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# The Hegelian Moment: from the Withering Away of Labour to the Concrete Universality of Work.

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This article engages with Todd McGowan's *Emancipation after Hegel* by taking seriously its overall ambition, that of thinking emancipation in conjunction with the central Hegelian category of the contradiction. Endorsing the intractability of the contradiction, that is to say the self-relating inadequacy (negativity, inconsistency) of thought, is for McGowan the philosophical task par excellence for any reader of Hegel. In what follows, I tackle the above proposition by exploring it in connection with the capital-labour dialectic. The aim, however, is not to offer yet another debate on Marx's controversial return to Hegel. Rather, I probe the extent to which Hegel's dialectical method of enquiry allows us to grasp the immanent contradiction of contemporary capitalism and its socio-economic crisis. I argue that while capital is by definition reconciled with its labour contradiction, insofar as the latter is the engine of its mode of production and socio-economic dynamism, at the same time such dialectic is now fast approaching its expiration date: the historical tipping point at which the contradiction stops working for capital and mercilessly begins to destroy its foundations.

Our time is dominated by the perception that we are descending, as if in slow motion, into a nightmarishly incoherent realm where life is no longer supported by the presupposition of shared symbolic values, and the future ceaselessly relapses into a claustrophobic present. Yet we continue to disavow such an insight, choosing instead to believe in our global economic narrative and its increasingly sour fruits, despite the fact that even such metafiction is now evaporating before our eyes. While our shared history is growing increasingly fragile and untenable, we are unable to let go of its framing assumptions. Our anxiety would seem to arise from our inability to articulate the terms and stakes of the explosive contradictions that mark our epoch. Confronted by this impasse, perhaps the first Hegelian step to take, if we are to turn anxiety into enthusiasm, is to *abandon all hope*, and throw ourselves rationally into the emptiness of our condition. In Emil Cioran's words, we need to rein in our palpitations and cool down our ardours, in the awareness that all this continues only "because our desires beget that decorative universe which a jolt of lucidity would lay bare."<sup>1</sup>

Lucidity, however, requires dialectical thinking. A Hegelian approach to contemporary crisis suggests that we need to grasp our world not as an excitingly diverse conglomeration of lifestyles and cultures, but as a *totality* of social relations coincidental with the wearied yet stubborn self-movement of capital, the blob-like global expansion of abstract wealth now reaching its point of deflation.<sup>2</sup> It is the enduring authority of abstract wealth that continues to lend a degree of imaginary consistency to our world, the tacit coalition of an increasingly sterile life around a "mass of desires and convictions superimposed on reality like a morbid structure".<sup>3</sup> The Hegelian moment, then, is neither a time for hope nor one for wisdom. Let us say it by borrowing, again, the refreshingly pessimistic words of Cioran "Wisdom is the last word of an expiring civilization, the nimbus of historic twilights, fatigue transfigured into a vision of the world, the last tolerance before the advent of other, newer gods – and of barbarism; wisdom, what we call *sagesse*, is also a vain attempt at melody among the environing death rattles."<sup>4</sup>

What our time calls for, rather, is a robust sense of fatalism,<sup>5</sup> which might help us to relinquish the blinding injunctions that condemn our winded civilisation to its credulity. Increasingly devoid of lifeblood, our work society overflows with the melancholic hyperactivity and fretful enervation of Shakespearian heroes, unwittingly heading for collapse. The modern idol of economic value – the metafiction in which all other values are rooted – lies unmasked in front of us, and yet we persist in enslaving our consciousness to its grand narrative, *because by renouncing value we*

*would renounce ourselves.* Our caged restlessness is symptomatic of the strength we lack when facing the prejudice that binds us to our historical destiny. Fanatics without conviction, we are lured on by the wreckage of a glimmering world, and we crawl before the altar of capital half-knowing that it exists only for our dispassionate gaze. And yet... and yet it is becoming clear to most of us that “[w]e shall not be able to sustain the ceremony of our contradictions much longer.”<sup>6</sup>

### Somewhere Hegel is Smiling...

After the ideological binge of postmodern relativism – which truly was (is) the cultural logic of late capitalism –<sup>7</sup> we must begin again from Marx’s scrutiny of the capitalist mode of production, which is both a dialectical relation between capital and wage labour, and a social form and mode of symbolic reproduction. This is because – let us state it from the start – the history of modernity as such is the history of the dialectical liaison between capital and labour. We should therefore let go of our liberal obsession with individual identities and instead focus on our common social substance, insofar as it continues to be delivered to the dull pressure of an increasingly impotent drive for profit-making. If history proved Marx wrong on many counts, his compulsive urge to dissect the “real abstraction”<sup>8</sup> of capitalist relations, which began to haunt him in the 1850s, remains the decisive orientation for any philosophical and political enquiry that wishes to focus on the terminal malady of contemporary society. But to carry out this task effectively we need to delve into the presuppositions of Marx’s critique of political economy, namely Hegel’s dialectical system. Although Hegel and Marx are customarily accused of the same cardinal sin – a teleological and universalistic rendition of the dialectic – a closer look reveals a different, highly nuanced picture.

Marx inherited from Hegel the persuasion that human beings are responsible for creating organic systems of dialectical correlations whose magnitude proves to be greater and more formidable than any of their individual components. In capitalism, the systemic whole is grounded in the abstraction that Marx called *Wertform* (value-form), constituted by the performative interrelation of the commodity-, money- and capital-forms of value, logical moments of a tirelessly repetitive process. These moments presuppose and feed into each other in a circular and synchronous rather than temporal progression (once capital is in motion, its stages and temporalities merge into one).<sup>9</sup> In its relentless hyperactivity, capital dialectically informs and presupposes its subjectivities, making us all equal (ironically!) in our frenzied devotion to its rituals. For this reason alone, we should

reclaim the Hegelian impulse that drove Marx to dissect the social discourse of his time. For Hegel's ambition to capture the universal forms of historical constellations is what qualifies most enduringly Marx's critique of political economy, and should also motivate our search for truth in the face of the continuing valorisation crisis (and attendant decomposition of social relations) in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The only correct way of understanding the relevance of Marx's critique of political economy for today's world is therefore the Hegelian one: we must abandon the narrow perspective of the *particular* capital, the *particular* enterprise, and the *particular* worker, in order to apprehend capital as the ubiquitous ether in which we are all immersed, a seemingly inescapable socio-historical formation supported by a dialectical logic whose truth becomes available to us both as *substance* (the underpinning objectivity of political economy) and as *subject* (our social participation in that objectivity). By following the Hegelian lesson inherited and at least partially endorsed by Marx, we are able to appreciate how, in capitalism, subject and substance are two sides of the same coin – if you take one away, you immediately lose the other. This in turn exposes a subtle form of disavowal: whenever we claim autonomy and independence of thought through adherence to spiritual, political or ideological *values* – as bourgeois societies have always tended to do – we conveniently forget that modern subjectivity is fundamentally *sequestered* by the capitalist dialectic of valorisation; the more the latter's role is denied, the more emphatically it imposes its domination upon us. Since its inception, bourgeois thought enforced political economy as its ontological horizon by naturalizing its foundational categories as constitutive of the human being's destiny. This process of embedding is clearly discernible in Adam Smith's eternalization of production and exchange as matters of immediate sensible experience and undisputable knowledge, while it is also announced in John Locke's dehistoricisation of private property and David Hume's utilitarian desocialisation of human nature. The progressive extension of capitalist valorization over other modes of production meant that the reproduction of social life become increasingly dependent on the economy. While deeply aware of the Great Transformation introduced by political economy,<sup>10</sup> Hegel's dialectical method of philosophical enquiry (which was the mature Marx's main source of inspiration) was fundamentally opposed to a view of the world where external reality is reduced to measurable quantities.

