

ONE

THE USE AND DISADVANTAGE OF PREHISTORY FOR LIFE

MARX'S "PRE-CAPITALIST ECONOMIC FORMATIONS" AND THE CONSTITUTION OF THE SUBJECT OF LABOR

In every moment of the development of the capitalist mode of production, capital has always proposed the form of cooperation. This form had to be functional with the form of exploitation when it did not actually inhere within it. It was only on this basis that labor became productive. Likewise, in the period of primitive accumulation, when capital enveloped and constricted pre-existent labor forms to its own valorization, it was capital which posed the form of cooperation—and this consisted in the emptying of the pre-constituted connections of the traditional laboring subjects.

—Antonio Negri, *Twenty Theses on Marx*

PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION

It is a matter of common knowledge that Karl Marx presents the difference between his analysis and all previous (bourgeois) understandings of political economy as a historical versus an ahistorical conception of capitalism. What is considerably less certain is how Marx, or those who came after him, understood this disparity; that is, What are its theoretical grounds and what were or could be its effects in the realm of philosophy, historical understanding, and political practice? There have been many interpretations of this difference; in this day and age this difference is often represented as either an incorrect prophecy (capitalism will collapse) or a contribution to a vague and inconsequential awareness of history

(something, some economy existed before capitalism). If it is possible today to propose another thought of the distinction between Marx and political economy, or to attempt to reanimate the question, problem, and lines of investigation from behind this accepted bit of academic common sense, I would suggest that for Marx this difference, the difference history makes, has entirely different grounds, and different effects, than mere prophesy, transforming what is understood by society, materiality, power, and subjectivity.

To begin to grasp this difference it is necessary to pose the question of what is at stake in what Marx called the “mode of production.” The mode of production, specifically the capitalist mode of production, was the name that Marx gave his particular object, and it is from this object that Marx proposes an understanding of history, politics, and the possibility of political practice. Furthermore, it is through a definition of this particular “theoretical object” that Marx develops a critique of the objects of idealist philosophy and bourgeois political economy, objects conventionally known as “society” and the “economy.”¹ This critique is most overtly aimed at the political motivations at work in the manner in which the bourgeoisie understood its object (it almost goes without saying that the bourgeoisie had an interest in understanding capitalism as eternal) or what is commonly referred to as “ideology critique” in its most banal and basic sense. However, Marx’s criticism goes beyond the simple investigation of political interest to indicate the unexamined presuppositions of the objects of bourgeois economics and philosophy. One such presupposition was the understanding of human nature that silently supported the theoretical space of classical bourgeois political economy. “Human nature” here is intended in a broad sense to include not only the particular philosophical anthropology that provides classical political economy with its alibis and justifications but also the more practical problem of the place of human desires, motivations, and beliefs (or subjectivity) in history: their conditions, limitations, and effects.

Marx’s critique of the conceptions of human nature and subjectivity supporting bourgeois political economy, as well as his development, albeit partial and often incomplete, of a radically different thought of the historicity and materiality of subjectivity, are perhaps nowhere more forcefully developed than in the points where Marx presents his account of the formation of the capitalist mode of production and its radical difference from all prior modes of production. I am referring here to the final chapters of the first volume of *Capital* and the notebooks entitled “Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations” in the *Grundrisse* and suggesting that these texts be read as something more than elements of a world history or speculative anthropology; that is, as contributions to an understanding of the materiality of social relations and subjectivity and, ultimately, despite appearances, to an understanding of the capitalist mode of production itself.

This intersection of historical formation and contemporary existence is underscored continually throughout Marx’s critique of so-called primitive accumulation [*sogenannte ursprünglichen Akkumulation*]. So-called primitive accumulation, which is sometimes called “previous or original accumulation,” is the answer posed

by political economy to a seemingly irresolvable problem: The fact that capitalist production would continually presuppose itself, it presupposes wealth in the hands of capitalists as well as a population of those who have nothing but their labor power to sell. These elements, capital and workers, are the preconditions of any capitalist production, yet they cannot be explained from it. Capitalist accumulation would seem to be something of an infinite regress, always presupposing its own conditions. To accumulate capital it is necessary to possess capital. There must then be an original or previous accumulation, one that is not the result of the capitalist mode of production but rather its point of departure and that constitutes the originary differentiation between capital and workers. This foundational distinction has generally been understood by political economy as a moral difference. As Marx writes:

This primitive accumulation plays approximately the same role in political economy as original sin does in theology. Adam bit the apple, and thereupon sin fell on the human race. Its origin is supposed to be explained when it is told as an anecdote about the past. Long, long ago there were two sorts of people; one the diligent, intelligent, and above all frugal elite; the other lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living. The legend of the theological original sin tells us certainly how man came to be condemned to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow; but the history of economic original sin reveals to us that there are people to whom this is by no means essential. Never mind! Thus it came to pass that the former sort accumulated wealth, and the latter sort finally had nothing to sell except their own skins.²

Thus, as much as so-called primitive accumulation posits a theory of the formation of the capitalist mode of production, albeit one predicated on a presupposed division between the diligent and the lazy, it turns this explanation toward the present in the form of a moral tale. The origin provides the present with a moral alibi, dividing the capitalist and the worker along the lines of the good and the bad.

Not only does the theory of so-called primitive accumulation function in the present, aiming for the present or a particular moral characterization of the present, it never leaves the present even as it offers itself as history. So-called primitive accumulation takes the idealized memory of an individual capitalist's accumulation—saving money, which itself is a morally coded, or best case (ideological), presentation of accumulation within capital—and turns it into the conditions of capitalist accumulation in general. It mistakes this memory for history, the conditions *within* capitalist accumulation for the conditions *of* capitalist accumulation. Étienne Balibar asserts that, “The analysis of primitive accumulation thus brings us into the presence of the radical *absence of memory* which characterizes history (memory being only the reflection of history in certain predetermined sites—ideology or even law—and as such, anything but a faithful reflection).”³ As a theory of the capitalist mode of production, so-called primitive accumulation constitutes a failure to think different conditions, limitations, and effects in history, or to think history as difference—a failure that is perhaps not

entirely explained by self-interest. So-called primitive accumulation can only extend the conditions of the capitalist mode of production infinitely backward in time: Capitalism was (and always will be) possible; to become real, it only required the industriousness and intelligence of the first capitalist.

