manifesto [1848] 495–96)

As a result, both Marx and Engels overly optimistic declare:

> that the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable. (MECW 6, Manifesto [1848], 496)

Nevertheless one must be aware of the context of this passage. As a manifesto Marx and Engels tried to gain the upcoming working class to join their program. Furthermore they were directly involved into tactical and theoretical debates with other members of the League of the Just, which just changed its name to the "Communist League" (Bohlender 2019, 258–262).

Marx inssited upon the necessity of a capitalist intermediate stage to developed the productivity. There can be little dissent about the fact, that at least in the imperialist centres the material conditions for a liberated society, the famous "realm of freedom" (MECW 37, Capital Volume III [1894], 807) exist. It is even the opposite, while a huge material wealth exists right now, the destructive element of capitalst accumulation will destroy a lot of wealth. This means that revolution nowadays is no longer a question about rather a certain level of material development is already reached, but to secure the existing wealth and to find ways to deal with collapse of ecological system (Saito 2024). Walter Benjamin was right, when grasping the revolution not as the "locomotive of history" but as the necessary emergency break (Benjamin 2010, 153). This leads to a second important point, every revolution needs to work with the circumstances of the old society and needs to transform them. Therefore revolution cannot simply mean, that the workers must seize the power over production, but that the whole purpose of production must be radically transformed. Revolution nowadays must understand how capitalism has ingraved itself into the very roots of (social) life (Mau 2021, 246) and that therefore a deep break with its logic and "rationality" must be achieved. Thirdly, I see it as still being relevant that revolutionary situations occur in times of crises. The contemporary polycrisis, shows capitalism`s inability of regulating its own contradictions without huge social damage and chaos. At the same time we see that crises do not automatically turn into a communist revolution. They can lead to a more authoritarian capitalism, and no victory is secure, as capitalism relies on various pillars of stability (Graf 2023, 273–92). Consequently this leads us to a second crucial component, the subjective element.

The revolutionary subject and progressive circumstances

Not only crises and uneasiness, are regarded as material conditions, but also a certain progress in terms of political freedom. Both, Marx and

Engels supported bourgeois upheavals against feudalism as a necessary precondition for the ultimate goal of a communist revolution (MECW 6 Manifesto [1848], 516). Nevertheless, Marx and Engels were far from being uncontested with this view. Other popular communist agitators, deeply rejected this temporary strategic alliance with the bourgeoisie, as he denounced the capitalists as the exploiters of the working class, whom could therefore not profit from this strategy (Meyer 1977, 190).

Considering the historical circumstances of a triangular class-constellation, between a reactionary feudal aristocracy, an upcoming and liberating bourgeoisie, and the first glimmerings of the proletariat, they ascribed the bourgeoisie a progressive role (Draper 1990, 180). They supported the fight for a democratic republic:

> Marx and I, for forty years, repeated ad nauseam that for us the democratic republic is the only political form in which the struggle between the working class and the capitalist class can first be universalised and then culminate in the decisive victory of the proletariat. (MECW 27, Reply to the Honourable Giovanni Bovio [1892], 271)

Or as it says in the Manifesto:

> In short, the Communists everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things. (MECW 6, Manifesto [1848], 519)

For that purpose, they also supported temporary alliances with progressive bourgeois forces:

> This does not mean, however, that the said party cannot occasionally make use of other parties for its own ends. Nor does it mean that it cannot temporarily support other parties in promoting measures which are either of immediate advantage to the proletariat or spell progress in the direction of economic development or political freedom. I would support anyone in Germany who genuinely fought for the abolition of primogeniture and other feudal relics, of bureaucracy, protective tariffs, and Anti-Socialist Law and restrictions on the right of assembly and of association. (MECW 48, E to Trier [1889], 423)

However, this was always only conceptualized as an instrumental strategic move, for the actual goal of surpassing bourgeois society itself:

> It is therefore in the interests of the workers to support the bourgeoisie in its struggle against all reactionary elements, as long as it remains true to itself. Every gain which the bourgeoisie extracts from reaction, eventually benefits the working class, if that condition is fulfilled. (MECW 20, Prussian Military Question [1865], 77)

Consequently, they granted the bourgeoisie to have played "a most revolutionary part" (MECW 6 Manifesto [1848], 486).

One touches a new problem here. Namely the question of the potential revolutionary subject. As seen the bourgeoisie was celebrated as revolutionary against feudalism. The bourgeois revolution was treated as a a precondition for the workers' revolution. However, they cannot for a moment regard it as their ultimate goal (MECW 6, Moralising Criticism [1847] 332–33). For the ultimate purpose another revolutionary subject came into play, the proletariat.

Reflections about the potential revolutionary subject were brought up, by social theoreticians and mostly utopian socialists at the time. Many of them concluded, that poor people, because of their miserable living conditions will be open-minded to engage in social struggle and therefore must be approached as the potential revolutionary subject. However, what is the important progress achieved by Marx (and Engels) is to locate proletarians in their antagonistic position to the bourgeoisie:

> with this a class is called forth which has to bear all the burdens of society without enjoying its advantages, which is ousted from society and forced into the sharpest contradiction to all other classes; a class which forms the majority of all members of society, and from which emanates the consciousness of the necessity of a fundamental revolution, the communist consciousness, which may, of course, arise among the other classes too through the contemplation of the situation of this class. (MECW 5, German Ideology [1846], 52)

They say:

> The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority. The proletariat, the lowest stratum of our present society, cannot stir, cannot raise itself up, without the whole superincumbent strata of official society being sprung into the air. (MECW 6, Manifesto [1848], 495)

Not only is the proletariat poor and therefore has a reason to rebel, but it also furthermore has a peculiar standing in bourgeois society. It is a "class with radical chains" (MECW 3, 186). As capitalist exploitation refers to an although asymmetric but intertwined dependency between bourgeoisie and proletarians, their resistance against their own exploitation is crucial, when bringing capitalism to its knees.

Other classes, like little farmers, are poor as well. Nevertheless, they are not defined as the truly revolutionary class. This is because poverty is not the decisive moment. Instead, it is the structural peculiarity of the proletariat to be a class, who through overcoming its own existence as a class, simultaneously overthrows the whole system of classes as

such (MECW 3, Contribution to Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law–Introduction [1844], 186). The antagonism between proletariat and bourgeoisie is described as the last antagonistic social relation (MECW 6, Manifesto [1848], 485).

Marx and Engels insisted upon the open class fight, as they understood the communist revolution, carried out by the proletariat as the upheaval of most of the society in its own interest (MECW 5, German Ideology [1846], 52). Because of that Marx insisted on the necessity of workers to unify to be successful (MECW 6, Moralising Criticism [1847], 332). They supported an open approach to this (MECW 6, Manifesto [1848], 519).

To sum it up, the proletariat is considered as the universal revolutionary subject. It is the negation of bourgeois society:

> which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society and thereby emancipating all other spheres of society, which, in a word, is the complete loss of man and hence can win itself only through the complete rewinning of man. (MECW 3, Contribution to Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law–Introduction [1844], 186)

For our political practice this means a central insight. It is the great progress from Marx and Engels to connect the objective material conditions with the subjective element of a conscious revolutionary mass movement. Neither does capitalism automatically collapse, nor should one rely on a clandestine conspiracy of revolutionaries, like the pre-Marxian communist Blanqui proposed (Deppe 1970, 23). Furthermore one must nowadays reflect the alteration of class composition in imperialist countries. A debate about who can be counted as a revolutionary agent in modern capitalism is helpful. I believe that it is indisputable that the conservative image of a classic white male blue-collar working class was never an accurate description of actual relations, and new ways of finding "connecting class politics" (Riexinger 2018, 123) must be worked out.

Revolution as radical self-emancipation

The social democratic talking about the big "Kladderadatsch" evokes the understanding of revolution as one immense bang. It suggests one heroic battle between the proletariat and the existing rulers. However, this image does not suit Marx and Engels evolutionary understanding of radical transformation. For them the revolution could not be broken down to a single mass event, directly leading to heaven on earth. Con-

trary they were transparent about the evolutionary character. Furthermore, they also insisted upon the dialectical relation between self-alteration and transformation of the existing relations. The most famous quote here ca be found in the third Theses on Feuerbach. It goes:

> The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice. (MECW 5, Theses on Feuerbach [1845], 4)

Similar thoughts can be found in the *German Ideology*:

> In revolutionary activity the changing of oneself coincides with the changing of circumstances. (MECW 5, German Ideology [1846], 214)

The process of revolutionary becoming itself can only be successfully carried out through a revolution. The working class, to become the central agent of a potential future must revolutionize itself before:

> Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; the revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew. (MECW 5, German Ideology [1846], 52–53)

Not only in their thoughts, but in their practical actions they must become the revolutionary subject. This is understood as a steady process. The formation of revolutionary subjectivity is not the outcome of a miracle, but the result of continuous fights, as Marx clarifies:

> Whereas we say to the workers: 'You will have to go through 15, 20, 50 years of civil wars and national struggles not only to bring about a change in society but also to change yourselves, and prepare yourselves for the exercise of political power.' (MECW 11, Revelations Concerning the Communist Trial in Cologne [1852], 403)

Also, Engels affirmed this process-oriented approach, which meant to openly inform workers about the long breath they will need. In a letter to Bebel, he empathizes the necessary evolutionary character of a revolution:

> The great mistake made by the Germans is to imagine the revolution as something that can be achieved overnight. In fact it is a process of development on the part of the masses which takes several years even under conditions that tend to accelerate it. Every revolution that has been achieved overnight has merely ousted a reactionary regime doomed from the outset (1830)

> or has led directly to the exact opposite of what was aspired to (1848, France). (MECW 47, E to Bebel [1883], 51–52)

Like Engels, Marx insisted upon the permanent revolution. He points out:

> This Socialism is the declaration of the permanence of the revolution, the class dictatorship of the proletariat as the necessary transit point to the abolition of class distinctions generally, to the abolition of all the relations of production on which they rest, to the abolition of all the social relations that correspond to these relations of production, to the revolutionising of all the ideas that result from these social relations. (MECW 10, The Class struggles in France [1850], 127)

One cannot overemphasise the importance of the permanent character of revolution. In history tempting images of one victorious epic battle have led to wrong concepts, unsuitable for the complex reality, with its longue durée of bourgeois society. In addition, one must link the permanent character of the revolution, with the question of the historical subject.