There is little doubt that, at least since the *Grundrisse* (1857-58), Hegel's influence on Marx proved decisive.<sup>11</sup> After his ambivalent "settling of accounts" with his illustrious predecessor in the last chapter of the 1844 Manuscripts (aptly entitled

“Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic and Philosophy as a Whole”),<sup>12</sup> Marx continued to gravitate toward Hegel as he turned again to him (specifically, this time, the *Science of Logic*) in his quest to unveil the inner nature of the capitalist system, where self-valorising value (captured by Marx in the general formula M-C-M') emerges as money's attempt to overcome its historical impasse as simple mediator of commodities (C-M-C). Marx's narration is well known: to actualise itself as capital, value in money-form (wealth accumulated in pre-capitalist times) began treating work as a special commodity for market exchange; once bought, sold and put to work, the labour-commodity started laying golden eggs, generating surplus-value as the trigger of the system's self-reproduction. With this historical and systemic transition, money upgraded its status from *means* of circulation (C-M-C) to *end* of exchange (M-C-M'), thereby restyling itself as capital. Marx described the difference between the two types of money-form through Aristotle's distinction between *economics* (whose purpose is the creation of use-values) and *chrematistics* (whose purpose is the limitless expansion of wealth).<sup>13</sup>

The interesting point to note here, however, is less the issue of the historical genesis of capitalism per se than the dialectical constitution of the new socio-economic relation around the two poles of money and labour, which mediate each other to form capital as a dynamic totality. However, against the mythicization of the proletariat implemented by the orthodox Marxist tradition, the Hegelian reading should be privileged here: proletariat and bourgeoisie are not in conflict as autonomous subjects/classes, but are from the start united in a passionate dialectical embrace. The central aspect of this systemic relation is what Marx, in the chapter on “Simple Reproduction” at the end of *Capital* volume 1, alluded to as a shift affecting labour: “A division between the product of labour and labour itself, between the objective conditions of labour and subjective labour-power, was therefore the real foundation and the starting-point of the process of capitalist production.”<sup>14</sup> More to the point, the transition to capitalism was enabled by the structural shift through which work was no longer treated as a relatively obscure, untapped subjective capacity to produce things that the wealthy owner of the means of production would then enjoy or exchange on the market. Instead, it acquired centre-stage in the social discourse of modernity by morphing into the scientifically quantifiable object (labour) through which value could expand itself. Thus, labour-power was granted the prestigious rank of “possessor of the value-creating substance”,<sup>15</sup> but only in as much as the workers' employment in the production process was constitutively regimented within a new abstract logic based on the monetary retribution of labour-time, which

of course included the vampiric extortion of *surplus* labour-time. For the capitalist mode of production to attain ontological cogency and resilience, then, a new narrative concerning the *computability of labour* had to be invented and installed within the social fabric. By the time the worker turned – to use Marx’s accurate expression – into “time’s carcass”,<sup>16</sup> a new social form based on the valorisation of labour qua pure ‘motion in time’ had already imposed itself. Labour as spatio-temporal *representation* – no doubt a filiation of the coeval discourse of scientific objectivity – was thus the invention through which capitalism began its course.

The central hypothesis advanced here is that the elementary function of the abstracting relation between capital and labour – a dialectic of *forms* if ever there was one – is to conceal the self-contradictory status of economic value in modern societies, a value that bestows on these societies the necessary semblance of substantiality. Since we started living under the shadow of the capital-labour relation, that shadow has provided us with ontological cover, a common point of identification. A Hegelian approach to the critique of value, then, should conceptualise the value-form as a totalising social *fiction* that works by mediating itself through labour as its posited presupposition. Put differently, capitalist autopoiesis (self-creation) needed to assert labour-power as its own cause. This means that Hegel’s *Setzung der Voraussetzungen* (positing the presuppositions) remains the crucial dialectical figure insofar as it reveals how the capitalist discourse began to thrive by establishing labour as its socially antagonistic *value*, whose role in the modern ‘theatre of illusions’ is precisely to be scientifically valorised and exploited. The implication here is that wage workers were from the start conceived as machines by capital. This would immediately disqualify the assumption, voiced with force by Italian *operaismo* (workerism), that within contemporary capitalist relations there exists a communal collective capacity for radical political emancipation. As pointed out by Riccardo Bellofiore, “[l]abour not only *counts* as abstract in commodity circulation, when it is already *objectified*, but it *is* already abstract in production, as *living* labour.”<sup>17</sup> Exchange values, in other words, are embedded within the principle of universal exchangeability, which is ultimately what qualifies production and constitutes ‘value’. Through an act of self-externalisation, then, or *self-othering*, capital gave birth to itself by fashioning a dialectical correlation with its labour presupposition, thus instituting the socio-ontological boundary within which its mode of production proliferated. This boundary was installed by a narrative concerning the computation of work.

The above act of self-mediation is ungrounded and sovereign, inasmuch as it implies the reciprocal “transubstantiation” of capital and labour as two speculatively identical moments of the same value-creating process. This suggests that if “[/]labour becomes productive only by producing its own opposite”,<sup>18</sup> by the same token capital exists only by transubstantiating into labour as its dialectical other.<sup>19</sup> It is not simply that labour produces value, and this value is then expropriated by the capitalist – this is the ultimately non-dialectical ‘exploitation narrative’ advanced by most 20<sup>th</sup> century labour movements. While Marx repeatedly asserted that labour is indeed the substance of value, he also qualified it as a dialectical category incessantly (re)produced by capital. Marx’s ambiguity on this crucial speculative matter should not be shirked but assumed as the symptom of his greatness.