The fantasy of the thrifty proto-capitalist, whatever its function as nursery tale may be within the schoolbooks and ideologies of capital, is wholly inadequate to the task of accounting for the formation of the capitalist mode of production. The accumulation of money without the conditions to transform it into capital, such as workers or those who have only their labor power to sell, is not capitalist accumulation but “hoarding” [*Shatzbildung*] (CI 227/144). For Marx hoarding is a subjective disposition toward money, and in part produced by money, prior to capital; that is, prior to the possibility of investment or surplus value. Hoarding as a disposition is constituted by money and its particular character of being qualitatively without limits—it has the power to stand in for any other commodity, for anything desired—and quantitatively limited, one always has a particular finite amount of money.

What is interesting for our purpose here is that Marx’s deduction of the affective comportment of hoarding from the money form as an unstable combination of work, thrift, and greed reproduces at least a certain presupposition or assumption of the theory of so-called primitive accumulation—that desire and will are themselves sufficient to generate history—but it does so paradoxically as farce. Without the proper historical conditions the “miser’s” desire for accumulation is destined only to collide into certain structural limits. As Marx states, “This contradiction between the quantitative limitation and the qualitative lack of limitation of money keeps driving the hoarder back to his Sisyphian task: accumulation. He is in the same situation as a world conqueror, who discovers a new boundary with each country he annexes” (CI 230/146). Assuming that hoarding or the desire for wealth is in some sense contemporary with the money form, and thus preexists capital, it is possible to invert Marx’s formula and argue that farce comes before tragedy.⁴ (The comic image of the miser with his bags of money comes before the tragedy of capitalist accumulation and massive expropriation.) The questions then become: Under what conditions, and through what other causes, is this desire actualized? How does accumulation cease to be the dream of the hoarder and become an effective practice, one that constitutes an entire mode of production?⁵

For money to constitute capital and for the desire to hoard to constitute capitalist accumulation, there must be the conditions for its investment; that is, the capitalist must be able to purchase both the means of production and labor. These elements must be dissociated from any form of property or social relation that would leave the means of production, tools, or the land in the hands of the producers. Thus, there are at least two conditions of the formation of the capitalist mode of production. As Marx writes, in a deceptively simple and frequently repeated formula:

In themselves, money and commodities are no more capital than the means of production and subsistence are. They need to be transformed into capital. But this transformation can itself only take place under particular circumstances [*bestimmten Umständen*], which meet together at this point: the confrontation of, and the contact between, two very different kinds of commodity owners; on the one hand, the owners of money, means of production means of subsistence, who are eager to valorize the sum of values they have appropriated by buying the labor-power of others; on the other hand, free workers, the sellers of their own labor-power, and therefore the sellers of labor. (CI 874/742).

The capitalist mode of production, the definition of which we are approaching through this seemingly simple fact, are formed by the conjunction of possessors of money and those who have only their labor power to sell. Marx calls this second group free or “bird-free” [*vogelfrei*], meaning at one and the same time, that while they are not property (as slaves) they are themselves without property and cast out of the human community, as a community of property owners—uprooted (or deterritorialized). The conjunction of these two elements, as the necessary or minimal constitution of capitalist accumulation, indicate that the capitalist mode of production cannot, in either its constitution or definition, be considered as a simple effect of one term or element—it is a relation, or an ensemble of relations.⁶

To argue that the capitalist mode of production ought to be grasped as an “ensemble of relations” is in a primary and almost entirely negative (or critical) sense to separate a thought of the capitalist mode of production from a thought of “human nature.” The capitalist mode of production cannot be understood as a simple expression or deviation of human nature: It is neither the realization of a fundamental and originary selfishness nor the suppression of an ancient communal essence.⁷ In the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx uses the term *ensemble of human relations* to displace the question of the human essence. Marx argues against Ludwig Feuerbach’s concept of the ‘abstract human essence’ and its alienation in religion: “But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality (*in seiner Wirklichkeit*) it is the ensemble of the social relations (*das Ensemble der gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse*).”⁸ Marx’s statement “displaces” the question of the human essence in that it does not argue against essence in general but rather proposes that such an essence does not exist in an idea but rather exists, or effectively exists, in the multiple and active relations that individuals establish with each other.⁹ What human individuals have “in common” is not some abstract idea of humanity but their specific relations, which are constituted each moment in multiple forms. There is an affirmative aspect of this concept of an ‘ensemble’ that follows this displacement: Just because capital cannot be related back to some abstract essence of humanity does not mean that it is separable from human desires, human intention, or human subjectivity, altogether, but rather these desires must be considered from the particular relations and the history of these relations. Or put otherwise, the formation of the capitalist mode of production is not reducible

to the simple desire to accumulate on the part of the capitalist, nor to the simple moral difference between capital and worker, although it involves and implicates desire as well an entire moral discourse on the values of saving and spending as its component elements.¹⁰ However, these elements or relations do not have as their causes some abstract nature of humanity, but rather their causes are other relations, which coexist and precede this particular ensemble of relations. For Marx the relations that form the capitalist mode of production are “the product of many economic revolutions, of the extinction of a whole series of older formations of social production,” the most direct and immediate extinction being the breakdown of the feudal mode of production (CI 273/183).