Various petty-bourgeois socialists have worked out their revolutionary plans on behalf of the working class. They did not conceptualize workers as capable of leading a future society. Instead a generous elite should manage them nicely. Robert Owen, for instance, planned to treat the people in his imaginary future society like patients in the most developed psychiatry in the world wide (Draper 2001, 6).

Also the famous tradition of Babeuf and Blanqui supported a clandestine assassination against the current representators of the system. Afterwards they declared the necessity of a temporary educational dictatorship and government on behalf of the workers (Draper 1986, 29–34). This can be linked to the experience of the French Revolution of 1789. In this history was first grasped as changeable through humans as active political subjects. However this enthusiasm sometimes led through an overly technologically approach towards revolutions. At this time the revolution was mainly conceptualized as a matter of the right planning and correct secret preparation (Deppe 1970, 23). Those who should be liberated, where not the first object of concern.

In contrast to that, Marx and Engels supported workers self-government. They wanted to qualify casual workers for becoming political and socially active in the future society. This can be grasped in the famous parole of the International Workers Association:

> That the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves. (MECW 20, Provisional rules of the association [1864], 14)

In a nutshell. The proletariat is the revolutionary subject. The concept of proxy politics is rejected, a dialectical process of self-revolutionizing and revolutionizing of the objective circumstances is mandatory. In this paradigm revolution is not a single event, but a constant progress. What this demands of communists is to find ways of a right education under false conditions. Assuming that proletarian self-emancipation cannot occur only in the concrete revolutionary situation but must be prepared under the bourgeois reign, one needs to find ways of holistic liberating education (Au 2018). While capitalism fundamentally undermines the floroushing and development of human capacities, one must seek for ways of a liberating radical pedagogy even under those harsh conditions.

The question of violence

The question of violence has been reason enough to disqualify Marx and Engels as extremists, and therefore unworthy of consideration. And it is true, that they were far from opposed to violence for achieving political goals. As so they declare in the Manifesto:

> The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. (MECW 6, Manifesto [1848], 519)

The late Engels repeated the general affirmation of violent actions, when he wrote:

> That the proletariat cannot seize political power, which alone will open the doors to the new society, without violent revolution is something upon which we are both agreed. (MECW 48, E to Trier [1889], 423)

In a letter to the communist committee in Brussels, Engels named general communist principles. He named some aims and then clarified, that it was crucial for communists "to recognise no means of attaining these aims other than democratic revolution by force" (MECW 38, E to Correspondence Committee [1846], 82).

In their eyes the revolutionary task to gain power legitimizes the usage of violence to sweep away the old conditions (MECW 6, Manifesto [1848], 506). Marx reflects upon the basic antagonism of interests, which is always in play, when revolutions break out. The goal of revolutions exists in the disempowerment of those, who are currently in

charge. As a result "it is impossible to emancipate the oppressed class without injury to the class living upon its oppression" (MECW 16, The Question of the abolition of serfdom in Russia [1858], 52).

Despite this, Marx and Engels were far away from uncritically promoting violence as a mean by itself. Conversely, they rejected to deliver an abstract goutation of violence. Instead of a general answer to the question, they supported an approach, which critically examines the peculiar situation under historical and social contingency. With reflection about different national conditions, Marx explained:

> We know that the institutions, customs and traditions in the different countries must be taken into account; and we do not deny the existence of countries like America, England, and if I knew your institutions better I might add Holland, where the workers may achieve their aims by peaceful means. That being true We must also admit that in most countries on the Continent it is force which must be the lever of our revolution; it is force which will have to be resorted to for a time in order to establish the rule of the workers. (MECW 23, On the Hague Congress [1872], 255)

It is therefore a question, which can only be answered for concrete contingent circumstances. For instance in the more liberal countries like France and the US, Engels even saw the possibility of achieving his goal through the legal way of parliamentarism (MECW 27, A Critique of the Draft Programme of 1891 [1891], 226). England although politically backwards, also was granted the ability to a legal and peaceful victory of the proletariat (MECW 22, Record of Marx's Interview with The World Correspondent [1871], 602).

Consequently, "the choice of that solution is the affair of the working classes of that country. The International does not presume to dictate in the matter and hardly to advise." (ibid.). While optimistic for France, the USA and England, neither Marx nor Engels saw any opportunity for a peaceful win of the working class in Germany (MECW 27, A Critique of the Draft Programme of 1891 [1891], 226). Marx openly points out:

> In Germany the working class were fully aware from the beginning of their movement that you cannot get rid of a military despotism but by a Revolution. (MECW 46, M to Hyndman [1880], 49)

It is known that Engels shared this opinion about the situation in Germany (MECW 20, The Prussian Military Question [1865], 69–70).

To put in a nutshell. Neither Marx nor Engels were opposed to violence, when considered political necessary. Marx declares "Force is the

midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one." (MECW 35, Capital Volume I [1867], 736). However, it is unsure, whether violence will be necessary. This can only be answered, when discussing concrete situations:

> An historical development can remain "peaceful" only for so long as its progress is not forcibly obstructed by those wielding social power at the time. If in England, for instance, or the United States, the working class were to gain a majority in PARLIAMENT or CONGRESS, they could, by lawful means, rid themselves of such laws and institutions as impeded their development, though they could only do so insofar as society had reached a sufficiently mature development. However, the "peaceful" movement might be transformed into a "forcible" one by resistance on the part of those interested in restoring the former state of affairs; if (as in the American Civil War and French Revolution) they are put down by force, it is as rebels against "lawful" force. (MECW 24, Parliamentary Debate on the Anti-Socialist Law [1878], 238)

Not only does the evaluation of the usage of violence vary in different political contexts. What is even more important to Marx and Engels is the potential violent response to revolutionary outbreaks. It is not for the proletariat to solely decide, whether brutal violence will be needed. As revolutionary communists are faced with hostility from the governments (MECW 22, Record of Marx's Speech on the Political Action of the Working Class [1871], 617) it is not up to them to determine, whether the battle to gain the state power will be bloody or not. Engels remarks:

> It remains to be seen whether it will be the bourgeois and their government who will be the first to turn their back on the law in order to crush us by violence. That is what we shall be waiting for. You shoot first, messieurs les bourgeois! No doubt they will be the first ones to fire. (MECW 27, Socialism in Germany [1892], 241)

Although Marx and Engels did not back down, they insisted upon the possibility of a less violent revolutions, than the bourgeois victory over feudal structures (MECW 20, Speech at the Polish Meeting in London [1867], 200).

In this complex situation, the motto could be grasped as peaceful, when possible, violent when necessary (MECW 22, Record of Marx's Speech on the Political Action of the Working Class [1871], 618). Violence is not rebuked, however it is seen as a potentially necessary cause, which should be avoided, whenever the objective political relations allow it.

This leads us to a pragmatic, but still cautious resume. Granting that repressive regimes will not let their power wannish without resistance, it might become necessary to defend the revolutionary cause. At the same time one should be sceptical of a romantic about revolutionary violence, which leads to an ignorance about the harmful and dramatic consequence of violence. When one fights for communism as a remedy to the violent bourgeois status quo, he/ she should not play down the danger of a escalating violence and revengeism. In this case one can follow Rosa Luxemburg's bonmot:

> A world must be overthrown, but every tear that has flowed even though it could have been wiped away is an accusation, and a person rushing to important action who crushes a poor worm through gross carelessness commits a crime. (Luxembrug 1919, 406)

The question of regionality vs. internationalism

It is a well-trodden truth that "The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!" (MECW 6, Manifesto [1848], 519). International solidarity was always worshipped as a core value, for left-wing movements. Nevertheless history tricked the radical workers movement, as the revolution not only did not breakout in the imperialist centres, but did not even successfully splash over, to those countries. Russia remained alone for a long time. And the path of "socialism in one country" was announced, by Stalin. Marx and Engels did leave little room for speculations about the centrality of a worldwide revolution. Marx elaborated:

> That the emancipation of labour is neither a local nor a national, but a social problem, embracing all countries in which modern society exists, and depending for its solution on the concurrence, practical and theoretical, of the most advanced countries. (MECW 20, Provisional Rules of the Association [1864], 14)

The internationalist approach was upheld by Marx and Engels, when they explained:

> […] the International is a genuine and militant organisation of the proletarian class of all countries united in their common struggle against the capitalists and the landowners, against their class power organised in the state. (MECW 23, 107)

Undoubtedly Engels referred to worldwide liberation, when he declared:

> To accomplish this act of universal emancipation is the historical mission of the modern proletariat. (MECW 24, Socialism: Utopian and Scientific [1880], 325)

The basal internationalist agenda is clear. Always referring to inherent internationalist character of the working-class movement, is precisely the task of communists (MECW 6, Manifesto [1848], 495). However, on more practical questions of daily politics, Marx and Engels conceded:

> Though not in substance, yet in form, the struggle of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie is at first a national struggle. The proletariat of each country must, of course, first of all settle matters with its own bourgeoisie. (MECW 6, Manifesto [1848], 495)

It is complex, how Marx and Engels thought about the role of colonies and less developed countries in terms of the revolution. There are many examples, where Marx even positively discussed some consequences of colonialism (Lindner 2010). In the "Grundrisse" Marx celebrated the "civilising influence of foreign trade" (MECW 29, Grundrisse [1861], 480). This shows what unilinear scheme of evolution Marx did support at a certain time of his intellectual biography (Basso 2016, 81). During his lifetime, Marx intensified his studies on non-western societies (Achcar 2013, 83). Consequently, he came to a way more nuanced evaluation.

