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# Fetishism and Revolution in the Critique of Political Economy: Critical Reflections on some Contemporary Readings of Marx's *Capital*

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## Abstract

The aim of this article is to examine a series of recent contributions to the reading of Marx's *Capital* that stress its specific determination as a dialectical investigation of objectified or fetishised forms of social mediation in capitalist society: on the one hand, the so-called *Neue Marx-Lektüre* originated in Germany towards the end of the 1960s and, on the other, the more widely circulated work of authors associated with so-called *Open Marxism*. The interesting aspect of these works is that they draw the implications of Marx's critique of political economy not only for the comprehension of the fetishised forms of social *objectivity* in capitalism, but also for the comprehension of the forms of *subjectivity* of the modern individual. More specifically, all these contributions broadly share the insightful view that the content of the simplest determination of human individuality in the capitalist mode of production is its alienated existence as 'personification of economic categories'. However, this article

argues that the limits of these perspectives become apparent when it comes to uncovering the grounds of the revolutionary form of subjectivity which carries the potentiality to transcend capitalist alienation. For these perspectives fail to ground the revolutionary form of subjectivity in the immanent unfolding of capitalist forms of social mediation. In the case of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, it quite simply leaves the *problematique* of the revolutionary subject outside the scope of the critique of political economy. In the case of *Open Marxism*, despite valiant attempts at overcoming all exteriority in their conceptualisation of the relationship between human subjectivity and capital, they end up grounding the revolutionary transformative powers of the working class outside the latter's alienated existence as personification of economic categories; more specifically, in an abstract humanity lacking in social determinations. In contrast to these perspectives, this paper develops an alternative approach to the Marxian critique of political economy which provides an account of the revolutionary potentialities of the working class as immanent in its full determination as an attribute of the alienated or fetishised movement of the capital-form.

**Key Words:** *Capital*, Fetishism, Revolution, Dialectics; *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, *Open Marxism*

## Introduction

The aim of this article is to examine a series of recent contributions to the reading of Marx's *Capital* that stress its specific determination as a dialectical investigation of objectified or fetishised forms of social mediation in capitalist society. In the first place, I critically engage with the contribution by authors associated with the so-called *Neue Marx-Lektüre* originated in Germany towards the end of the 1960s (Backhaus 1980, 1992, 2005; Reichelt 1982, 1995, 2005, 2007; Heinrich 2009; Fineschi 2009). Secondly, I also scrutinize the more widely circulated work of authors associated with so-called *Open Marxism* (Bonefeld y Holloway 1991; Bonefeld, Gunn y Psychopedis 1992a, 1992b; Bonefeld, Holloway y Psychopedis 1995; Bonefeld y Psychopedis 2005). In this latter case, I shall particularly focus on Werner Bonefeld's contribution (1992, 1993, 1995, 2014), who explicitly draws intellectual inspiration from Backhaus's and Reichelt's ideas (Bonefeld 1998, 2001, 2014), albeit within a framework which is more overtly *political*.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, I shall discuss Richard Gunn's more 'philosophically-minded' take on *Open Marxist* themes, which probably

constitutes the more sophisticated and rigorous contribution to the methodological dimension of this approach (Gunn 1987, 1989, 1992).

In my view, perhaps the most interesting aspect of all these works is that they draw the implications of Marx's critique of political economy not only for the comprehension of the fetishised forms of social *objectivity* in capitalism, but also for the comprehension of the forms of *subjectivity* of the modern individual. In effect, all these contributions broadly share the view, correct as I see it, that the content of the simplest determination of human individuality in the capitalist mode of production is its alienated existence as personification of 'economic categories'. However, I shall show below that the limits of these perspectives become apparent when it comes to uncovering the grounds of the form of subjectivity which carries the immanent potentiality to transcend capitalist alienation, that is, when it comes to bring to light the determinations of the revolutionary subject.