### Painting it Grey: a Shape of Life Grown Old

The precondition for my approach to value-critique is the awareness that every socio-ontological formation is constituted by logical abstractions engaged in dialectical struggle not merely among themselves, but more fundamentally with the self-relating negativity that, according to Hegel, is constitutive of Being in its concreteness. With the installation of the capitalist mode of production as the ontological horizon of modernity, labour-power emerged as the new site of a conflict where the socially synthetic narrative was played out. In Hegelian parlance, I take labour-power to be an abstraction of work as a *concrete universal* (a recalcitrant, self-relating contradiction), to which capital accords determinacy via its ‘employment’ by the means of production.<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that this understanding of work has nothing to do with Marx’s notion of concrete labour as producer of use-values,<sup>21</sup> as I see the latter to make sense only within the universality of labour as capitalist abstraction.<sup>22</sup> A Hegelian approach to work, on the other hand, cannot but privilege the *negative* relation between subject and matter, insofar as this relation shapes the object as much as the subject, thus uniting them in their intrinsic self-difference. As a determinate negation of matter, work is creative for Hegel not because it produces abstractly comparable values, but because it expresses a singular concreteness which, in its self-relating recalcitrance, is permanent and universal. This is why the truth of work, for Hegel as well as for Lacan, is on the side of the slave (bondsmen): in his/her work qua negation of infinite, meaningless materiality, the slave achieves negative unity (concrete universality) with the object. This is precisely what Hegel has in mind when he defines the slave’s work, in a well-known passage of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, as “desire held in check, fleetingness staved off”,

immediately adding that the “negative relation to the object becomes its *form* and something *permanent*, because it is precisely for the worker that the object has independence.” In its deepest, universal configuration, work is creative by engaging and tarrying with the negative, not by overcoming negativity in the positive exchangeability of the object: “This *negative* middle term or the formative *activity* is at the same time the individuality or pure being-for-self of consciousness which now, in the work outside of it, acquires an element of permanence.”<sup>23</sup>

In the third part of the *Logic*, more precisely in the chapter called “Teleology”, Hegel emphasises how a concrete universal, differently from an abstract universal “that only *subsumes*”, owes its status to its particular self-externality, that is to say to its “impulse to repel itself from itself”.<sup>24</sup> This impulse – which is formally comparable with the Freudian drive – is precisely what abstract universals are blind to, insofar as they exclude/negate certain concrete determinations without realising the self-reflexiveness of such an act of negation: the latter does not merely refer to the negated determinations, but it bends back into its self qua universal, thus making universality *concrete*.<sup>25</sup> This theme is indeed central to Hegel’s entire “subjective logic” (volume 2 of his *Science of Logic*), in which the concept is construed as a universal whose totality is both “absolute determinateness” and a “*negation of determinateness*”, “the diremption of its self”.<sup>26</sup> When Hegel discusses concrete universality in relation to the dialectical couple genus-species, for instance, he characterises genus as a universal form that, while extending over its particular species, at the same time is itself one of its own species. As such, it is a “negative self-identity”<sup>27</sup> that cannot precede and subsume its determinations, but rather emerges through its correlation with one of them: a genus encounters itself in one of its species as its determination, which also means that its framing capacity is not external, but it arises from within, in its connection with a particular species. A whole (for instance, the generic concept of production) exists only in relation to one of its determinations (for instance, the capitalist mode of production) which through that correlation over-determines all others.<sup>28</sup>

This speculative point tells us that what is *concretely* universal is not the diversity of various species belonging to a common genus, but the self-difference or exceptionality of each species as it coincides with the radical inconsistency of the genus. While “[s]pecies are contrary inasmuch as they are merely *diverse*”, and “[t]hey are *contradictory*, inasmuch as they exclude one another”, nevertheless “each of these determinations is by itself one-sided and void of truth”. Instead, concrete universality captures the speculative coincidence of the self-disjunctive singularity of

each species and their negative unity in their genus: "In the 'either or' of the disjunctive judgment, their unity is posited as their truth, which is that the independent subsistence of the species as *concrete universality* is itself also the *principle* of the negative unity by which they mutually exclude one another."<sup>29</sup> The exclusionary logic of diverse identities, then, is *concretely universal* only inasmuch as it reflects their self-relating negativity, since the latter captures the *universal principle* of their negative unity, thus undermining any (intrinsically identitarian) notion of abstract universality.

Slavoj Žižek provided a clear account of the disruptive potential of concrete universality:

Abstract universality is the mute medium of all particular content, concrete universality unsettles the identity of the particular from within; it is a line of division which is itself universal, running across the entire sphere of the particular, dividing it from itself. Abstract universality is uniting; concrete universality is dividing. Abstract universality is the peaceful foundation of particulars; concrete universality is the site of struggle – it brings the sword, not love.<sup>30</sup>

In short, a concrete universal can only emerge and manifest itself as the partiality of an engaged stance: it is *concrete* insofar as it shows purpose, and it is *universal* because it embodies an incompleteness or impossibility that is common to all subjective positions. Thus, every concrete universal expresses itself as a form of self-relating *inadequacy*: it is frustratingly unable to realise itself in a particular identity; it is the self-difference, or rupture, that belies the false universality of any abstract category. To paraphrase Hegel's wonderful definition from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the difference between concrete and abstract universality is the *defect* of both.<sup>31</sup> This is because concrete universality, as self-relating negativity, unmask the defectiveness (radical incompleteness) of the abstract universality to which it refers. In today's geopolitical constellation, for instance, concrete universality is represented by all those subjectivities who do not enjoy a stable position within the social order, and therefore experience themselves as dislocated, excluded, scarred, prevented from achieving their particular identity. Here it is crucial to insist that this inherent tension and insufficiency of a particular identity is, literally, universal: it defines the global social order itself as inconsistent and lacking, therefore vulnerable and open to its reconfiguration.

The above Hegelian topic can be translated into psychoanalytic terms through Jacques Lacan's dialectical categories – for instance, that of sexual difference. The latter is concretely universal because it signals how the impossibility inherent in each sexual identity overlaps with the universal inconsistency of sexuality as such. In Lacan, the very difference between Symbolic and Real can be seen to reflect the antagonism between abstract and concrete universality: the concreteness of the Real, its singular unruliness, coincides with the universal inconsistency of the Symbolic. In that respect, labour as working capacity should be enlisted within the register of the Real of *jouissance* – always the intractable *work of the unconscious*, which as such relates to a specific modality of enjoyment – while the valorisation process is the (by definition failed) attempt to convert this unconscious, concrete 'laboring' into a socio-symbolic fiction whose legitimacy claim rests on the ideological imposition, and policing, of the abstract exchangeability of the labour-commodity. Lacan's definition of the unconscious substance of work in non-productivist terms is crucial for my Hegelian argument concerning the implosion of the capitalist dialectic with its foundation in labour-power. Lacan's linking of work to knowledge and thus to the Real of *jouissance* (work as *savoir-faire*, unconscious knowledge-at-work), in Seminars XVI and XVII,<sup>32</sup> grants his theoretical position a dialectical advantage over other critiques of labour and capitalist productivity that emerged in France in the early 1970s, such as those of Jean Baudrillard, Georges Bataille and Jacques Camatte.<sup>33</sup>

One way of capturing Lacan's notion of work as a negative substance informed by unconscious knowledge, thus by definition not amenable to computation and valorisation, is by thinking of it in conjunction with Hegel's dialectical articulation of crime as inherent to the law.<sup>34</sup> For Hegel, crime is not merely antagonistic to the law, but dialectically correlated with it, as – in another instance of infinite judgment or speculative coincidence of opposites – it constitutes the law's foundation (in order to originally assert itself, the law is, like crime, a negative force). More precisely, crime for Hegel is the self-relating negation that the law has as its foundation while attempting to conceal or counteract it by asserting itself as a positive and balanced set of norms. Thus, the Real intractability (negativity) of crime enjoys priority over the symbolic law, which is, strictly speaking, a secondary event that, as such, remains wholly within the horizon of crime. The dialectical couple crime-law is therefore formally identical to the couple work-labour: work is 'criminal' (transgressive, recalcitrant, indomitable) inasmuch as it is rooted in the antagonistic surplus of the unconscious, or in what Lacan names the Real of *jouissance*.