Already in his 1850 newspaper articles he posed the question whether "mankind [can] fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in […] Asia" (MECW 12, The British rule in India [1853], 132). He also reflected on the possible revolutionary effects an upheaval of the Irish colony can have on destabilizing the imperialist British mother country (MECW 43, M to Meyer & Vogt [1870], 474). As he treated the rivalry and the prejudices between the British and the Irish working class, as "the secret of the English working class's impotence, despite its organisation" (ibid., 475). He concludes, that the fight for Irish independency plays a crucial role in destabilizing the ruling bourgeois order in the most developed capitalist country of the time, namely England:

> England, as the metropolis of capital, as the power that has hitherto ruled the world market, is for the present the most important country for the workers' revolution and, in addition, the only country where the material conditions for this revolution have developed to a certain state of maturity. Thus, to hasten the social revolution in England is the most important object of the International Working Men's Association. Th e sole means of doing so is to make Ireland independent. It is, therefore, the task of the

> 'INTERNATIONAL' to bring the conflict between England and Ireland to the forefront everywhere, and to side with Ireland publicly everywhere. (MECW 43, M to Meyer & Vogt [1870], 475)

Another example of Marx ascribing upheavals in non-hegemonial countries a crucial role in destabilizing the capitalist order in the imperialist mother countries, is China. He declares:

> it may safely be augured that the Chinese revolution will throw the spark into the overloaded mine of the present industrial system and cause the explosion of the long-prepared general crisis, which, spreading abroad, will be closely followed by political revolutions on the Continent. It would be a curious spectacle, that of China sending disorder into the Western World. (MECW 12, Revolution in China and in Europe [1853], 98)

Although Marx thought, that the decisive question would be, if a revolution can be achieved and secured in the capitalist centres, he assigned world political circumstances an important role. What this points out, is that Marx already had an understanding of an intertwined capitalist world market and system, in which instability in one subaltern part of the world could directly influence the stability of the imperialist nations.

The most obvious example is his discussion about the potential transmission of the Russian village into communism. In a letter to Sazulitsch Marx clearly rejects an unilinear approach. He rejects the accusation of carrying out a philosophy of history, as one critic of him has said:

> But this is too little for my critic. It is absolutely necessary for him to metamorphose my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into a historico-philosophical theory of genera l development, imposed by fate on all peoples, whatever the historical circumstances in which they are placed, in order to eventually attain this economic formation which, with a tremendous leap of the productive forces of social labour, assures the most integral development of every individual producer. (MECW 24, Letter to Otechestvenniye Zapiski [1877], 200)

Here he clearly rebukes a teleological and Eurocentric approach to history and social development. Instead, Marx affirmed the possibility of a leap from the commune in Russia, to advanced communism (MECW 24, Drafts of the Letter to Vera Zasulich [1881], 346–49). However, as Marx remarks, "Russia does not live in isolation from the modern world" (ibid., 349). Under consideration of (worldwide) polit-economical circumstances, Marx concludes: "To save the Russian commune, a Russian revolution is needed" (ibid., 357). In general Marx believed in the ability of a Russian way towards communism. Nevertheless, the conditions in Russia cannot be looked at isolated. The Russian path, according to

Marx and Engels could not be successful, without a win of the proletariat in the west (MECW 24, Preface to the Second Russian Edition of the Manifesto [1882], 426).

Engels clearly emphasised the decisive role, of the western proletariat, when he announced.

> If anything can still save Russian communal ownership and give it a chance of growing into a new, really viable form, it is a proletarian revolution in Western Europe. (MECW 24, Refugee Literature [1874], 48)

At the same time, he assured, that Russia is on "the eve of a revolution […] a revolution that will be of the greatest importance for the whole of Europe" (MECW 24, Refugee Literature [1874], 48).

Elsewhere Engels made even clearer remarks:

> It is quite evident from this alone that the initiative for any possible transformation of the Russian commune along these lines cannot come from the commune itself, but only from the industrial proletarians of the West. The victory of the West European proletariat over the bourgeoisie, and, linked to this, the replacement of capitalist production by socially managed production—that is the necessary precondition for raising the Russian commune to the same level. (MECW 27, Afterword [1894], 425)

The hegemonial evaluation of (semi-)peripheral countries as not being the determining revolutionary force should not be interpreted as a denial of the historical agency of subaltern subjects. Moreover, Marx and Engels were aware of the centrality of violence and force, when establishing a new anti-capitalist society. They declared the aim of the "revolution permanent" (MECW 10, Address of the Central Authority to the League [1850], 281), at least in "all the dominant countries of the world" (ibid.). It is not merely a question of epistemologically acknowledging subaltern subjects as revolutionary actors, but a question of power relations in the imperialist world system and the (in-)ability of subaltern revolutions to build up a new society, while coping with counterrevolutionary upheavals, financed by reactionary states and dealing with harsh economic sanctions.

To conclude, Marx and Engels mainly concentrated on the imperialist hegemons and ascribed them a special role. This is due to the materialist precondition of developed productivity, they believed to be necessary. Furthermore, it can be seen in relation to their reflection on the essential role of violence in revolutions. This, should not mean, that especially Marx, did not reflect about the role of non-western countries. During his lifetime he learned, and slowly moved away from an unilinear model of development (Lindner 2010). Through analysing subaltern

resistance, he saw potential to connect perspectives. He developed a first model of global interdependency and granted subaltern upheavals significance as a potential starting point of wider revolutionary outbreaks (Pradella 2017, 587). Marx affirmed the potential success of a communist revolution, starting in Russia, under the condition, that it was completed by a revolution in the western countries (Basso 2016, 96). Beyond any doubt Marx and Engels always supported an internationalist agenda. They were convinced of internationalism not merely as a moralistic value, but as a necessary condition for a successful revolution.
However, Marx and Engels tended to one-sidedly celebrate movements of national sovereignty as a step towards the right direction. With this position they were far from unchallenged in the "League of Communists" (Güner 2023). Other communists insisted that nationalism was never a progressive element and distracted workers from understanding their national bourgeoise as their real enemy. Perhaps nowadays this should lead to a critical reexamination of the alleged progressive role of national liberation movements. Maybe it makes sense to rediscuss a form of not international, but antinational communism.

Revolution – and then?

As pointed out Marx and Engels did not believe that the revolution should be understood as a one-day-project. For that reason the speaking of a "Kladderadatsch"[1] (MEW 37, E to Schmidt [1889], 325) is misleading, as it evokes a short violent outbreak, in which the workers gain the power and afterwards build up socialism. It is true that Marx and Engels were convinced in the necessity of a (violent) action against the reigning bourgeoisie to take away their power. However, they saw this battle only as the starting point for a further process of constant revolutionizing. After a first successful takeover the proletariat must seek to manifest its position, or as Engels put it:

> the enemy once beaten, they must establish measures that will guarantee the stability of their conquest; that will destroy not only the political, but the social power of capital, that will guarantee their social welfare, along with their political strength (MECW 6 The Reform Movement in France [1847], 381).

It is central to take a deeper look at the role of the state. Marx and Engels were aware of the potential threat from counterrevolutionary forces, which must be kept down. To fulfill this purpose a temporary

1. Not adequately translated in the English Version, therefore quoted from the German Marx-Engels-Werke (MEW).

"dictatorship of the proletariat" was announced as a necessary step (MECW 10, Class struggles in France [1850], 127). This term "dictatorship" was falsely interpreted as a proof for the totalitarian and authoritarian agenda. However, dictatorship, during the lifetime of Marx and Engels, was not as negatively connoted as it is today (Draper 1986, 26–28). Thus, it was common practice to describe the bourgeoise state, as the dictatorship of the bourgeois class, without implying an especially violent or authoritarian state (MECW 11, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte [1852], 124). In the "Manifesto" Marx and Engels identify political power as "merely the organised power of one class for oppressing another" (MECW 6, Manifesto [1848], 505). Following this analysis the constitutional system therefore was described as a "dictatorship of his united exploiters" (MECW 10, Class struggles in France [1850], 122) against the proletariat. The term of the dictatorship implies that is only a temporary form of defending the revolution against conservative and reactionary forces. Marx and Engels openly declare:

> every provisional political set-up following a revolution requires a dictatorship, and an energetic dictatorship at that. (MECW 7, The Crisis and the Counter-Revolution [1848], 431)

Additionally to that Marx makes this clear, when he explains:

> this dictatorship itself constitutes no more than a transition to the abolition of all classes and to a classless society (MECW 39, M to Weydemeyer [1852], 65).