The “extinction” of the feudal mode of production encompasses multiple elements and trajectories. It includes the dissolution of the regime of the guilds, the breakdown of the system of peasant landownership, and the massive disintegration of existing structures of wealth and prestige through merchant capital and usury.¹¹ These elements of dissolution are not the effects of a single strategy or aspects of a single process, rather they are entirely disparate. Balibar explains that “the elements combined by the capitalist mode of production have different and independent origins.”¹² These elements of dissolution such as usury often stem from the margins and “pores” of the old society and only begin to occupy center stage in terms of their effects, the effects of constituting a new economy and a new mode of production. Whatever intelligibility or unity they have is produced after the fact when they retroactively become the conditions of the capitalist mode of production.

Where the theory of so-called primitive accumulation imagines a vague identity of past and present, unified by a particular memory and morality, Marx finds the intersection of disparate historical trajectories and itineraries that only come together in the common space that they mutually create. For example, the laws and acts that turned common lands into pasture and forced the peasantry off the land did not have as their goal the creation of the proletariat as a propertyless working class; rather, this was an unintended effect that was later seized by other agents and actors (CI 885/752).¹³ To continue the comparison between so-called primitive accumulation and primitive accumulation, we could add that where the theorists, or apologists, of political economy find an idyllic and moralizing transformation Marx finds violence and bloodshed. This violent transformation has two acts: First, as I have noted, there are multiple conditions of expropriation, including usury, which quite literally tear the producers from their means of production, most importantly the land. Expropriation in itself does not produce “free workers,” however, only disenfranchised peasants and artisans who are just as likely to resort to begging or crime as they are to show up at the doors of the factories and mills of the newly emergent capitalist class looking for work. As Marx writes in the *Grundrisse*: “The propertyless are more inclined to become vagabonds and robbers and beggars than workers.”¹⁴ The period of expropriation is followed by the period of “bloody legislation”: laws are drawn up and regimes of penalization and torture are enacted to curtail criminality and control the new class of criminals.

Hence at the end of the fifteenth and during the whole of the sixteenth centuries, a bloody legislation against vagabondage was enforced throughout Western Europe. The fathers of the present working class were chastised for their enforced transformation into vagabonds and paupers. Legislation treated them as “voluntary” criminals, and assumed that it was entirely within their powers to go on working under the old conditions which in fact no longer existed. (CI 896/762)

Although such laws are founded on the fantasy that it is possible to go on being a peasant after feudalism, their secondary, and perhaps unintended, effect is the control and containment of a working class, of those who have only their labor power to sell. Those “freed” from previous forms of labor and existence must be violently coerced into and contained in the new structures of labor and existence. The transition from feudalism to capitalism is neither smooth nor easy, and it requires the necessary intervention of law, the state, and new forms of police to transform disenfranchised peasants and artisans into subjects of labor.¹⁵ As Marx argues, the state, and particularly its powers of police and violence, are then a contingent, but necessary constitution of the capitalist mode of production (CI 899/764).

Is the question of primitive accumulation simply a matter of two different origins and two different moralities, the first of which locates the good on this side of the proto-capitalist for his or her thrift and industriousness and the bad on the side of the proto-laborer for his or her waste, while the second morality locates the bad on the side of the proto-capitalist for his or her violent aggressions, and the good on the side of the proto-laborer for his or her romanticized innocence? Or is something other than a competing history, or mythology, at stake here? As I have suggested, it is through the critique of so-called primitive accumulation that the elements of the historical definition of the capitalist mode of production are given. So far these elements are perhaps only given in a dim outline through the points of contrast with the moralists of so-called primitive accumulation. First, a mode of production is irreducible to, and in excess of, the intentions of an individual subject. Even though the “fairy tale” of primitive accumulation founds the possibility of historical transformation and capitalist accumulation on individual intent and the morality of those that save rather than squander, Marx argues through the character of the miser not only that intentions in general cannot be actualized without their material conditions, but that these conditions are constitutive of intentions. Subjectivity is inseparable from the ensemble of relations that makes it possible.

There is perhaps a second, albeit more oblique, element to this materialist critique of intentionality. Marx’s account of the disparate conditions of primitive accumulation would separate this thought of the mode of production from a subject of history. It is not the same subject that dissolves the old mode of production and produces the new one.¹⁶ At the most basic level this means that Marx’s thought of a mode of production is distinguished from any attempt to write a “great man” philosophy of history, in which history is nothing more than the realization of ideas and intentions within the *tabula rasa* of history. More important, Marx’s

history is not the simple intention or progression of a single class or even of the struggle between two classes. Classes and subjectivities do not preexist their particular material conditions. Finally, Marx's critique of so-called primitive accumulation begins to point to a specific problem within the mode of production: the manner in which a mode of production is constitutive and constituted by desires, forms of living, and intentions: subjectivity.

IMMANENT CAUSALITY

Although Marx's critique of so-called primitive accumulation is perhaps a condition for a theorization of the conditions of the capitalist mode of production, as well as some of the general elements of a concept of a mode of production, it is a paradoxical point from which to begin to elucidate a consideration of the capitalist mode of production. This is paradoxical because it is unclear where or within what mode of production the conditions of primitive accumulation are to be located according to a historical periodization: They could be placed within the feudal mode of production, from whose dissolution they stem, or within the capitalist mode of production, whose birth it constitutes. Primitive accumulation is situated between two types of violence and two types of power relations: between the feudal forms of servitude that it destroys and the capitalist forms of exploitation that it renders possible. Thus primitive accumulation would seem to exceed any strict periodization, or division of history, into a succession of modes of production (Asiatic, ancient, feudal, capitalist, and communist); it is rather a point of passage and transition.

It is unclear, however, whether primitive accumulation simply can be relegated to the past or to the simple prehistory of the capitalist mode of production as a moment of transition. As a process of accumulation it would appear to encompass both the conditions for the historical formation of capital and its extension into other spaces and other modes of production. As Marx writes in a passage illustrating the overdetermined historical appearance of capital:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of [the] indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize the dawn of early capitalist production. . . . These different moments are systematically combined together [*systematisch zusammengeßt*] at the end of the seventeenth century in England; the combination embraces the colonies the national debt, the modern tax system, and the system of protection. These methods depend on brute force [*brutalser Gewalt*], for instance the colonial system. But they all employ the power of the state, the concentrated and organized force of society [*Gewalt der Gesellschaft*], to hasten, as in a hothouse, the process of transformation of the feudal mode of production into the capitalist mode, and to shorten the transition. Force is the midwife of every old society which is pregnant with a new one. It is itself an economic power [*ökonomische Potenz*]. (CI 915/779)

As this passage indicates, primitive accumulation is situated both at the historical formation of the capitalist mode of production and at the point of its extension into other modes of production through the forceful violence of colonization.