This is nowhere more evident than in crime films that focus on the *savoir-faire* of their unlawful protagonists. Perhaps the best example of this logic is Michael Mann's masterpiece *Thief* (1981), the story of a safecracker and jewel thief named Frank (James Caan) whose exceptional criminal dexterity (his *savoir-faire*) is antagonised not only by the law, as we would expect, but also and more significantly by ring leader Leo (Robert Prosky), who helps Frank as he wants to capitalise on his thieving ability – that is to say, he wants Frank to work for him, thus turning his singular skill into profitable labour. The film's main battleground, then, shifts from 'Frank vs the law' to 'Frank vs Leo', where we witness the (implicitly capitalistic) struggle to turn the unruly core of *savoir-faire* into economic value, an object of calculation and profitability. This is brilliantly conveyed by Leo's brutal rant toward the end of the film, after his henchmen beat up Frank to coerce him into obedience:

You treat what I try to do for you like shit? You don't wanna work for me, what's wrong with you? And then, you carry a piece, in my house! You one of those burned-out demolished wackos in the joint? You're scary, because you don't give a fuck. [...] You got a home, car, businesses, family, n' I own the paper on ya whole fuckin' life. I'll put ya cunt wife on the street to be fucked in the ass by niggers and Puerto Ricans. Ya kid's mine because I bought it. You got 'im on loan, he is leased, you are renting him. I'll whack out ya whole family. People'll be eatin' 'em in their lunch tomorrow in their Wimpyburgers and not know it. You get paid what I say. You do what I say, I run you, there is no discussion. I want you work, until you are burned-out, you are busted, or you're dead... you get it? You got responsibilities – tighten up n' do it. [...] Back to work, Frank.

Capitalist universality means that labour counts because it is counted: the condition for its exploitation and profitability is its abstract quantification into discrete units of labour-time. Modern political economy constitutes itself by regulating the exceptionality of labour as a concrete universal. In this respect, capital is a dialectic of forms which parallels Hegel's dialectic of forms of thought. This, however, does not mean that Marx was right in considering Hegel a philosopher of bourgeois modernity;<sup>38</sup> rather, it means that by mobilising Hegel's dialectic *we* have a chance to accomplish what Marx eventually missed: the comprehension of the structural logic governing the self-reproduction of the modern forms of value (commodity, money and capital) *inclusive of their negative, concretely universal core*. My Hegelian

reading of labour-power (together with its labour-movement iterations) as a moment of capital, emphasises the failure of capital's tautological mechanism of self-expansion. The contradictory status of labour is precisely what capitalism 'employs', in a risky operation which, today, decrees the implosion of its mode of production.

Let us not forget that, for Hegel, philosophy "paints its grey in grey". When Hegel states that "[t]he owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the falling of dusk", he asserts that philosophy's fundamental task is to reveal "a shape of life grown old", the approaching end of a given form of life.<sup>36</sup> Hegel's philosophy, in other words, affirms the ontological priority of the inconsistent ground, the lacking presupposition, the vanishing mediation; while Marx's, despite its dialectical ambiguity, stands for the actualisation of a positive potentiality. The *end* for Hegel has always-already taken place, because it is the insubstantial ground of any dialectical ontology. As with Freudian psychoanalysis, reason for Hegel operates only against the background of its own impossibility, with which it engages in a battle it has always-already lost. Thus, being able to reflect on the elementary impossibility of the human condition is reason's highest task, the point where it achieves what Hegel terms "absolute knowing", which is freedom. Never before had philosophy dared to reveal how reason reaches itself the moment it loses itself. The difficult theoretical point to grasp here is that the vanishing of reason's capacity to sustain itself is also *its condition of possibility*, which continues to haunt reason as its explosive truth. Once again, it is precisely this theme of the speculative coincidence of opposites that we should re-politicise today, when beholding the spectacular triumph/implosion of the capitalist mode of production.

To grasp the modality of the ongoing decomposition of our social bond, let us briefly consider how, in order to enforce the hegemony of the value-form, capital continues to play a hazardous game with labour: on the one hand, it uses labour-power as the inexhaustible dynamo for the generation of surplus-value, but on the other it domesticates it by positing its abstract computability and exchangeability as its own (capital's) necessary presupposition. While labour for capital is fundamentally a countable entity, it nevertheless remains uncountable in itself, as a negative self-relation that survives its socio-economic abstraction. It is an object of calculation and exchange on the surface, but also a mesmerising (unconscious) subjective force; in short, it is an *abstract* and a *concrete* universal. Or, in Marx's own words from the *Grundrisse*, "labour is *absolute poverty as object*, on one side, and is, on the other side, the *general possibility* of wealth as subject and as activity".<sup>37</sup> (Although, as

anticipated, Marx ontologised work qua Aristotelian potentiality to flourish and overcome alienation, rather than as a negative self-relation).

The potential explosiveness of the above contradiction, which remains latent within the economy, is what capital attempts to use in its favour by positing labour as its own externality (in Hegelese, as external determination). However, precisely because capital and labour coincide as speculatively identical manifestations of value, the radical heterogeneity of work as concrete universal inevitably threatens to unmask the negativity of capital itself, the fact that capital in its deepest configuration coincides with its own lack. For it is increasingly obvious that, today, *labour betrays capital*, its masterminding alter-ego in the pantomime of endless productivity. This is, of course, not because of labour's antagonistic self-awareness as class, but because the current rate of technological automation exposes the devastating (Hegelian) immanent contradiction that underlies the historically 'productively contradictory' bond between capital and labour. As more and more living labour is expelled from production, increasingly without a chance of re-entering the exploitation game, work *formally* becomes *what it always-already was*, a negative, inconsistent category that, as such, intrinsically resists full assimilation within the modern logic of abstract quantification. Conversely, no longer supported by its internal presupposition, capitalist universality comes apart at the seams, being forced to reveal its bluff and the emptiness at its core.

### The Whole is the Hole

While Marx revealed his debt to Hegel by describing the transition from C-M-C (money-form of value) to M-C-M' (capital-form of value) as a way for money to externalise itself, thus escaping its internal contradiction (essentially, the fact that a commodity must be sold before another one can be bought), he nevertheless failed fully to unravel the grounding inconsistency of the capitalist link. In his materialistic adaptation of Hegel's dialectic, he eventually missed the key intuition according to which, insofar as it is a logical *whole*, the self-valorisation dynamic of capitalist accumulation is structured around a *hole*, a lacking or negative cause. This hole qua absent cause is the central character in the capitalist whodunit, the fundamental ingredient in political economy's pie. This is why Jacques Lacan's discourse theory, where the social bond is shown to be articulated around its lack, can be employed successfully to explore the changing role fulfilled by the missing cause in the structural shift from C-M-C to M-C-M'.