It is indispensable to recognize the importance of this temporary epoch of "dictatorship" to secure the revolutionary status quo (MECW 7, The Programmes of the Radical-Democratic Party and of the Left at Frankfurt [1848], 50). Engels even admitted the necessity of a communist army to secure the revolution against the influence of counterrevolutionary other states or classes. At the same time, he did not see the necessity of a standing army under communism (MECW 4, The Holy Family [1845], 249).

Nevertheless, this cannot be simply understood as an instruction to instrumentalize the given bourgeois state to keep down the counterrevolutionary forces. One important insight from the Paris Commune directly touched the relationship between revolutionary transmission periods and the role of the existing state:

> From the very outset the Commune was compelled to recognise that the working class, once come to power, could not go on managing with the old

> state machine; that in order not to lose again its only just conquered supremacy, this working class must, on the one hand, do away with all the old repressive machinery previously used against it itself, and, on the other, safeguard itself against its own deputies and officials, by declaring them all, without exception, subject to recall at any moment. (MECW 27, Abstract from The Civil War in France [1891], 189)

The Commune was lauded especially for not remaining in the common state order:

> It was a Revolution against the State itself, this supernaturalist abortion of society, a resumption by the people for the people, of its own social life. … The Commune was its definite negation, and, therefore the initiation of the social Revolution of the 19th century. (MECW 22, Drafts of The Civil War in France [1871], 486)

While they believed in the necessity of implementing a temporary "dictatorship" to secure the revolutionary situation, they were highly sceptical of the state. This does not mean, that they blindly supported a direct abolishing of any state. Moreover, it was about an evolutionary process, to constantly undermine the necessity of such a "supernaturalist abortion of society" (MECW 22, Drafts of The Civil War in France [1871], 486). Engels stressed this intertwined relationship, where the state was criticised, but at the same time, granted a necessary existence in the transmission period (MECW 47, E to van Paten [1883], 10).

All in all, one must once again stress the evolutionary character off the post-revolutionary character. The revolutionary conditions, the proletariat has successfully fought for, must be secured. When necessary, also through the use of violence. Meanwhile the state was not praised as an instrument for installing socialism, as meant by many utopians or petty-bourgeois socialists. It was characterised as a temporarily needed institution, which should be regarded as an institution whom right of existence diminishes with the successful ongoing of the revolution.

What this points out, is that revolutionary romanticism of heroic battles on barricades are misleading and raising false hopes to revolutionary agents. The last part underlines, that the revolution must be grasped as an ongoing-longterm challenge, which demands an understanding of steps and evolution rather than of one gigantic big bang.

Conclusion

Marx and Engels did not deliver a transtemporal theory of revolution. Instead, they insisted upon the necessity to seek for concrete answers to concrete political questions. The revolutionary overcoming of capitalism

will not be the consequence of any deterministic inner logic, but the action of revolutionary communists leading the working-class as active subjects, who take their history into their own hand. Unlike, other socialists at the time, Marx and Engels understood revolution as a process of radical self-emancipation. They supported an evolutionist approach in regards to revolution, in terms of a progress. This evolutionism does not evoke revisionism, but merely a materialist approach, which denies unscientific utopianism. Today it is upon on us to try to give those concrete answer to the concrete circumstances of our times. For now I see three main points which need to be worked out.

Firstly, I believe that the discussion about revolutionary subjectivity must be deepened. Marxists should try to find ways to deal with the contradiction, that the revolution and a successful communist society requires people far more developed, compared to their existence under capitalism, where education and personal development are structurally withheld from a major part of the world.

Secondly, the critical debate about eurocentrism and possible other paths to the revolution must be enhanced. From my standpoint it is highly questionable whether "western" bourgeois societies while developing in many countries of the global periphery as well, will actually include them in their realms of power, due to the tacit role of imperialism.

Thirdly, in accordance with the debate about a pragmatic internationalism, the central question remains the seezing of power and defending the possible revolutionary achievements against the supremacy of counterrevolutionary forces. This seems to be even more challenging when we consider the current non-existence of viable socialist alternatives and support on the level of states. Furthermore, this leaves communists not only with the challenge to seize and defend power against counterrevolutionary forces, but at the same time with the task to avoid an authoritarian course.

My essay on these old questions was written to invite other Marxist scholars to engage in those practical debates.

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Biography

Joshua Graf is a PhD candidate at the political science department of the University of Osnabrück. In his PhD project he examines the genealogy of communism in Marx and Engels. His focus in Marx-Engels-Research concentrates on their concept of communism, the idea of revolution as well as their approach towards criticism of the bourgeois society. Additionally, he is interested in the critique of social work and of the European border regime. He lectured several seminars at the University of applied sciences in Esslingen, discussing the stabilizing role of social work under current circumstances.

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Authoritarianism in Crisis: Resistance in Turkey under Erdoğan

Duru Selimkan

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Introduction

In the following I will analyse the political context of widespread protests that have erupted in response to the arrest of Ekrem İmamoğlu, the Mayor of Istanbul (Girit et al. 2025). The unfolding political developments in Turkey cannot be seen in isolation but must be contextualized within the broader trajectory of Erdoğan's authoritarianism, the structural transformation of the Turkish state, and the ongoing suppression of political opposition.

As a 23-year-old Turkish woman who has lived her entire life under the rule of Erdoğan, I write this analysis not only as a political observer but also as someone whose generation has grown up under the weight of authoritarianism. Unlike other cohorts who witnessed earlier phases of Turkey's political evolution, my peers and I have never known a political reality beyond the centralized control of Erdoğan's regime. We are often accused of being apolitical, but this characterization fails to capture the frustrations that define our political experience. Many in my generation, far from being indifferent, deeply desire transformative change. However, the absence of a political identity or organizational structure that genuinely represents our aspirations leaves us in a state of political disorientation. This disconnection is not a symptom of apathy but a reflection of structural limits imposed by a political system that suppresses alternative voices and narrows the field of democratic participation. The arrest of İmamoğlu and the protests led by the young it ignited are symptomatic of a deeper crisis–one that touches not only institutions, but the political consciousness of a generation coming of age under repression.

The rise of political Islam as an ideological framework for state power in Turkey has been a defining characteristic of the Erdoğan and "Justice and Development Party" (AKP) era. However, political Islam under the AKP must be distinguished from both its traditional Islamist predecessors and from other regional manifestations of Islamism. Unlike earlier Turkish Islamist movements that sought a more direct challenge to the secular Kemalist order, which was based on nationalism and laicism, the AKP engaged in a process of gradualist institutional capture, embedding its ideological orientation within the structures of the state while outwardly maintaining the formal framework of parliamentary democracy. Initially, this strategy involved a tactical alliance with liberal reformists and pro-EU factions, presenting the AKP as a force for democratization. Over time, however, this façade was discarded in favor

of a model of governance that fused Islamist conservatism with neoliberal economic policies and authoritarian statecraft (Tugal 2016; White 2017, Bahozde 2025).

Political Islam in Turkey, particularly under Erdoğan, has functioned not merely as a religious or ideological movement but as a mechanism of hegemonic control, aimed at restructuring state institutions, society, and economic relations to serve the interests of a new ruling elite. This transformation has entailed the erosion of secular legal norms, the increased subjugation of the judiciary to executive power, and the instrumentalization of religious discourse to justify state repression. The shift toward authoritarianism has also been accompanied by a profound centralization of power, wherein Erdoğan himself has become the embodiment of the state, mirroring patterns observed in other cases of personalist rule ("the big leader"). As scholars of authoritarianism have argued, such regimes often rely on the strategic deployment of ideological tropes to consolidate power while maintaining a veneer of legitimacy (Brownlee 2007; Levitsky & Way 2010). In Turkey, political Islam has provided the discursive justification for this consolidation, framing dissent as a threat to national and religious unity while systematically dismantling democratic safeguards.

This process, however, has not unfolded in a linear or uncontested manner. Rather, it has been marked by periodic crises, moments of mass resistance, and shifts in the ruling bloc's internal cohesion. The contradictions within Turkey's Islamist-authoritarian model—particularly its need to maintain electoral legitimacy while suppressing opposition—have produced recurrent instability. The regime's survival has thus depended not only on ideological control but also on coercion, patronage networks, and the strategic manipulation of legal and political institutions. Understanding this dynamic is essential for situating the repression of figures like Ekrem İmamoğlu within a broader trajectory of state transformation.

The arrest of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu is not just another instance of political repression under Erdoğan's increasingly authoritarian rule—it is a decisive moment that underscores the urgent need for a unified and organized resistance. Spontaneous protests and electoral victories alone are insufficient to counter the entrenched power of an authoritarian regime that has systematically dismantled democratic institutions, silenced opposition, and weaponized the state to maintain control. What is required is a broad-based, strategic movement that unites workers, students, intellectuals, and marginalized communities into

a cohesive political force capable of challenging the ruling class. Without an organized, class-conscious opposition, resistance remains fragmented, and the structures of capitalist and state oppression remain intact. As Marx famously argued, "The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves." The struggle against Erdoğan's rule must therefore move beyond reactive outrage, which in the current case have been proven more stable than before, and toward the building of a revolutionary alternative—one that does not merely resist oppression but looks forward to the future and lays the foundation for a truly egalitarian society.