Primitive accumulation serves as the name not only for an event but also for a process: the expropriation and legislation necessary to destroy other economic and social relations to make them productive for capital. Primitive accumulation is the process of the separation of labor from the means of production and reproduction of its existence.¹⁷ Thus primitive accumulation becomes not only a cause of the capitalist mode of production but also its effect.¹⁸ The two essential results of primitive accumulation—workers with only their labor power to sell and capital free to invest anywhere—are also effects of the capitalist mode of production's encounter not only with other modes and economies but also with the remnants of noncommodity production internal to capitalist societies. Primitive accumulation can be said to take place at every point where something in common is converted into private property (e.g., from the land used to gather firewood to the genetic code of indigenous crops) or where the conditions for the production and reproduction of existence are converted into commodities (e.g., the transition from home garden plots to fast food).¹⁹ It is thus possible to talk about an endo-colonization (the colonization of the remainders of noncommodified or nonexploited dimensions of existence internal to capitalist societies) alongside exo-colonization (the extension of capital to other spaces). As much as these concepts make it possible to extend the idea of primitive accumulation beyond that dark night when capitalism was born, they do so as moments of transition. The transition is extended beyond a singular point in time to become a process, but the definition of primitive accumulation remains exterior to the definition of the capitalist mode of production.

The previous passage also begins to indicate a second sense in which primitive accumulation is irreducible to a simple moment of transition. We can approach this second sense by posing the following questions, When does the moment of primitive accumulation end? And How? Even if we bracket for a moment the forms of "endo-" and "exo-" colonization that would make primitive accumulation a point of transition which continually repeats itself, these questions are difficult to answer owing to the intimate relationship that the violence of primitive accumulation has with the new order it engenders. Marx demonstrates that primitive accumulation involves a relation of force, power, and, more important the powers of the state, which give birth, as it were, to a new society. Poised at the point of transformation the moment of violence almost disappears in its execution. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have related Marx's critique of political economy to a particular type of violence that is difficult to critique because it is always presented as pre-accomplished and carrying with it its justification.

Hence the very particular character of state violence: it is very difficult to pinpoint this violence because it always presents itself as pre-accomplished. It is not even adequate to say that the violence rests with the mode of production. Marx made the

observation in the case of capitalism: there is a violence that necessarily operates through the state, precedes the capitalist mode of production, constitutes the “primitive accumulation” and makes possible the capitalist mode of production itself. From a standpoint within the capitalist mode of production, it is very difficult to say who is the thief and who is the victim, or even where the violence resides. That is because the worker is born entirely naked and the capitalist objectively “clothed” an independent owner. That which gave the worker and the capitalist this form eludes us because it operated in other modes of production.²⁰

Thus, the violence of primitive accumulation is immediately justified within and by the new order that it constitutes. For example, the destruction of the common lands by the enclosure acts only appears violent from the perspective of the old order and practices that it destroys. As Michel Foucault argues, the period of primitive accumulation entails a fundamental transformation of the definition of illegality and property: the longstanding relations of traditional use surrounding land (free pasture, wood collecting, and so forth) were replaced by a new regime of property: “[L]anded property became absolute property; all the tolerated ‘rights’ that the peasantry had acquired or preserved were now rejected by the new owners who regarded it simply as theft.”²¹ Primitive accumulation is the point of transition between violence and right. As Antonio Negri writes, “Violence thus constitutes the vehicle between accumulation and right.”²²

If the violence of primitive accumulation is difficult to locate as an event because it loses itself in the law and the new society that it produces, it is also difficult to locate because it is always situated with respect to a transformation of violence and the emergence of a new type of violence. In the long passage from feudalism to capitalism this transformation is in the first instance the passage from the dispersed violence of feudal lords to violence monopolized and standardized by law and the bourgeois state. As Marx states, in the beginning, “[T]he rising bourgeoisie needs the power of the state, and uses it to ‘regulate’ wages, i.e., to force them into the limits suitable for making a profit, to lengthen the working day, and to keep the worker himself at his normal level of dependence. This is an essential part of so-called primitive accumulation” (CI 899/764). In the first instance the sporadic and excessive feudal forms of violence passes into the universality of law, but this is not the entirety of the transformation. Marx also seems to indicate a second moment of this transformation of violence in which violence disappears not into the neutrality of law but into the quotidian relations that the law makes possible. In Marx’s words, “The silent compulsion of economic relations sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker. Direct extra-economic force is still of course used, but only in exceptional cases” (CI 899/764).

Marx is somewhat ambiguous with respect to the closure of primitive accumulation and its relation to the mode of production it engenders. At times, Marx appears to argue that primitive accumulation and the overt violence it involves ends in the day-to-day relations of exploitation; while at other times it appears that the violent lawmaking power of primitive accumulation is merely privatized and

brought indoors into the factory.²³ Marx emphatically illustrates the order of discipline imposed by the factory codes: “The overseer’s book of penalties replaces the slave-driver’s lash. All punishments naturally resolve themselves into fines and deductions from wages, and the law-giving talent of the factory Lycurgus so arranges matters that a violation of this laws is, if possible, more profitable to him than the keeping of them” (CI 550/447).