In one brief scene of Mike Figgis' *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995), alcoholic Ben (Nicolas Cage) approaches a motel called 'The Whole Year Inn'. As he is waiting to book a room, he looks up smilingly at the motel neon sign as it suddenly morphs into 'The Hole You're In'. This linguistic hallucination, which would have tickled Lacan, is anticipatory of Ben's predicament, for he will never find a way out of his self-destructive rut. The metaphor suggested by Ben's alcohol-fuelled delirium can easily be extended beyond the filmic narrative and into our socio-historical landscape. Since recently, apocalyptic scenarios have found a way into our cultural and socio-political imagination. It seems as if the ideological phantasmagoria of endless growth that became hegemonic in the 1980s has suddenly turned into a dark vision of incumbent catastrophe and annihilation. Perhaps, however, we should think the optimistic end-of-history (Fukuyama) slogans of the 1990s as properly Hegelian reminders that history *has always-already ended*, because its end – history's reconciliation with its non-existence – is the precondition for its appearance. Instead, individually and collectively we continue to invest our beliefs in the obdurate capitalist narrative by displacing its demise onto an array of alternative placeholders whose role is, paradoxically, to strengthen that very fantasy. Typically, the collapse we fear has different faces, from ecological catastrophe to nuclear war, rise of global terror, neo-fascism and so on. But all of these scenarios effectively prevent us from thinking the elementary inconsistency of our mode of production, whose increasingly desperate impotence ends up buried under the fear of the calamitous consequences it threatens to unleash. The situation remains not only objectively depressed but also, most importantly for us, contradictory: while still enjoying (concretely or wishfully) the fruits of capitalist progress, we are also increasingly mindful that globalization is driving itself into a hole from which there is no exit in sight. We are becoming aware of how quickly and remorselessly our work society is digging its own grave; how capitalist utopia has become self-destructive, as the moment of its triumph overlaps uncannily with the moment of its defeat.

Today, more than ever before, we should begin from the acknowledgment that all cultural and political debates are null and void without reference to political economy and its epochal naturalisation. Whether we lament the ascendancy of populism or the return of authoritarian ideologies, we would be mistaken in disconnecting the ethico-political implications of these symptoms from the regime of abstraction provided by their economic context. Any political or existential concern today needs to be corroborated by an examination of the state of our economy, intended not as a theory of marginal utility, which ignores production, but as a theory

of the *social relation* between capital and labour that continues to be based on the exploitation of labour-power in spite of its ongoing liquidation.

While capital is by definition a restless contradiction that manifests itself at different levels of abstraction, the key conflict today should be located in the *absolute failure* of the relation of exploitation between capital and labour. Simply stated, this relation is losing its capacity to produce the elementary conditions upon which modern societies are built. The reason for this failure is that the contradiction at the heart of the capitalist mode of production is no longer working in its favour. Both historically and structurally, then, our conundrum appears as follows: the economy's drive to generate surplus-value is both the drive to *exploit* the workforce and to *expel* it from the production process; while only the exploitation of labour-power leads to the formation of surplus-value, competition compels capital to reduce labour costs to a minimum. While this paradox (labour as value-substance, and labour as cost to be sacrificed to the altar of competition) constitutes the lifeblood of capitalism as a mode of production, today it backfires, turning the economy into a mode of permanent devastation. The reason for this change of fortune is *objective*, a failure inherent in the structural configuration of the capitalist machine: the current, unprecedented acceleration rate of technological automation means that more labour-power is being ejected from production than reabsorbed; thus, capitalism follows its powerful productive logic down into the (financial) nightmare of its real impotence. In what is only deceptively a different context, this systemic failure is unveiled in the 2019 miniseries *Chernobyl*. The simple yet enlightening insight provided by the series' last episode is that the failure of the nuclear reactor that led to the Chernobyl disaster in April 1986 was not, in the last instance, imputable to the plant's engineers, despite their criminal behaviour in insisting to carry out a safety test without the necessary precautions being in place. Ultimately, the reactor exploded because of a design flaw in the control rods, an elementary system failure that had to do with the backwardness of the technology employed at a time of widespread economic recession, which first Andropov (1982-84) and then Gorbachev (1985-91) unsuccessfully attempted to stem. Chernobyl therefore can be read as a metaphor for the systemic breakdown of a mode of production which (this is what the series does not say) shared with the capitalist one the same reliance on the exploitation of the workforce qua abstract labour. While in the 1980s western capitalism was able to overcome its valorisation crisis through a significant *salto mortale* in the financial sector, this option was not available to Soviet 'state capitalism', which therefore collapsed. In fact, however, we are talking about the

same systemic failure originating in the formidable acceleration of automated productivity (third industrial revolution).

As Martin Ford puts it, most jobs today are “squarely in the sights as software automation and predictive algorithms advance rapidly in capability”.<sup>38</sup> This is true not only of the manufacturing industry, but also of other key sectors such as logistics, white-collar, services and retail. Furthermore, algorithms, Big Data and AI are quickly colonising the knowledge industry, including areas until recently considered resistant to intelligent technologies. All this means that we are already facing the collapse of the virtuous feedback loop between production, wages and consumption. In such a bleak context, recourse to financial prestidigitations is the only way in which collapse can be not so much avoided, but temporarily postponed – and, again, this postponement strategy was precisely what was not available to socialist economies in the 1980s. In short, the simulation of growth in the financial sector hides the economy’s best-kept secret, its real lack of growth. It would be hard to deny that, more than ten years after its latest devastating crisis, the world economy is still plagued by the same sickness that caused the global credit crunch of 2008, as well as the economic crises of the last 40 years or so. Global productivity growth is slowly but surely heading toward stagnation – currently well below 2 percent, with advanced economies faring much worse than smaller emerging ones.<sup>39</sup> In this setting, debt-leveraged financialisation constitutes contemporary capitalism’s specific type of *escapism*: it is the (inevitable) *forward-escape route* for a model of socio-economic reproduction that has hit against its historical limit and is now caught within a seemingly endless downward trajectory. By continuing to borrow from the future (‘imaginary’ profits to come), our economy only has one (desperate) aim: to defer its own collapse and that of the societies it supports. The point here is that contemporary capitalism’s financial overdose and credit binge are not simply self-inflicted sicknesses. They are not just destructive revenants of a more stable, rational and healthy socio-economic structure. Instead, they capture the essence of the capitalist dialectic insofar as it is increasingly incapable of profiting from its inherent contradiction (labour as posited presupposition). This means that, while the financialisation of our economies originates in the same ontology of self-valorization that characterised it from its inception, it is also a symptom of its exhaustion and fundamental impotence. As Robert Kurz argued back in 1999:<sup>40</sup>

Credit (i.e., the mass of the savings of society which are collected by the banking system and lent for the purpose of production or consumption in

exchange for interest payments) is quite a normal capitalist phenomenon, but its importance has grown as the capitalist expansionary development accelerated. Credit implies the usage of future money revenue (and, hence, of a future employment of workers and the future creation of substance of value) in order to maintain the present operation. The development of credit since the beginning of the 20th century, and likewise the 'de-substantiation' of money through the disconnection from the real substance of value (i.e., the end of the gold standard), already indicated the immanent barrier of the process of valorization, which comes to the surface today.