Erdoğan's regime represents a sharp turn away from the limited democratic structures that were once characteristic of Turkey's political system. His rule relies heavily on the mechanisms of state repression to secure the hegemony of the ruling class, while dismantling the fragile democratic institutions that persist in a *supposedly liberal state* framework. The arrest, and the protests it has sparked, are both symptoms and reflections of the deeper crisis within Turkish bourgeois democracy. In this context, we have to inquire into the authoritarian turn in Turkey and the ongoing struggles against capitalist oppression. It is essential to understand these events not simply as isolated political incidents, but as part of a larger struggle against authoritarian capitalism and the necessity for a revolutionary alternative.

Authoritarian Parallels

The rise of *authoritarian populism* in Turkey cannot be analyzed in isolation from the broader global shift toward illiberal governance. Erdoğan's political trajectory aligns with a wider trend of right-wing populist leaders who have sought to undermine democratic institutions, consolidate personal rule, and reconfigure state structures in ways that facilitate authoritarian governance while preserving a facade of electoral legitimacy. A striking example of this phenomenon can be observed in the concurrent rise of Donald Trump in the United States, which itself seems only following the model of former proto-fascist governments, as for example in Italy under Berlusconi.

On the very day of Trump's inauguration, the Turkish state intensified its crackdown on opposition figures, including the detention of nationalist politician Ümit Özdağ (Altaylı 2025). While this may appear coincidental at first glance, it underscores a deeper political logic: the consolidation of right-wing authoritarian rule is often emboldened by global shifts in power (Chotiner 2025). This connection is also to be seen in the context of Turkey's role in NATO. The election of Trump, who

espoused an anti-democratic, nationalist, and reactionary political vision, provided further ideological and geopolitical space for Erdoğan to escalate his own authoritarian project.

Both Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Donald Trump have placed authoritarian populist rhetoric at the core of their political strategies, using it to justify attacks on political opponents and democratic institutions. Both leaders have framed themselves as embattled figures fighting against internal enemies who allegedly undermine the true will of the people. In this context, they have portrayed judicial and electoral systems as corrupt obstacles that must be overcome to restore national sovereignty. For Erdoğan, these internal enemies include Gülenists, Kurdish movements, and secular elites, while Trump has targeted the so-called "deep state" and all kinds of "left" elements. By positioning themselves as the sole defenders of the people against these supposed threats, both leaders have sought to consolidate their base and expand executive power.

This form of authoritarian populism aligns with the theoretical framework of competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way 2002), in which democratic institutions formally persist while their independence and functionality are systematically eroded. Both Erdoğan and Trump have maintained the appearance of elections, judicial oversight, and legislative processes, yet they have actively worked to weaken these mechanisms and transform them into tools of executive dominance.

In Erdoğan's case, particularly after the 2016 coup attempt, the judiciary was turned into an extension of the executive branch, with courts being used to suppress opposition. Elected politicians, journalists, and academics have been imprisoned under vague charges such as "terror propaganda" or "insulting the president," effectively shrinking the space for political dissent. The 2017 constitutional referendum further entrenched Erdoğan's authority by replacing Turkey's parliamentary system with an executive presidency, centralizing power in his hands while rendering checks and balances largely ineffective. Elections continue to be held, but the government's control over election boards, legal barriers imposed on opposition candidates, and media dominance have severely undermined the fairness of the electoral process.

Similarly, Trump's tenure was marked by efforts to delegitimize democratic institutions, particularly through attacks on the judiciary and electoral integrity. His repeated claims of voter fraud, especially during the 2020 presidential election, sought to cast doubt on the legitimacy of

democratic outcomes. He routinely pressured judicial and law enforcement bodies to act in his political favor, most notably in attempts to overturn election results. The January 6th, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol was a direct manifestation of this authoritarian populist strategy, as Trump mobilized his supporters against the democratic process itself. While the institutional resilience of the United States prevented a full transition to autocracy, Trump's actions showcased the vulnerabilities of democratic systems when confronted with a leader willing to erode institutional norms from within.

Despite differences in their political contexts, Erdoğan and Trump demonstrate how authoritarian populists exploit democratic structures to entrench their own power. It should be noted that this resembles the situation of 100 years ago, i.e. not only the rise of Fascism in Italy but even more the Nazi strategy in Germany, maintaining the facade of democracy (especially in the beginning) while hollowing out its core, using a combination of legal manipulation, media control, ritualistic allegiance and nationalist rhetoric to weaken opposition. This was also the time of the consolidation of the modern Kemalist Turkish state as another outcome of the geopolitical changes induced by the World War connected with the purges of the Armenian population and the war with Greece. While the Turkish *national state* was stabilized Turkish *democracy* remained fragile. This bifurcation can be observed on a global scale. The recent cases of Turkey and the USA illustrate that competitive authoritarianism is not confined to traditionally or still unstable democracies but can emerge even within states with strong institutional legacies. Beyond discourse, Erdoğan and Trump also share key strategies in their consolidation of power: reliance on clientelistic networks, the delegitimization of independent media, and the use of executive authority to punish opposition figures (Shear 2025). While the Turkish case is more extreme in its outright suppression of dissent, the underlying logic of governance follows a similar trajectory. Recognizing these parallels allows for a more comprehensive understanding of Turkey's authoritarian turn, situating it within a global pattern of democratic erosion rather than viewing it as an isolated national phenomenon.

In a striking example of the global reach of authoritarian repression, Rümeysa Öztürk, a Turkish PhD student, was recently arrested in the United States on charges that remain ambiguous (Donegan 2025). This event has drawn significant reactions within Turkey, including from supporters of the ruling AKP, who view the arrest as an unjust inter-

vention. The case raises concerns about the transnational nature of political suppression and the complicity of international powers in enabling repression. The arrest of Öztürk highlights the blurred lines between domestic authoritarianism and global authoritarian cooperation, a phenomenon that demands further scrutiny.

Notably, Öztürk's arrest drew significant reactions within Turkey, including from supporters of the ruling AKP. While the Turkish government often utilizes similar repressive measures against its own dissidents, the detention of a Turkish citizen by the United States triggered nationalist sentiments and widespread criticism. Many pro-government commentators, despite their alignment with Erdoğan's domestic authoritarianism, framed Öztürk's arrest as an example of Western hypocrisy and an attack on Turkish sovereignty. This paradoxical response highlights how anti-imperialist rhetoric is selectively employed by the AKP and its supporters—not as a principled opposition to authoritarianism, but as a tool to reinforce nationalist narratives. The case ultimately reveals the contradictions within Erdoğan's political base, which simultaneously upholds repression at home while objecting to similar tactics when applied by Western states.

Moreover, Erdoğan's administration operates with clear approval from the U.S., evident in his interactions with former President Donald Trump and continued diplomatic engagements under subsequent administrations. The phone conversations between Erdoğan and Trump, in which Erdoğan reportedly secured U.S. acquiescence on key domestic policies, reflect this dynamic. Additionally, the recent visit of Hakan Fidan, Turkey's intelligence chief, to Washington signals an ongoing relationship that bolsters Erdoğan's regime (Güldoğan 2025). These instances underscore the extent to which authoritarian governance is not merely a domestic phenomenon but one that is sustained through international alliances.

The Erdoğan Regime and the Criminalization of Opposition

The arrest of Ekrem İmamoğlu, the mayor of Istanbul and leading opposition figure (designated presidential candidate of CHP), is not an isolated event but part of a calculated strategy by President Erdoğan to consolidate his personal power and eliminate any meaningful opposition to his rule. Erdoğan's transformation of the state apparatus has been one of the most striking features of his political career, characterized by a systematic dismantling of democratic institutions and the reshaping of state structures to serve his own authoritarian agenda. Over the past two decades, Erdoğan has presided over the creation of an executive-

centered political system, which has systematically subordinated the judiciary, the media, and the security apparatus to his personal control.

This process of state transformation has gradually eroded the political structures that once defined Turkey's political landscape, replacing them with mechanisms of authoritarian rule (Cevik-Compiegne 2022). Under Erdoğan, the judiciary has become an instrument of political repression rather than an independent arbiter of justice. The media, once a vital space for public debate, has been either co-opted or suppressed, and the security forces are now deployed against any opposition, regardless of the political or ideological background of the protesters. The arrest of İmamoğlu is merely the latest example of this process. The judicial system has been instrumentalized to neutralize political opponents and the law itself has become a tool for the survival of Erdoğan's power.

This pattern is not new to Turkey. Throughout its modern history, the Turkish state has relied on mechanisms of coercion and suppression to maintain the dominance of the ruling class. From military coups to judicial interventions, the Turkish state has often employed undemocratic means to quell political dissent and suppress opposition movements. However, under Erdoğan, this process has reached new heights, with the state functioning as an increasingly coercive apparatus designed to serve the interests of the ruling class and, in particular, Erdoğan's personal power.

As Cenk Saraçoğlu (2025) notes, "Erdoğan's consolidation of power does not rely solely on coercion; it is also a product of his active reengineering of the entire state apparatus into an extension of his personal authority." Rather than operating within the constraints of bourgeois democracy, Erdoğan's government has engaged in a systematic campaign of state-led repression to maintain his control. This is a classic example of what Marx described in *The Class Struggles in France*, where the state, with its vast bureaucratic and military machinery, becomes alien to the interests of the people, operating primarily to secure the dominance of the ruling class. Under Erdoğan, the state has become an instrument of political repression, primarily serving the interests of the political and economic elites that support his regime.