Marx suggests that there is a qualitative difference between primitive accumulation and the capitalist economy it engenders, in terms of the former’s bloody discontinuity and the latter’s continuity and silent functioning. At the same time, however, Marx would suggest that this qualitative change is best understood perhaps as a change in the form of violence itself, capitalist accumulation is nothing other than primitive accumulation continued onto the shop floor, and thus nothing other than a continuation of the modification of violence begun with “bloody legislation” and the enclosure acts. The violence of law and the police gives way to the coercive force of the shop supervisor and the rhythm of machines.²⁴

The problem of the relation between primitive accumulation and the capitalist mode of production opens onto yet another problem: the definition of the capitalist mode of production, or stated otherwise, the difference between capitalism thought as a mode of production and capitalism thought as an “economy.” What is at stake in such a distinction is the understanding of the continuity of capital, the reproduction of the forces and relations of production over time. To understand capital as a mode of production is, in some readings, to insist on the necessarily complex conditions of this continuity—an entire series of complex factors including the state, law, and ideology are necessary to the functioning of capital. To understand capital, or any other mode of production, as an economy is to lapse into what has been called “economism.” Economism, briefly, is the guarantee of the adequacy of the economy to its own reproduction without the necessary implication of other factors, or elements, such as the state, ideology, law, or subjectivity. Economism takes the lawlike nature of the economy as a given and understands its effects on other elements to be that of a simple linear cause. To return to ambiguity indicated above with respect to the closure of primitive accumulation, we can see the possibility of interpreting the “silent compulsion of economic relations” as either the dominance of the economy over other instances of the social or, following Marx’s statements regarding the disciplinary power of the capitalist, as the internalization of the violence within the system itself.

At the level of individual quotes and citations the problem of the contours and complexity of the mode of production is, strictly speaking, irresolvable; it will always be possible to oppose an “economist” Marx to a “noneconomist” Marx—the entire history of Marxism bears witness to this possibility. To get beyond the seemingly endless back and forth of this or that statement, or concept, of Marx’s writing, it is necessary to pose another seemingly unrelated question, the question of the place of primitive accumulation in the exposition, or logic, of Marx’s *Capital*. Louis Althusser has argued that Marx’s later writings, especially the first volume of *Capital* (since it was completed by Marx) engage philosophical problems articulated through their

very exposition, in the order of chapters, and the logic of categories. Marx himself writes in the afterward to the second edition of *Capital*: “Of course the method of presentation [*Darstellung*] must differ in form from that of inquiry [*Forshung*]. The latter has to appropriate the material in detail, to analyze its different forms of development and to track down their inner connection. Only after this work has been done can the real movement be appropriately presented” (CI 102/27).

Capital, according to Althusser, is not an incomplete manuscript, a manifesto, or a series of notes “written for self clarification”; it is a completed text, or at least part of one, and as such it engages and enacts a particular question, the question of its exposition or logic. That is, the relation between abstract concepts, examples and historical events, a relation that poses the problem of the presentation, or even the representation of something called the capitalist mode of production itself.

We have already glimpsed something of this problem in the critique of so-called primitive accumulation. In part, and if it is possible to put aside the clear differences of ideology and politics, *the difference between the bourgeois theory of primitive accumulation and Marx’s theory can be expressed as a difference of representation*. The violence and historicity of primitive accumulation cannot appear within classical political economy. It does not fit within the manner in which classical political economy constructs its object: the market as an invisible hand functioning without state intervention.²⁵ For Marx the presentation of primitive accumulation and the formation of capital involved not only fundamentally different elements, such as the entire history of the dissolution of the feudal mode of production, the violent formation of the capitalist mode of production, and the history of colonialism, but also the question of the relations between these elements.²⁶ If there is a specifically materialist dialectic, as a thought of contradiction, antagonism, and relation, or if Marx is something other than G. W. F. Hegel turned upside down (Hegel applied to the material world), then this dialectic (if that word is still appropriate) would have to be found in the logic of the presentation of *Capital*.

This problem of presentation is not limited to *Capital*; it is given a stronger and more forceful theoretical formulation elsewhere. In the “1857 Introduction” (Notebook M of the *Grundrisse*) Marx wrestles with a question that we have already touched upon: How is it possible to give a historical presentation of the capitalist mode of production? The obvious answer would be a linear historicism in which the concepts and relations follow each other as they have chronologically from primitive forms of ground rent to finance capital and so on. What such a presentation misses, however, are the relations of priority and determination within the capitalist mode of production itself; that is, the particular relations of dominance and subordination established between the “old” and “new” economic forms within the capitalist mode of production. As Marx writes:

For example, nothing seems more natural than to begin with ground rent, with landed property, since this is bound up with the earth, the source of all production and of all being, and with the first form of production of all more or less settled societies—agriculture. But nothing would be more erroneous. In all forms of society

there is one specific kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others. It is a general illumination which bathes all the other colors and modifies their particularity. (G 106/40)

And, later:

It would therefore be unfeasible and wrong to let the economic categories follow one another in the same sequence as that in which they were historically decisive. Their sequence is determined, rather, by their relation to one another in modern bourgeois society, which is precisely the opposite of that which seems to be their natural order which corresponds to historical development. The point is not the historic position of the economic relations in the succession of different forms of society. Even less is it their sequence “in the idea” (Proudhon) (a muddy notion of historic movement). Rather, their order [*Gliederung*] within modern bourgeois society. (G 108/41)

The sequence of categories and concepts in Marx's texts are neither chronological nor determined by a purely logical or conceptual relationship (their sequence “in the idea”) but a presentation, or articulation, of the particular relations in capitalist society. This “presentation” is a necessary abstraction in order to go beyond any fetishization of the concrete, any theorization that remains at the level of a particular phenomenon or element and tries to grasp capital from this concrete element (as classical political economy understood the formation of capital from the particular memory of saving or accumulation). It is through the presentation (or articulation) that the particular relations constituting the capitalist mode of production can be grasped in their stability and instability.²⁷