Kurz's point is that a falling rate of profit, as predicted by Marx in volume 3 of *Capital*, can exist next to an increase in the mass of profit only if "the corresponding future money revenues were really obtained on the basis of the real substance of value (including payments of interest). But this was made and is being made increasingly impossible by the Third Industrial Revolution", and, today, by the Fourth.<sup>41</sup> The implication is that, as the route into credit and annexed 'casino capitalism' turns into an inevitability, the catastrophic effect of crisis becomes a realistic possibility as the gap between the creation of fictitious capital and its basis in the real substance of value (labour-power) widens. When 'money that makes money work' (finance) loses its connection with 'money that makes people work', the result can only be a drastic devaluation of existing capital with breakdown potential. The 2008 crisis effectively confirmed Kurz's (and others before him)<sup>42</sup> prediction that "the simulated perpetuation of the capitalist expansion starts to reach its limits".

It is for the above reason that our moment is Hegelian: the stealthy self-movement of the capitalist dialectic falters; instead of reproducing its own rationale and conditions of possibility, it generates the foundational inconsistency that was always immanent to its reproductive logic, and that can be sublated neither by the optical illusions of finance nor by yet another level of abstraction (Schumpeterian creative destruction) in the real economy.<sup>43</sup> It seems to me that, in its deepest configuration, this inconsistency corresponds to *work* as concrete universal – work as the persistence of a contradiction that demands a different resolution outside the current parameters of political economy. This also means that all radical critiques of work, all the libertarian no-work utopias, miss the key Hegelian point, developed in the "Doctrine of Essence" (*Science of Logic*), about the necessity for *reflective determination* to redouble into *determining reflection*: the inherent negativity of reflection (thought's self-relating contradictoriness) has no other way of subsisting

than by engaging in a self-alienating correlation that, by sparing thought its abyssal inconsistency, might afford it a degree of (fragile, yet necessary) determinacy. Work needs to know what it is working for – like all forms of life, it can only operate within an intrinsically alienating dialectical relation. Work, in other words, by definition needs a politics to authorise it, to organise its concrete impossibility into an (at least minimally) abstract possibility.

Lacan allows us to grasp the above point directly: work is always the work of the unconscious (*savoir-faire*), the surplus-*jouissance* that sticks to whatever we do or think; which is why it is consubstantial with human life and it needs to be (at least minimally) domesticated. When we say that we are now reaching a Hegelian moment, then, we mean that the centuries-old capitalist domestication of work into labour-power is not working any longer. While frightening, this event is also potentially liberating, since it opens up the meaning of work to its redefinition via a radically different relation to what 'will have conditioned it' – since the dialectic follows a logic of *retroactive* signification. How? Let us take, again, the example of the capitalist dialectic: while, as Marx clearly understood,<sup>44</sup> capital validates its own structure *après coup*, after the fact, since commodity-producing labour turns into value only after commodities are sold, by the same dialectical token this mechanism functions precisely because capital has always-already subsumed work as wage labour, thus positing its own labour presupposition as self-othering value. Market exchange, in other words, is predicated upon a retroactive signification of production: the act of exchange takes place against the abstracting relation to work as labour-power. In more general terms, the implication is that for something to obtain social effectivity, a retroactive logic needs to be in place through which the presuppositions to one's activity 'will have been validated'. Lacan's theory of subjective identification through language entails this very short-circuiting of future and past: all subjectivities, in their intrinsic instability, form themselves on the basis of linguistic resignification, since they consolidate (or transform) their content by constantly writing (or reconfiguring) their own conditions of possibility, that is to say the signifiers that 'will have signified them'. Thus, as Lacan put it, we are not what we were, or have been, but what we will have been.<sup>45</sup>

### The Difficulty of Letting Go

As anticipated, the main challenge we are facing today would seem to have to do with our collective inability to translate the *objectively self-destructive* character of our socio-ontological condition into a *subjective desire* to move beyond it. This

passage can only be dialectical. As such, it will not happen seamlessly, as some commentators – armed with a dubious dose of potentially dangerous optimism – have been arguing since the debate on labour-shedding automation has gone viral. Rather, to grasp the stakes of social transformation today we should keep firmly in mind Freud's well-known Latin quotation from Virgil's *Aeneid*: "Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo". Freud was very fond of this line and used it as the motto for his seminal work *The Interpretation of Dreams*. It means, roughly, that "If I cannot bend the heavenly powers, I will have to move the powers of hell". Read as a psychoanalytic metaphor, it points to the difficult retroactive recalibration of our unconscious attachments (modes of enjoyment) as the necessary step toward the overcoming of our social impasse.

In his book *The Brave New World of Work*, sociologist Ulrich Beck described this challenge in a series of existential questions which reflect our self-defining attachment to valorised work:

Along which coordinates can people's lives be structured if there is no longer the discipline of a paid job? Is its loss not the root of all evil: drug addiction, crime, social disintegration? How can people's basic existence and social status be assured if these no longer rest upon performance at work? Which ideas of justice, or even of social inequality, can serve as the measure of people's lives, if society no longer thinks of itself as 'hard-working' or 'industrious'? What does the state mean if one of its most important sources of tax revenue – paid employment – dries up? How is democracy possible if it is not based upon participation in paid employment? How will people's social identity be determined, if they no longer have to tell themselves and others that 'what they do in life' is one of the standard occupations? What would be the meaning of governance, order, freedom – or even of society itself? Visions that work will progressively disappear as the social norm rebound off the faith that most people still have in job miracles and in themselves as citizens of the work society. Having lost their faith in God, they believe instead in the godlike powers of work to provide everything sacred to them: prosperity, social position, personality, meaning in life, democracy, political cohesion. Just name any value of modernity, and I will show that it assumes the very thing about which it is silent: participation in paid work.<sup>46</sup>

While Beck – the theorist of the risk society – as a rule abstains from confronting the macroeconomic presuppositions of the work society, which ultimately makes his analysis superficial, we should nevertheless heed the warnings contained in the above passage: in capitalist modernity wage labour informs the totality of our existence, including its unconscious mode of enjoyment. Here we should go all the way: by shaping the totality of our experience, labour represents the anthropomorphic side of capital, its self-othering qua automatic subject; which also means, of course, that the more capital emancipates from labour (expelling it from production), the more its narrative loses its footing, thus inexorably heading for implosion.