A crucial yet often underexplored dimension of Turkey's political landscape is the fluctuating relationship between the AKP and the Kurdish political movement, represented institutionally by the DEM Party (formerly the HDP). While the AKP has engaged in systematic repression of Kurdish political actors—imprisoning mayors, dismantling party

structures, and engaging in military operations in Kurdish-majority regions—it has also, at key moments, sought tacit or overt alliances with Kurdish political forces. This dual strategy reflects the regime's pragmatic authoritarianism: repression is deployed when the Kurdish movement threatens the regime's stability, while limited engagement is used when it serves Erdoğan's electoral or geopolitical interests (Güneş 2020).

The de facto alliance between the AKP and the DEM Party, though seldom acknowledged explicitly in mainstream political discourse, reveals the contradictions within the Turkish political order (Hürriyet Daily News 2025). On the one hand, Erdoğan's nationalist-Islamist base is deeply opposed to any concessions to the Kurdish movement, viewing it as an existential threat to the unitary state. On the other hand, Erdoğan has at times sought Kurdish political support to maintain his hold on power, as seen in past electoral strategies where AKP courted Kurdish votes in key constituencies. This unstable and opportunistic relationship highlights the broader instability of Erdoğan's authoritarian model—it relies on contradictory alliances that can shift based on immediate political calculations rather than long-term ideological consistency.

İmamoğlu's Arrest: A Coup Against the People's Will

The arrest of İmamoğlu must not be viewed solely as a procedural legal matter; rather, it constitutes a direct movement to the democratic will of the electorate. Having progressively eroded the conditions for free and fair elections, Erdoğan has resorted to an authoritarian judicial system as a means of eliminating political threats. This pattern is not unprecedented in Turkish history. The ruling class, whether through military coups, judicial interventions, or emergency decrees, has consistently employed undemocratic mechanisms to suppress challenges to its authority. As Zürcher (2004) notes, Turkey's modern political history is marked by cycles of authoritarian retrenchment, in which ruling elites—both civilian and military—have repeatedly curtailed democratic advances to maintain their grip on power. The current crackdown on opposition figures, including İmamoğlu, represents a continuation of this historical trend, albeit in a more personalized and centralized form under Erdoğan.

The arrest is not simply a matter of political rivalry. It represents a movement to the millions of voters who cast their ballots in favor of opposition candidates like İmamoğlu. For many, İmamoğlu's victory in Istanbul symbolized the possibility of an alternative to Erdoğan's authoritarian rule, a hope for a more democratic and just society. The arrest

is, therefore, not only an attack on İmamoğlu but on the very idea of democratic representation. This is one of the reasons motivating the widespread and heterogenous resistance. Erdoğan's actions send a clear message: those who challenge his power will be punished, and the democratic process is no longer a legitimate avenue for opposition.

It signals a shift away from the already limited democratic practices that existed in Turkey and a further entrenchment of Erdoğan's authoritarian rule. In this context, electoral politics has become an increasingly untenable path for opposition forces. As the regime escalates its repression, the opposition faces a stark choice: either submit to Erdoğan's authoritarianism or escalate the struggle beyond the confines of electoral politics. This crisis presents a moment of rupture in the political system, one that will require a fundamental rethinking of how opposition forces can organize and resist.

Protests and Popular Resistance: The Emerging Class Struggle

In the wake of İmamoğlu's arrest, a wave of protests has erupted across Turkey. The protests, which have been particularly widespread in Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, and more than 50 cities, have involved a broad cross-section of Turkish society, including workers, students, intellectuals, and activists. Demonstrations have also spread to university campuses, including Istanbul University and Middle East Technical University (METU), where students have played a leading role in resisting state repression.

The scale of the protests reflects the deepening crisis of the Turkish state and the growing discontent with Erdoğan's rule. Millions of people have taken to the streets, chanting slogans such as "Hükümet İstifa!" ("Government Resign!") and "Faşizme Karşı Omuz Omuza" ("Shoulder to Shoulder Against Fascism"). These protests are not simply a reaction to the arrest of İmamoğlu but are part of a broader resistance to the authoritarian turn in Turkish politics. A central demand of the demonstrators is the end to politically motivated trials and the decriminalization of opposition figures, which have become commonplace under Erdoğan's regime.

The Turkish state has responded to these protests with violent repression. Riot police have been deployed to disperse crowds, and protesters have faced the use of tear gas, water cannons, and other forms of state violence. The brutality of the state's response to these protests highlights the increasing authoritarianism of Erdoğan's rule and the lengths to which the regime is willing to go to maintain its power. Reports indicate that police brutality has escalated, particularly against

student demonstrators, who have faced disproportionate violence. This repression serves to underscore the political stakes of the current moment and the urgent need for a united resistance movement to challenge the regime.

These mobilizations draw clear parallels to the 2013 Gezi Resistance, which saw millions of people take to the streets to resist Erdoğan's authoritarianism and demand greater democratic freedoms. "Gezi was a moment of rupture in Turkish political consciousness, forcing even previously depoliticized sectors of society to recognize the necessity of resistance" (Saraçoğlu 2025). The current protests, while different in many respects, share a similar spirit of defiance against state repression and authoritarianism.

The Gezi protests, initially sparked by opposition to urban redevelopment in Istanbul's Gezi Park, quickly escalated into a nationwide movement against state repression and authoritarian governance. The social composition of the Gezi movement—encompassing students, workers, leftist organizations, and disillusioned members of the urban middle class—demonstrated the potential for cross-class, cross-ideological resistance to Erdoğan's rule (Özkırımlı 2014).

The state's response to Gezi was characterized by extreme police violence, mass arrests, and the expansion of repressive legal measures. However, while the regime succeeded in suppressing the movement in the short term, the political consciousness it generated has had lasting effects. The emergence of new waves of protest in subsequent years, including the demonstrations following İmamoğlu's arrest, suggests that the underlying contradictions exposed by Gezi have not been resolved (Karakaş 2025). Instead, each successive crackdown has intensified the regime's legitimacy crisis, creating conditions for future mobilizations.

The question that arises, however, is how these protests can move beyond spontaneous outrage and into a more organized, revolutionary movement capable of challenging the structures of capitalist and in particular *state* oppression, which by definition has the monopoly on violence to *defend* democracy, even while effectively suppressing it. Spontaneous uprisings, like the protests that erupted in Turkey following the arrest of Ekrem İmamoğlu, are a powerful expression of widespread discontent, but they tend to remain short-lived if they lack organizational cohesion and a concrete political program. While these movements highlight the growing resistance to Erdoğan's authoritarianism, they also reveal a deeper issue: the opposition's fragmentation and its inability to

forge a unified strategy that can truly challenge the ruling power structure and the legitimated political system. Without a clear program of action rooted in class politics, the protests risk being contained or co-opted by the existing political structures that ultimately uphold the capitalist nation state. This brings us to the crucial question of how the opposition can transition from mere resistance to actual revolutionary action. In view of the above mentioned paradox of a formally democratic state suppressing democratic representation their seems to be no other way forward.[1]

A significant part of the challenge lies in the role of the opposition parties, particularly the "Republican People's Party" (CHP), which remains the primary opposition force to Erdoğan's regime. However, the CHP's political position within Turkey's existing bourgeois framework is a key obstacle. Historically, the CHP has been a party of the establishment, which has long aligned itself with the capitalist class and the state apparatus. While the CHP presents itself as a bulwark against Erdoğan's authoritarianism, it lacks a revolutionary class politics and continues to operate within the boundaries of the capitalist state. This is critical because simply replacing Erdoğan with a new elite, even if it is from the CHP, does not address the structural oppression embedded within Turkey's state institutions. As Marx argued in *The Civil War in France*, "The working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes" (Marx 1871). In other words, merely taking control of the state machinery does not lead to liberation. Instead, the existing state apparatus must be dismantled and reconstituted by the people for the purpose of their own emancipation.

In Turkey's case, the state apparatus has been systematically restructured by Erdoğan's regime, deeply entangling the judiciary, the me-

1. This situation, by the way, illustrates the Kantian "paradox" of revolution, which might be rather read as a call for action, even though this action seemingly lacks a formal legal or electoral basis. The conflicted argument of Kant's "right of revolution" (Beck 1971) becomes clear in a situation when state power legitimizes itself fusing juridical and discursive control as well as legislative and executive registers to suppress opposition and freedom of speech. In this situation, we ask: where is the immanent corrective of a state order which acts against its very function of securing democracy? When does a state order looses its legitimacy? In other words, Kant made visible the possible contradiction between state legislation and more universal rights, as well as the risks revolutionary action faces—a fact which is crucial to understand, since it is one of the reasons for many people's reluctance to join revolutionary action (framing it as undemocratic, illegal or just too dangerous), not the least because of the advanced possibilities of state control nowadays and thus it has to be taken into account. I thank the editors for the hint to Kant's paradox.

dia, and security forces with his authoritarian agenda. Erdoğan has effectively neutralized any independent power that might challenge his rule, consolidating the state as an instrument of his personal and party's dominance. Given this, the CHP's assumption that it can simply take control of this very state apparatus and use it to implement progressive change is naive. The reality is that the state, as currently constituted, is a tool of capitalist control, and without addressing its fundamental nature, no meaningful shift in power can occur.