Reading Marx's works such as *Capital* and the *Grundrisse* for such an articulation has particular theoretical and philosophical effects: Most important, it allows one to read for an “object” and a “problem” which is never named or announced as such by Marx. I have already preemptively titled this object/problem “the representation” of the capitalist mode of production. This is perhaps something of a misnomer, or it could be correct provided that what is being “represented” here, the capitalist mode of production, actively transforms the contours and terrain of representation itself.²⁸ What is being represented is not an object for thought, but a relation or series of relations and their particular dynamism and tensions (G 102/36). That is, Marx's text deals with the problem of the relations between structures, the division of labor, relations of production, and so on, which are different elements of a larger structure: the capitalist mode of production.²⁹

The relation between these structures cannot be contained or presented within existing models of causality (they are not simply the causes or effects of each other in a mechanical or expressive sense) or presentation (most notably the often presupposed division between essence and appearance); rather, this relation is one of immanent causality: The cause, or structure, is immanent in its effects; there is nothing outside of its effects. Thus there is no simple division or priority between cause and effect: Every effect is equally and at the same time a cause.³⁰ This cause

is both immanent and absent, because to be immanent and present in its effects is also to be unlocalizable. This cause cannot be present or empirically given at any one point, hence the other name that Althusser gives it: “metonymical causality.” To risk something of an example (risk because it is not quite clear if the traditional philosophical presuppositions regarding the relation between universal and particular, concept and example, are at work here): Elements of the capitalist mode of production that would appear to be its effects, such as the desire for accumulation on the part of the capitalist, or “rationalized” hoarding, must equally be thought of as causes and elements of its functioning. Louis Althusser compares this presentation/articulation/structure to a new theater, a new machinery.

Now we can recall that highly symptomatic term “*Darstellung*” compare it with this “machinery” and take it literally, as the very existence of this machinery in its effects: the mode of existence of the stage direction [mise en scène] of the theatre which is simultaneously its own stage, its own script, its own actors, the theatre whose spectators can, on occasion, be spectators only because they are first of all forced to be its actors, caught by the constraints of a script and parts whose authors they cannot be, since it is in essence an authorless theatre.³¹

Without necessarily following all of the ramifications of Althusser’s reading of *Capital*, although we will return to many of these points, it is important to indicate that his insistence on the intimate relation between presentation, or philosophical exposition, and structure and the relations of the mode of production, displaces the earlier question regarding the place of transition or transformation in the mode of production from the infinite and inexhaustible series of quotes and counter-quotes of what “Marx thought” to another and different problem: that of the exposition or logics (holding open for a second that there at least may be more than one) at work in Marx’s text.

Marx’s rewriting of the fantasy of primitive accumulation poses particular problems when placed within this question of textual presentation. Although primitive accumulation deals with the intersecting questions of the real relations that have formed the capitalist mode of production, the dissolution of feudalism, and the imaginary apprehension of those relations (the morality tale), it is placed at the end of *Capital*, in the final chapters. Thus there is a considerable difference between the presentation of primitive accumulation within the articulation of *Capital* and its place in the historical formation. The text begins with the famous analysis of the commodity form which constitutes the phenomenological appearance and common sense of the capitalist mode of production, where “[t]he wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an ‘immense collection of commodities [*ungeheure Warensammlung*]’” (CI 126/49). The commodity is presented as both the unexamined material of day-to-day experience under capitalism and the key to all of its riddles.³² Marx does not begin *Capital* with the question of origins but with an element of capital that is at once quotidian and all encompassing in its scope. From the starting point of the commodity

form, Marx develops the contradictory relationship between exchange and use values and abstract and concrete labor. Without attempting to offer anything like an overview or synopsis of the exposition of *Capital*, I will attempt to indicate something of the difference between primitive accumulation as the historical emergence of capital and the commodity form as the starting point for the presentation of capital. The difference between these two points is not only the difference between the synchronic articulation of the relations of capital and its historical emergence, it is also the difference between two different tendencies within the presentation [*Darstellung*] of the capitalist mode of production.

Althusser argues in a later text entitled “Marx dans ses limites,” in a point that could be understood as both a radicalization and a destabilization of his earlier insistence on the relation between presentation [*Darstellung*] and structural causality, that Marx’s writings, in even mature texts such as *Capital*, cannot be reduced to the articulation of a single presentation but rather must be understood as themselves determined and constructed by multiple presentations and multiple logics.³³ To follow the two different presentations I have indicated, the commodity form and the first chapter of *Capital* proceed by a series of internal contradictions: from use value and exchange value, to abstract and concrete labor, and finally to surplus value itself. This movement is also the movement from the indeterminate abstraction of the commodity or value to what is finally the specific articulation of the capitalist mode of production including the day-to-day relations and struggles on the factory floor. The first chapters of *Capital* would seem to participate in a logic that is at once a sort of crude Hegelianism (passage from the indeterminate abstract to the concrete through contradiction) and an economism (understanding capitalism entirely from the commodity form).³⁴

In Althusser’s earlier writings he attempted to show how the supposedly opposed camps within Marxism, Hegelian or historicist Marxism (Antonio Gramsci, Jean-Paul Sartre, and others) and economic Marxism (Second International), were actually two sides of the same “problematic.”³⁵ Although such an argument may appear to be completely dated, and thus barely warranting a footnote, it is worth returning to Althusser’s argument for the simple fact that today the conjunction of economism and Hegel is often invoked as grounds for a complete rejection of Marx. According to Althusser, economic Marxism, or Stalinist Marxism, is focused on one central contradiction: between forces and relations of production. All other contradictions and conflicts then are merely effects, or conditions, of this dominant contradiction that proceeds unhindered until its eventual collapse. Such an interpretation bases itself on an emphasis on the first part of Marx’s famous paragraph from the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (and perhaps never really goes beyond it):

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of the material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of a society, the real

foundation [Basis], on which arises a legal and political superstructure [Überbau] and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. . . . The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure . . . in short ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.³⁶

Most historicists, or Hegelian Marxists, oppose themselves to this by emphasizing the conflicts in the superstructure, arguing that it is the conflict of the ideological forms that determine the actual fate of the class struggle and the direction of history. In each case “there is never more than one *structure* of identification at work—the structure of the problematic which, by reducing one to the other, *theoretically* identifies the levels present.”³⁷ What is retained across the theoretical divide that separates Hegelian Marxism from economism is expressive causality, the idea of a society structured by one single contradiction. Thus, in “Marx dans ses limites” Althusser recognizes both of these tendencies: to understand society as structured by a single contradiction in the logic of the commodity form.