Our libidinal attachment to the work society is so ingrained and pervasive that it continues to define us even after the traditional notion of productivity, based on the exploitation of human labour, has largely been replaced by the alchemic rituals of financialization, which has now become ubiquitous and quasi-sovereign. This point can be quickly summarized via another brief filmic reference, Woody Allen's *Blue Jasmine* (2013), which delivers a very simple yet effective punch: a precise description of the psychic imbalance affecting the global post-2008 subject. Jasmine marries a rich broker, ends up penniless after he is incarcerated for corruption, but – and here is Allen's touch of genius – *she still flies first class*. That is to say, she believes (literally, for she suffers from an increasingly damaging form of delusion) that, despite her sudden fall from grace, she continues to belong to the glitzy Park Avenue society of the 1%. While she knows that her economic circumstances have drastically worsened, she refuses to accept her new situation, taking refuge instead in increasingly crippling delusional fantasies, as if her subjectivity had been torn asunder from her social context.

It would be useful to concede that, within the ongoing crisis of the *form of life* specific to our epoch, we are all like Jasmine – we share her psychology. Despite its current, increasingly manifest deterioration, the Crystal Palace of the *Wertform* continues to identify us by providing the illusory sense of domesticity and everydayness we crave, thus defusing any real, class-related antagonism of the Marxian ilk. Fyodor Dostoevsky's Crystal Palace (together with Walter Benjamin's Parisian Arcades) is the architectural metaphor that, as Peter Sloterdijk argues, conveys more convincingly the hermeneutics of the *spell* we call capitalist alienation,<sup>47</sup> even more doggedly so at the time of its historical exhaustion. Such metaphor “invokes the idea of an enclosure so spacious that one might never have to leave it”.<sup>48</sup> Or, to use a well-known metaphor from popular culture, a Hotel

California where “we are all just prisoners of our own device”, and, more pointedly, where “you can check out at any time, but you can never leave”.<sup>49</sup> Capitalist captivity, which of courses reaches beyond the relations of production, owes its ideological power not merely to appearing necessary, but to constantly evoking the openness of freedom: “It implies the project of placing the entire working life, wish life and expressive life of the people it affect[s] within the immanence of spending power.”<sup>50</sup>

Although its artificial ether is growing toxic and unbreathable, the great Palace of consumer capitalism continues to tell us who we are by shaping the flows of our desires, in a colossal effort to immunize us from its systemic contradictions. This way, it functions for us as what philosophers call ‘substance’, a concept Lacan captured with the deceptively simple term *big Other* (*grand Autre*): the invisible presuppositions that confer a veneer of meaningfulness and sanity upon a human life that, in itself, is from start to end suspended over its own void. After the wake-up call of the 2008 credit crunch, we have opted to retreat once again in the big Other of the capitalist relation, a globalized fiction that stages the economy and its immunizing powers as our natural and indestructible habitat. But how long will our epochal delusion last? How long, in the face of the decomposition of our social bond, will we be able to endure this stale ceremony?

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<sup>1</sup> Emil Cioran, *A Short History of Decay* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2012): 18.

<sup>2</sup> *The Blob* is a 1958 science fiction / horror B-movie about a shapeless, self-expanding, flesh-eating creature that crashes on Earth (Pennsylvania, US) from outer space and devours anyone who comes into contact with it. Because the blob is utterly non-specific, its metaphorical significance remains open to interpretation. While in 1958 the crimson blob-monster was associated with the communist threat, nuclear catastrophe and McCarthyism, today we could read this floating signifier as a metaphor for the crisis of global capitalism, especially due to the film’s finale, which shows the blob being captured, transported to the North Pole by air and parachuted into the frozen landscape. The ending indicates that the alien creature is not dead but only temporarily tamed; as commented by the Steve McQueen character, humanity will be safe “as long as the Arctic stays cold”, a closing line that today speaks to us as a chilling ecological warning.

<sup>3</sup> Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*: 21.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid: 35.

<sup>5</sup> On fatalism and Hegel see Frank Ruda, *Abolishing Freedom: A Plea for a Contemporary Use of Fatalism* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Emil Cioran, *The Temptation to Exist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998): 59.

<sup>7</sup> See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> See Sohn-Rethel's discussion of this Marxian notion in Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology* (London: Macmillan, 1978).

<sup>9</sup> As Marx put it neatly in the *Grundrisse*: "While in the completed bourgeois system every economic relation presupposes every other in its bourgeois economic form, and everything posited is thus also a presupposition, this is the case with every organic system" (Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, London: Penguin, 1993: 278).

<sup>10</sup> The obvious reference here is Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of our Time* (London: Beacon Press, 2002), originally published in 1944.

<sup>11</sup> On this question see especially Christopher Arthur, *The New Dialectic and Marx's Capital* (Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> As Marx states in the Preface to the 1844 Manuscripts, "I have deemed the concluding chapter of the present work – the settling of accounts with *Hegelian dialectic* and Hegelian philosophy as a whole – to be absolutely necessary, a task not yet performed" (Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Radford, VA: Wilder Publications, 2011: 17). As is well-known, Marx's critique of Hegelian philosophy as theology was deeply influenced by Ludwig Feuerbach. For a detailed analysis of Marx's complex reading of Hegel in the 1844 Manuscripts, see Christopher Arthur, *Dialectics of Labour. Marx and his Relation to Hegel* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

<sup>13</sup> See Karl Marx, *Capital: Critique of Political Economy vol. 1* (London: Penguin, 1990): 253-54 & 267.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid: 716.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid: 715.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, in *Marx-Engels Collected Works vol. 6* (New York: International Publishers, 1976): 127.

<sup>17</sup> Riccardo Bellofiore, "Marx after Hegel: Capital as Totality and the Centrality of Production", in *Crisis and Critique*, vol. 3(3): 47. Bellofiore drives his main point home when he claims that "the abstraction of living labour" needs to be reconstructed "as a *process* opened by initial (bank-)finance as *monetary ante-validation*, before production. As a consequence of the *monetary dimension* marking the buying and selling of labour power, living labour too earns a 'latent' sociality *in anticipation* of the final ex post-validation in exchange. [...] Money is not just a passive 'reflection' of value, *ex post*: it is actually essential to 'constitute' it, *ex ante*" (55).

<sup>18</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*: 305.

<sup>19</sup> Marx uses the symptomatic term "transubstantiation" in the *Grundrisse* to undermine the argument that capital is merely a displacement [*verrückung*] of the productive force of labour, claiming instead that "capital itself is essentially this *displacement, this transposition*, and that wage labour as such presupposes capital, so that, from its standpoint as well, there is this *transubstantiation*, the necessary process of positing its own powers as *alien* to the worker. Therefore, the demand that wage labour be continued but capital suspended is self-contradictory, self-dissolving" (Marx, *Grundrisse*: 308-09).

<sup>20</sup> In Marx's words: "It is no longer the worker who employs the means of production, but the means of production which employ the worker" (Marx, *Capital vol. 1*: 425).