The class nature of the Turkish state must therefore be central to any opposition strategy. The opposition cannot afford to rely solely on the state's reformability under a new administration. Instead, it must work toward the dismantling of the state's repressive institutions and the creation of a new political order, one that is genuinely democratic and serves the interests of the working class. The movement must not only resist Erdoğan's authoritarianism but also confront the capitalist structures that undergird the entire political system. This means rejecting the *false promises* of reformist politics and understanding that the political struggle in Turkey today is ultimately a class struggle, with the working class at the heart of any effort to create a just society.

The centrality of the working class is key to any revolutionary movement.[2] Marx's insight—that the emancipation of the working class must be achieved by the working class itself—remains as relevant as ever. It is the working class, as the most oppressed and exploited group within the current system, that must lead the charge in dismantling the structures of capitalist oppression. However, the class consciousness of this group is particularly weak nowadays. The protests and uprisings, while important expressions of popular anger, must become part of a broader, organized movement that can mobilize the working class, intellectuals, students, and marginalized groups to challenge the entire capitalist system. A revolution in Turkey cannot simply be about changing the people in power; it must be about changing the very systems of power that enable oppression.

2. An important point is to understand this constellation in our times and in the local context. Thanks again to the editors, in this case for pointing to the footnote that Engels felt compelled to make to the *Communist Manifesto* in 1888: "By bourgeoisie is meant the class of modern capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labour. By proletariat, the class of modern wage labourers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour power in order to live." (Marx/Engels 1848 / 1969).

In short, the political crisis in Turkey, exacerbated by Erdoğan's authoritarian turn, provides hopes for a critical opportunity for a revolutionary transformation. However, this opportunity will not be seized unless there is a shift in how the opposition conceptualizes its struggle. Rather than focusing on electoral victories or superficial reforms, the opposition must aim to dismantle the structures of state power that have been co-opted by Erdoğan's regime. It must take up the challenge of a new state order. This requires a revolutionaryapproach that recognizes the limitations of the current state apparatus and the need for its complete reorganization. Only through such a transformation can the opposition hope to build a truly democratic society—one that serves the needs of the working class and all oppressed peoples.

Navigating a Complex Political Terrain

The role of the Republican People's Party (CHP) in the current political landscape is a complex and contentious issue. Historically, the CHP has been the party of the Turkish bourgeois state, upholding the interests of the capitalist class and the imperialist-oriented foreign policy of the Turkish elite. However, in recent years, the CHP has also become a crucial space for organizing opposition to Erdoğan's regime. The party's role as a key opposition force is now more critical than ever, especially as Erdoğan's repression has intensified.

> "While the CHP's class character remains bourgeois, its role as the de facto space for oppositional politics means that even leftist organizations must engage with its mobilizations critically rather than dismiss them outright." (Saraçoğlu 2025)

This is particularly important in a political environment where the repression of political Islam has become a regime in itself, and where the CHP has increasingly become a site of struggle for democratic freedoms and political space.

This shift in the CHP's political position must be understood in the context of the broader political dynamics in Turkey. The dominance of political Islam, especially under Erdoğan's leadership, has reshaped the political terrain in such a way that even bourgeois parties like the CHP are now seen as key players in the resistance to authoritarianism. While the CHP remains fundamentally aligned with the capitalist class, it has become a crucial actor in the struggle for democracy in Turkey. This reality complicates any simple critique of the CHP, as leftist movements must now navigate the contradictions inherent in engaging with a bourgeois party in a time of escalating repression.

Organizing the Resistance

The protests in response to İmamoğlu's arrest reflect widespread dissatisfaction with Erdoğan's authoritarian rule, but they also highlight the need for a more organized and strategic resistance movement. The question that arises is: Who will organize the resistance, and what form will it take? As Marxists, we understand that the struggle against oppression cannot be reduced to spontaneous protests or isolated actions. Rather, it requires the creation of an organized, revolutionary movement capable of confronting the state and challenging the structures of capitalist power. We, the youth, are calling upon the elders to help with that.

This movement must unite various sectors of society that are resisting oppression, including workers, students, intellectuals, and marginalized communities such as the Kurdish movement. These diverse forces must be brought together into a cohesive political bloc capable of challenging the ruling class. This bloc must not only resist the authoritarianism of Erdoğan's regime but also work toward a more just and egalitarian society.

The arrest of İmamoğlu is not simply an attack on one politician; it is an attack on the democratic aspirations of the Turkish people. This is a critical moment in Turkey's political history. Workers (incl. employees), students, intellectuals, and activists must unite to confront Erdoğan's authoritarianism and demand democratic freedoms. The struggle cannot be confined to electoral politics; it must expand into a broader movement that challenges the very foundations of capitalist oppression. The task is given and clear, the solution less so. The youth is calling for change.

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The Silent Weight of Class: Hegemony and False Consciousness in *Common Courtesy (Nezaket)*

Mesut Yüce Yıldız

WHAT IS COURTESY?
Courtesy is more than politeness. Rooted in the Old French *courtoisie*, originally denoting the disciplined behavior expected in royal courts, it has long functioned as a tool of social regulation. As Norbert Elias (1969) suggests, such codes of conduct internalized hierarchies by rendering domination respectable, even virtuous. In this sense, courtesy operates not only as etiquette but as ideology: a form of soft power that legitimizes authority while concealing inequality. In this film, *Common Courtesy*, this historical logic finds a contemporary echo. Beneath its modest portrayal of a seemingly benign workplace lies a quiet reproduction of class power. The relationship between a small appliance store owner and his ailing employee Halil is presented as humane, even touching—but its deeper significance is class-based. Here, courtesy itself becomes the protagonist: the invisible agent through which structural domination is naturalized, embodied, and moralized.

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• *Correspondence:* Mesut Yüce Yıldız, İzmir Metropolitan Municipality.
• e-mail: mesut.yuce.yildiz@gmail.com
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The invisibility of class relations often takes shape behind the veil of everyday politeness. *Common Courtesy* aims to partially render visible the structural domination operating beneath this veil. The film presents the relationship between an appliance store owner and his employee Halil, who suffers from a herniated disc, as a simple, ordinary, even "humane" story. Yet, it in fact represents one of the most refined forms of class conflict. Halil is a laborer whose health has deteriorated due to a heavy workload. Although he is offered a job with better conditions elsewhere, he cannot leave his current position. The employer, fully aware of this situation, takes no action. This indifference does not stem from a personal moral failure, but from the nature of his structural position—he is, after all, the employer.

Such a relationship is not limited to economic exploitation; it is the product of a regime of consent that also operates at cultural and ideological levels. The continuity of dominance is ensured not solely through direct coercive mechanisms, but through the production of symbolic structures, moral norms, and emotional codes embedded in everyday life (Lears 1985). Gramsci's theory of hegemony provides an illuminating framework in this regard: the ruling class universalizes its own interests, not only through force but by shaping cultural meaning. Subaltern classes, in turn, often internalize and reproduce values that contradict their own material interests. Halil's loyalty to his employer emerges from such values—modesty, fidelity, silence—which serve to legitimize his class position. However, this internalization leads him into a passivity that ultimately conflicts with his own interests. The tension between his intuitive sense of justice and his everyday submission corresponds directly to what Gramsci describes as "contradictory consciousness" —a condition in which the worker, while intuitively perceiving injustice through lived experience, continues to think within the framework of dominant ideology (Lears 1985, 570).

This regime of consent also involves the ideological naturalization of domination. While Gramsci conceptualizes hegemony as a structure sustained through contradictions within consciousness, McCarney's notion of false consciousness refers to the disappearance of these contradictions—the moment when the structure becomes unquestionable. The individual does not simply fail to recognize that the social order works against them; rather, they come to perceive it as the natural order of things (McCarney 2005). Halil's rejection of a job offer with better conditions cannot be explained merely through emotional loyalty. His inaction stems from the internalization of values taught by the dominant

structure—loyalty, gratitude, sacrifice—which are not just cultural norms but perceived moral truths. The relationship he builds with his employer is therefore not coded economically but morally. In this moral framework, exploitation becomes both invisible and legitimate.

The employer figure in the film does not represent a classical capitalist type, but rather a modern form of neo-feudal authority. Instead of enforcing absolute domination, he cultivates an emotional, even familial, bond with the employee. The commonly encountered "we are a family" discourse in contemporary workplaces functions as an ideological veil; it obscures the structural position of the worker and encourages identification with roles such as the temporarily unsuccessful entrepreneur or the loyal family member. This kind of rhetoric, which obstructs the development of class consciousness and conceals capital-labor antagonism, has been well documented (Day 2020). Halil's employer does not impose direct pressure; instead, he appears to care about Halil's well-being. These gestures reflect a relationship in which authority is sustained not only materially but also emotionally. The employer reinforces his moral authority not through institutional control but through a sense of implicit obligation. Power, in this context, manifests not through overt discipline but through an internalized sense of debt; loyalty, devotion, and gratitude become key ideological tools for preserving class hierarchies.

Halil's sense of moral debt is not a matter of personal disposition; it is grounded in the internalized codes of his class culture. Ruby Payne's work on class-based hidden rules offers a valuable framework for understanding such internalizations. In low-income groups, time is predominantly experienced in the immediacy of the present; decisions are oriented around survival and the continuity of interpersonal relationships rather than long-term planning. Language tends to emphasize emotional and relational connections, and resistance to authority is rare, as it conflicts with survival strategies (Payne 1996). Halil's decision to remain loyal at the expense of his own health is a clear example of this invisible set of norms. The cultural logic of his class rewards relational behavior that subordinates individual interests, thus producing a silent consent to structural inequality.