The “logic” that opens *Capital Volume I*, a logic that is one part a crude Hegelianism and one part economism, does not account for the entirety of the text. Althusser contends that it is continually interrupted by chapters and analyses that incorporate relations and levels irreducible to the enfolded of the internal contradictions of the commodity form, and are outside the order of presentation [*hors ordre d'exposition*], constituting a break with a Hegelian, or economic logic.³⁸ Even though this rupture includes the chapters on primitive accumulation, and thus the problem of the foundation of the capitalist mode of production, it is not limited to it. This other logic in tension with economism includes the chapters on cooperation, the working day, and machinery and large-scale industry (all of these chapters and the logic they suggest will be returned to later). What is at stake in this other logic that remains outside of the dominant order of exposition? How might an alternative be thought of in other than negative terms, as other than an interruption or an outside to the dominant logic? Put otherwise, What is it that economism and Hegelianism, or the shared space between the two that has comprised much of what has been designated Marxist thinking, necessarily exclude to constitute themselves as a discourse of the social?³⁹

The beginning of a response to these questions can be found in the disparity between the two starting points: the commodity form and primitive accumulation. The first assumes what the second puts into question by historicizing the commodification of labor itself. Whereas primitive accumulation reveals the violent operations necessary to constitute a laboring subject, to constitute those who have only their labor power to sell, the analysis of the commodity form takes this condition as an already accomplished fact. One might even claim that this is the difference of historical perspective. It is the difference between the capitalist mode of production viewed as completed, on the one hand, and the problem of the formation of the capitalist mode of production, on the other hand. At the same time, and as the first logic progresses from use value/exchange value to abstract and con-

crete labor and to the definition of surplus value as the chapter progresses, the assumption of the commodification of labor becomes inseparable from a purely quantifiable understanding of surplus value itself.

When you read Section 1 Book 1 of *Capital*, you find a theoretical presentation of surplus value: it is an arithmetical presentation, in which surplus value is calculable, defined by a difference (in value) between the value produced by labor power on the one hand and the value of the commodities necessary for the reproduction of this labor power (wages) on the other. And in this arithmetical presentation of surplus value, labor figures purely and simply as a commodity.⁴⁰

As Althusser argues, what this presentation excludes are the conditions necessary to the constitution of labor as commodity, both in terms of its organization, for example, on the factory floor according to the division of labor, cooperation, and discipline and its reproduction beyond the factory floor; that is, the “organized social forces” (state, law, ideology) necessary to the formation of the economy as such. The difference is profound at the basis of the chapter on the commodity for there is the idea of labor as a commodity, and thus the possibility of a purely economic analysis, while the section on primitive accumulation points to a “politics of production,” the relations necessary to convert labor power into a commodity.⁴¹ The profound statement of such a difference makes it possible to understand what was politically at stake in the idea of immanent causality. Immanent or structural causality as the recognition of the overdetermined conditions of any economy, of any mode of production, is related directly to the political and philosophical problem of thinking the materiality of social relations.

In underscoring the destruction and violence necessary to the constitution of the free worker, and thus of capital, the chapters on primitive accumulation begin to outline the materiality of social relations. As Antonio Negri indicates, the destruction and violence that defines primitive accumulation can be understood only if one posits forms of cooperation and social relations that preexist capital, and must be destroyed or seriously modified to produce the “free worker” necessary to capitalist accumulation. Negri writes that “in the period of primitive accumulation, when capital enveloped and constricted pre-existent labor forms to its own valorization, it was capital which posed the form of cooperation—and this consisted in the emptying of the pre-constituted connections of the traditional laboring subjects.”⁴² The intimate relation between the formation of the capitalist mode of production and violence found in primitive accumulation has as its correlate the materiality of social relations that preexist capital.⁴³ This “other side” of primitive accumulation persists in the spontaneous and resistant social relations, from primitive cooperative exchanges to criminal expropriations, that mirror the violent history of primitive accumulation, from the enclosure acts to bloody legislation. Just as primitive accumulation as institutionalized violence never properly ends but instead migrates into the enclosed spaces of the factory, these forms of cooperation and sociality are not destroyed but rather fundamentally transformed by the formation of capital. As

Negri argues, the entire history of the capitalist mode of production can be interpreted as the changing antagonism between forms of accumulation, with their corresponding regimes of power and violence, and forms of cooperation, with their corresponding forms of counter-power.⁴⁴ This conflict continually destroys and creates new forms of accumulation and cooperation.

The destruction and creation of new forms of cooperation entails the destruction and creation of the old forms of sociality and subjectivity. Thus it is possible to find in Marx a third moment of primitive accumulation, after the expropriation or destruction of the previous mode and its violent legislation, a moment of normalization that bears on subjectivity and sociality itself. As Marx writes: “The advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by education [*Erziehung*], tradition, and habit [*Gewohnheit*] looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self evident natural laws” (CI 899/765). The violence and dissolution of the old mode of production is followed by the normalization of the new mode of production, which obliterates the memory of the past mode of production as well as any traces of the violent foundation of the new mode of production. This normalization constitutive of the regularity and functioning of the capitalist mode of production is actualized not only at the levels of laws or institutions but also at the level of subjectivity.⁴⁵ *There is a production of subjectivity necessary to the constitution of the capitalist mode of production.* For a new mode of production such as capital to be instituted it is not sufficient for it to simply form a new economy, or write new laws, it must institute itself in the quotidian dimensions of existence—it must become habit.