<sup>21</sup> "On the one hand, all labour is an expenditure of human labour-power, in the physiological sense, and it is in this quality of being equal, or abstract, human labour that it forms the value of commodities. On the other hand, all labour is an expenditure of human labour-power in a particular form and with a definite aim, and it is in this quality of being concrete useful labour that it produces use-values" (Ibid: 137).

<sup>22</sup> I agree here with Robert Kurz: “Not only can the concrete side not be separated from the abstract, but the former is subordinated to the latter. In other words: use-value is only a form of representation or appearance of abstract labour. Overarching both is the abstraction ‘labour’ as a real abstraction” (Robert Kurz, *The Substance of Capital*, London, Chronos Publications: 88). For a similar critical approach, see Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*: 21-51.

<sup>23</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977): 118.

<sup>24</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 656.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid: 531. Here Hegel begins to articulate the theme of the double negation (negation of negation): what the concept as abstract universal negates is a negative concrete determination. However, “this double negation comes to be represented as if it were *external* to it, both as if the properties of the concrete that are left out were different from the ones that are retained as the content of the abstraction, and as if this operation of leaving some aside while retaining the rest went on outside them. With respect to this movement, the universal has not yet acquired the determination of *externality*; it is still in itself that absolute negation which is, precisely, the negation of negation or absolute negation” (ibid). Acquiring self-externality entails an inward bending back upon itself, which is what turns abstract into concrete universality: “The truly higher universal is the one in which this outwardly directed side is redirected inwardly” (533). Here, then, is the truth about double negation: not simply the negation of a negative externality, which is excluded so that the concept acquires a positive identity, but “creative power as self-referring absolute negativity”, which “differentiates itself internally” (ibid); “the form with which the infinite concept clothes its differences – a form which is equally itself one of its differences” (534).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid: 513.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid: 574.

<sup>28</sup> Marx made this Hegelian point about production in the *Grundrisse*. See Marx, *Grundrisse*: 476.

<sup>29</sup> Hegel, *The Science of Logic*: 579.

<sup>30</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Incontinence of the Void. Economico-Philosophical Spandrels* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017): 273.

<sup>31</sup> It is worth quoting this key passage at length: “The disparity which exists in consciousness between the ‘I’ and the substance which is its object is the distinction between them, the negative in general. This can be regarded as the *defect* of both, though it is their soul, or that which moves them. That is why some of the ancients conceived the void as the principle of motion, for they rightly saw the moving principle as the negative, though they did not as yet grasp that the negative is the self. Now, although this negative appears at first as a disparity between the ‘I’ and its object, it is just as much the disparity of the substance with itself. Thus what seems to happen outside of it, to be an activity directed against it, is really its own doing, and Substance shows itself to be essentially Subject” (Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*: 21).

<sup>32</sup> See my previous work on this topic, e.g. Fabio Vighi, “Genie Out of the Bottle: Lacan and the Loneliness of Global Capitalism”, in *Crisis and Critique* 6(1): 391-415 and “Capitalist Bulimia: Lacan on Marx and crisis” in *Crisis and Critique* 3(3): 415-32; and Heiko Feldner and Fabio Vighi, *Critical Theory and the Crisis of Contemporary Capitalism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

<sup>33</sup> See especially Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production* (St Louis, MO: Telos Press, 1975) and Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion* (New York: Zone Book, 1989: 87-104), both originally published in

1973. See also Jacques Camatte's numerous contributions, since 1968, to the journal *Invariance*, which he continues to edit (although more and more sporadically).

<sup>34</sup> See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), particularly: 96-153, where Hegel repeatedly argues that through punishment, the law sublates crime as "negation of the negation" (100). In its mediating role, the law for Hegel does not merely treat crime as an exception to a naturally balanced situation, but rather engages with the crime-exception by granting it a foundational role that requires mediation.

<sup>35</sup> On this point see Hiroshi Uchida, *Marx's Grundrisse and Hegel's Logic* (London: Routledge, 1988). From a Marxian angle, Uchida argues that the logical categories in Hegel's major work were themselves reflections of the productive processes of capitalist society.

<sup>36</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 16.

<sup>37</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*: 296.

<sup>38</sup> Martin Ford, *Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of a Jobless Future* (New York: Basic Books, 2015): Lxv.

<sup>39</sup> See <http://www.oecd.org/sdd/productivity-stats/>

<sup>40</sup> See <http://autonomies.org/2016/11/against-labour-against-capital-marx-2000-by-robert-kurz/>

<sup>41</sup> In the words of Klaus Schwab, founder of the World Economic Forum: "The speed of current breakthroughs has no historical precedent. When compared with previous industrial revolutions, the Fourth is evolving at an exponential rather than a linear pace. Moreover, it is disrupting almost every industry in every country. And the breadth and depth of these changes herald the transformation of entire systems of production, management, and governance" (Klaus Schwab, "The Fourth Industrial Revolution: What It Means, How to Respond", in *Foreign Affairs*, 12 December 2015; full article available here: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-fourth-industrial-revolution-what-it-means-and-how-to-respond/>)

<sup>42</sup> The issue of labour displacement and fall in the mass of profit was anticipated in the post-war period by a variety of thinkers including, among others, Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1958); Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (London: NLB, 1975) and Wassily Leontief, "National perspective: The definition of problems and opportunities", in *The Long-Term Impact of Technology on Employment and Unemployment. A National Academy of Engineering Symposium, 30 June 1983* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1983): 3-7.

<sup>43</sup> For a discussion of this point, see Heiko Feldner and Fabio Vighi, "Finitude of Capitalism and the Perverse Charm of Denial", in *Berlin Journal of Critical Theory* 2(2): 99-130 (specifically 114-120).

<sup>44</sup> As Marx put it in the opening chapter of *Capital*: "It is only by being exchanged that the products of labour acquire a socially uniform objectivity as values" (*Capital vol. 1*: 166).

<sup>45</sup> See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits, the First Complete Edition in English* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006): 247.

<sup>46</sup> Ulrich Beck, *The Brave New World of Work* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2000): 63.

<sup>47</sup> Inspired by Dostoevsky's remarks in his 1864 novella *Notes from the Underground*, Peter Sloterdijk refers to the Crystal Palace – the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London – as a metaphor for "the world interior of capital", "a hothouse that has drawn inwards everything that was once on the outside": "In this horizontal Babylon, being human becomes a question of spending power, and the meaning of freedom is exposed in the ability to choose between products for the market – or to create such products oneself". According to Sloterdijk, it is in this image of a self-enclosed and self-sufficient civilisation ruled by capital, and the sense of domesticity it creates, that "the motif of the 'end of history'

began its triumph": "The visionaries of the nineteenth century, like the communists of the twentieth, already understood that after the expiry of combatant history, social life could only take place in an expanded interior, a domestically organized and artificially climatized inner space" (Peter Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital: Towards a Philosophical Theory of Globalization*, Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013: 170-71).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid: 175.

<sup>49</sup> These are lines from the Eagles' famous song "Hotel California", released in 1976.

<sup>50</sup> Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital*: 176.