The employer interprets Halil's loyalty as irreplaceable dedication, but in reality, this loyalty is a manifestation of structural powerlessness. Jean Anyon's concept of the "hidden curriculum" provides a useful analytical lens here. Her observations on class-based education practices reveal that working-class children are socialized from an early age

into specific cognitive and behavioral patterns. They are expected to be obedient and compliant; the knowledge they receive is typically abstract, decontextualized, and removed from application. This pedagogical model serves to prepare them for a labor market in which compliance is valued over critical thinking (Anyon 1980). The long-term impact of such an education system is evident in Halil's case: a disposition that accepts authority without question and naturalizes structural inequality.

Halil's class position shapes not only his social relations, but also his emotional dispositions, action capacities, and even bodily experience. His herniated disc is not merely a medical issue; it is a corporeal symptom of the systemic exploitation of labor, a wound inscribed by class. This condition evokes what has been termed a "structure of feeling" —a historically embedded, pre-discursive affective formation that, while difficult to articulate, is powerfully felt in the fabric of everyday life. Halil's silence, his inability to articulate himself, and the emotional disconnection in his interactions with his employer all signify a suppressed class-based anger, or an unspoken form of resistance.

The employer's politeness is also far from innocent. Ideological hegemony entails not only the forceful imposition of dominant values but also their transmission through seemingly benevolent, natural, and morally sanctioned forms. Relationships that ultimately undermine the subordinate party's interests are often legitimized through a discourse of kindness or paternalistic care (SAGE 2014). The employer does not directly harm Halil; rather, he sustains—quietly and politely—the very structure that produces harm. This mode of domination operates not through coercion, but through silence, emotional detachment, and the language of care.

Yet the tragedy of *Common Courtesy* lies precisely in the contradiction between subjective intentions and objective conditions. Both Halil and his employer may appear well-meaning, even kind—and in certain gestures, they genuinely are. But the film does not portray a world of moral equivalence; rather, it depicts individuals shaped by vastly unequal positions within a structure that disciplines even their decency. This is not merely a story of exploitation masked by politeness. It is a portrayal of how individuals—especially those in subordinate positions—are compelled to navigate structural pressures that define, constrain, and ultimately instrumentalize their actions. While the employer appears courteous, his inaction is not the result of helplessness, but of a quiet compliance with the logic of domination. The social order

does not impose itself through force alone, but through the gradual internalization of norms that make domination appear natural—even moral. *"*Courtesy*"* thus reveals how power often functions most effectively when it disguises itself as care. The figures in the film are not passive puppets of ideology, but subjects entangled in contradictory demands: they act, they choose, they mean well—but always on terrain not of their own making. This is the film's tragic core: even in a world where everyone seems polite and well-intentioned, someone still ends up in the hospital.

In conclusion, *Common Courtesy* illustrates how class relations are not only reproduced in the economic sphere but also in the emotional, moral, and cultural layers of everyday life. While the film presents itself as a modest, humane portrayal of a quiet workplace, it subtly interrogates the structural tensions beneath this surface. Halil's "politeness" is revealed to be not an individual virtue, but an ideological product of his class position; his loyalty, silence, and self-sacrifice are not acts of generosity, but the embodied consequences of a historically situated mode of domination. In this sense, *Common Courtesy* is not merely the story of a worker—it is a cinematic narrative of class discourse, internalized consent, and embodied inequality.

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MOVIE
The *Common Courtesy* short film can be viewed at the following address:
https://vimeo.com/9970544531
password: 619182

GUIDELINES FOR AUTHORS

The purpose of these guidelines is to ensure a clear, standard format for submissions. Please follow all guidelines as closely as possible.

Marxism & Sciences is an open access journal. Publication of articles/essays and access to accepted and published material is free. The journal does not charge any article/essay submission, processing or publication fees. We have no budget for proof-readers or type-setters. These tasks are therefore the responsibility of the authors.

The basic descriptions and principles about the content of submissions are formally presented here. However, the priority of the journal is to achieve its aims collectively in collaboration with editors, editorial and advisory boards, authors and readers.

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- *Class struggles:* Studies covering class struggles in nature, culture, and/or society.
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- **Essays** (5000-1000 words): Essays are original contributions with more personal, intuitive and introspective style and do not necessarily have to build on a comprehensive literature review and/or extensive research, unlike scholarly articles. Essays are expected to include critical reflections or political interventions into the past or actual natural/cultural/social issues and/or old or ongoing scholarly and intellectual discussions.
- **Review articles** (6000-12000 words)**:** Critical review of the state-of-art of any topic or any discipline(s).
- **Cultural works** (max. 1200 words of texts or max. 1 GB of audio/visual material): Poem, play, story, music, short film, documentary, video, photographs, graphics design, painting, sculpture etc.
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- **Translations** (6000-12000 words): Works either with an historical or actual significance written and published in languages other than English.
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Academic property issues: Submissions must be original and unique. They may not be already published in the same or similar form (in print or electronically, including on a web site), in any language, or accepted or under consideration for publication elsewhere. Papers published in *Marxism & Sciences* may not be published elsewhere in any language without the permission of *Marxism & Sciences*.

CALL FOR PAPERS

ISSUE 8 | SUMMER 2025

Marxism and Systems Science - The Technosphere: Systems, Things, and Infrastructures From Tektology, Cybernetics and Computational Planning to the Complexity Paradigm and Platform Capitalism

Marxist thought and practice have always centrally focused on the analysis of systems, things, and (technological) infrastructures—along with the possibilities inherent in alternative systems organized by collective ownership and state planning. These discussions have gained renewed currency in the digital age. To explore these questions today means to elaborate a Marxist epistemology of systems that goes beyond the old dichotomy of historical vs. structural analysis.

In this special issue, we want to investigate the relation of Marxism and systems science, in history, theory and practice. We construe systems science broadly, with a particular emphasis on those conceptions which developed in the Marxist tradition with a dialectical approach. Additionally, we understand there to be a longstanding relationship between systems theory, political economy, organisation, computational means, theories of economic planning, and global social history, represented by traditions such as Immanuel Wallerstein's world systems theory.

In recent years, world systems analysis has been recast in light of the debate around the notion of the Anthropocene. Representative is the work of the geologist Jan Zalasiewicz, who has argued we should understand the artefacts of human planetary activity as comprising the Technosphere. As Zalasiewicz writes, "The technosphere encompasses all of the technological objects manufactured by humans, but that is only part of it.... [It] comprises not just our machines, but us humans too, and the professional and social systems by which we interact with technology.... A proto-technosphere of some kind has been present throughout human history, but for much of this time, it took the form of isolated, scattered patches that were of little planetary significance. It has now become a globally interconnected system – a new and important development on our planet."

This debate provides an occasion to revisit Marxist resources for understanding human labour in connection with the "scientific-technological revolution" and the "great acceleration" of the twentieth century. We can consider key moments in history, from the famous Bogdanov-Lenin debate to the anti-technocratic work of Evald Ilyenkov, the systems theory of Blauberg, Sadovsky, and Yudin, and cybernetics in the socialist realm.

In the special issue we would like to address the following questions: Is system science more than a theory of an administered world? Does it go beyond an effort to improve the status quo and transform the system altogether? What role does systems theory play in Marxist thought and the history of socialism more generally? What epistemological changes are presented by the development of technologies such as AI? Are current developments reducible to old questions about statistics and data, or do they contain novel dynamics?

Additionally, we might ask: what were the contexts informing the development of Marxist systems theories? Which problems do we encounter today when pursuing these perspectives, and how successful were syntheses of the Marxian critique of political economy and systems thinking? What are its prospects today, and where are revisions needed?

Also, Is it significant that the first two versions of systems science, developed by prominent Marxist theorists Bogdanov and Bukharin, were suppressed by the Soviet regime and only reemerged in the post-war US context?

Given the broad topic, we are looking for contributions from different fields and perspectives, including historical and analytical methods, and systematic and speculative approaches alike. We particularly welcome contributions that give a comprehensive overview of a specific field, case study, or problem.

Possible topics may include:

- Revisiting Bogdanov's work and its reception
- Cybernetics in socialist planning in view of computation (e.g. in Chile, DDR, USSR, China, etc.)
- Marxist analyses of systems (e.g., trade, money, the internet)
- Marxist systems theories (World systems theory, the Regulation School, etc.)
- Materialist dialectics and systems theory
- Hegel, Marx and Engels as precursors of the systems paradigm
- The problem of inherent positivism in techno-futurist ideas
- Dialectics of nature and earth-systems science
- The Technosphere and the debate about the Capitalocene
- Marxist epistemology of systems and infrastructure
- Capitalist appropriation of systems sciences (neo-liberalism, neo-institutionalism, Governance theory, Club of Rome, RAND, etc.)
- Cybernetics in socialist planning and computation
- The rise of complexity science in the neoliberal era (Manhattan Project, Santa Fe Institute, etc.)
- Marxist (and post-Marxist) critics of systems sciences and complexity governance
- Digital infrastructures and platform capitalism

NOTE

Your submission may be in the form of articles, essays, communications, cultural works and creative writing for our summer 2025 collaborative issue. Detailed CFPs for both issues will be published and circulated in due time.

Please submit your manuscripts prepared for blind review with a separate title page that includes the title of your submission, affiliation and contact information to marxismandsciences[at]gmail. com. We also suggest the "online first" publication option for the manuscripts that are submitted, reviewed, and accepted earlier than the deadline.

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