What is at stake in these different logics thus is sociality and subjectivity itself, as both produced by and in excess of the economy. “Produced” and “in excess” are perhaps crude ways to indicate that what is in question here is a relation, one of sociality and subjectivity to or in the mode of production. Such vagueness is, at this point, necessary in that we are only beginning to glimpse the contours of this relation, which is to assert that we are glimpsing the contours of the mode of production itself. Although we can know very little at this stage about what this relation is, it is not the simple production of an obedient and docile form of sociality by the economy, as is suggested by various economisms and even Althusser’s earlier works. Nor is it a relation of exteriority and transcendence, as it is in various forms of voluntarism and various metaphysics of alienation. The basic idea underlying such conceptions of subjectivity is theoretically complicit with classical political economy and its theory of so-called primitive accumulation: in both cases subjectivity is capable of acting on history insofar as it is placed outside of history as a timeless possibility. Change and transformation can only be imagined by resorting to the image of a transcendental subject who is not touched by the violence of history. To begin to articulate an affirmative, rather than simply negative, understanding of this relation between subjectivity and the mode of production, we must examine this “other logic,” while at the same time remaining aware of its constitutive co-implication with, and contamination by, the “major” logic of Marx’s texts.

THE PREHISTORY OF CAPITALISM

The problem of economism and the critique of economism is a problem and conflict interior to the space opened by Marx's work; it is not named as such by Marx and is thus in some sense a problem of Marxism and not of Marx.⁴⁶ Within Marx's works there are somewhat different problems, ones that prefigure the problem of economism, such as the nature of the difference between the capitalist mode of production, as a mode of production constituted by the dominance of the economic relations (the production of commodities, realization of surplus value, and so on), and other precapitalist modes of production that perhaps have other relations of determination and domination. Although this problem is not the same as the problem of economism, that is, it is not a matter of differentiating between those societies (precapitalist) for which economism is false and those for which it is true, it is similar in that it deals with the relation between the conditions for the constitution of something called the economy in its differential effectivity within different modes of production. This is one of the questions at stake in Marx's notebook on "Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations" [*Formen, die der kapitalistischen Produktion vorhergehen*] in the *Grundrisse*.

The primary question for Marx in "Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations" is the nature of the distinction between precapitalist modes of production (Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and so forth) and the capitalist mode of production in terms of the grounds and consequences of such a distinction. Claude Lefort contends that Marx is primarily concerned with the major division between precapitalist modes of production and the capitalist mode of production rather than what he considers to be the minor differences between the various precapitalist modes of production.⁴⁷ This distinction, however, does not exhaust the entirety of the questions traversed in the notebooks. Since the precapitalist modes of production constitute the prehistory of the capitalist mode of production, providing the elements which in their dissolution become constitutive of the capitalist mode of production, there are relations of descent and transformation that exceed a simple comparison. Thus there are multiple points of intersection between these notebooks and Marx's analysis of primitive accumulation. For these different modes, or forms, to occupy the same terrain, of either comparison or historical descent, there must be some commonality, something that makes them a mode of production, and thus the text also broaches the general problem of the definition of a mode of production. It is in relation to this third problem that this text most explicitly intersects with the minor logic outlined previously. The notebook on precapitalist economic conditions, like most of the *Grundrisse*, is developed on a conceptual terrain that acknowledges the constitutive force of subjectivity and sociality in determining and transforming a mode of production.⁴⁸

Finally, it is important to add after the enumeration of these different problematics at work in this text, all of which will have to be both justified and elaborated, that there is a fourth aspect that is not necessarily a problematic in itself, although it does pose a problem for reading; that is, the specific articulation of the

relation between these different problems. The articulation of “Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations” follows the open, overlapping, and discontinuous nature of the notebooks in the *Grundrisse*, which often repeat with slight modifications and transformations earlier statements and analyses and at times drop analyses only to redevelop them later. The *Grundrisse* also follows an articulation that does not neatly divide between general theory and specific articulation, or concept and example, in which the particular is generally only an illustration or an instance of an already pre-given concept or generality.⁴⁹ This destabilization of the priority of the general and the particular, like the earlier features I have indicated, could be chalked up to the incomplete status of the notebooks, but it could also be understood as an opening to another question, What is at stake in these notebooks, other than a contribution to the fields of speculative anthropology and history? What is at stake in these notebooks is not only a complex thought of the relation between subjectivity and the mode of production but a different and original thought of historical transformation.

Marx’s “Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations” begins by introducing the basic historical preconditions and presuppositions of the capitalist mode of production. As with Marx’s account of primitive accumulation, the presuppositions and preconditions of the capitalist mode of production, the conditions that constitute its formation and yet cannot be derived from it, are the separation of the “worker” from the means of production and the freeing up of a flow of money that is capable of becoming capital; or the naked worker and free wealth. From this starting point Marx both investigates the historical formation of these specific presuppositions [*Voraussetzung*] and historical preconditions [*Bedingungen*] in the dissolution of the precapitalist economic formations and develops a major distinction between precapitalist and economic formations according to not only their different presuppositions and preconditions but a different treatment of, or relation to, their presuppositions. All of the precapitalist economic formations (Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and so on) have as their presupposition not the separation of the worker from the means of production or the separation of money from wealth but their integration within a particular community or sociality. As Marx writes:

This naturally arisen clan community, or, if one will, pastoral society, is the first presupposition—the communality [*Gemeinschaftlichkeit*] of blood, language, customs—for the appropriation of the objective conditions of their life, and of their life’s reproducing and objectifying activity (activity as herdsmen, hunters, tillers, etc.) The earth is the great workshop, the arsenal which furnishes both means and material of labor, as well as the seat, the base of the community. They relate naively to it as the *property of the community* [*Eigentum des Gemeinwesens*], of the community producing and reproducing itself in living labor [*lebendigen Arbeit*]. (G 472/385)

There are at least two theoretical effects of this particular approach to the relation between precapitalist and capitalist modes of production. First, it includes and intertwines the problem of genesis of the latter with the problem of their dis-