In order to substantiate this argument, this article starts out by offering an in depth and detailed critical discussion of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* and the *Open Marxist* approach, arguing that these authors fail to ground the emergence of revolutionary subjectivity in the immanent unfolding of capitalist forms of social mediation. In the former case, quite simply by leaving the *problematique* of the revolutionary subject outside the scope of the critique of political economy. In the case of *Open Marxism*, despite its valiant attempts at overcoming all exteriority in their conceptualisation of the relationship between human subjectivity and capital, they end up grounding the revolutionary transformative powers of the working class outside the latter's alienated existence as 'personification of economic categories'; more specifically, they end up grounding it in an abstract humanity lacking in social determinations.

Furthermore, the article develops this critical discussion along *methodological* lines demonstrating that the substantive weaknesses of both the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* and *Open Marxism* go hand in hand with an inadequate conception of the scientific-critical method needed immanently to discover the determinations of revolutionary subjectivity. More concretely, for these authors the Marxian scientific-critical method underlying the discovery of revolutionary praxis simply boils down to the analytic movement entailed by the '*reductio ad hominem*', through which the dialectical investigation traces the human origin of economic categories. The 'genetic' or 'synthetic' aspect of dialectics is thus relegated to the role of explaining the social constitution of the forms of objectivity of capitalist society and, at most, of the forms of subjectivity that bear their *reproduction*. However, according to this conception,

this second moment of the dialectical investigation has no role to play with regards to the comprehension of the foundations of revolutionary subjectivity.

In contrast to these perspectives, I develop an alternative approach inspired by the contribution to the critique of political economy of the Argentine scholar Juan Iñigo Carrera (1992, 2007, 2013) which, insofar as it attempts to provide an account of the revolutionary potentialities of the working class as immanent in its full determination as 'personification' of the movement of capital, differs from the two readings just outlined on the following two key methodological dimensions. In the first place, it is argued that insofar as revolutionary subjectivity is a 'unity of many determinations', its ground cannot be found at the 'level of abstraction' of commodity fetishism, as implicitly follows from the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* and the *Open Marxist* approach. In the second place, and as a consequence, it is shown that the critical moment of the Marxian dialectical method does not simply consist of the *reductio ad hominem*. The latter undoubtedly is the essentially analytic and Feuerbach-inspired approach deployed by Marx in early texts such as the *1844 Paris Manuscripts*. However, I maintain that Marx overcame the limits of the latter methodological perspective in the 'mature' versions of his critique of political economy (the *Grundrisse*, the *1859 Contribution* and, especially, *Capital*). In effect, in these latter works the discovery of revolutionary subjectivity immanently emerges out of the *synthetic unfolding* of the *totality* of form determinations of capital as the alienated concrete subject of the movement of modern society, with the commodity form as its necessary yet only *simplest* expression (and hence as the point of departure of the dialectical presentation which *culminates* with revolutionary subjectivity).

## Method and practical critique from the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* to *Open Marxism*

### *Backhaus's and Reichelt's Neue Marx-Lektüre*

We pointed out above that both the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* and its more politicised reception by *Open Marxism* in the Anglophone world share a particular conception of the method and significance of the Marxian critique of the fetishised forms of capitalist social mediation. In effect, in their reducing the critical moment of the investigation of commodity fetishism to the mere discovery of the human content behind the alienated objectivity of economic categories, it can be argued that these

authors develop what I have elsewhere termed a 'Feuerbachian' reading of this aspect of Marx's method in his 'mature' works (Starosta 2015). In other words, what eventuates is a variation of what Avineri referred to in his classic book as the method of *transformative criticism* that the young Marx had taken over from the author of *The Essence of Christianity* (Avineri 1993). In this sense, it would seem that there would be no essential methodological difference between the critical method of *Capital* and that which structures Marx's first attempt at the critique of political economy in the *1844 Paris Manuscripts*. The only difference would be that in Marx's later texts, he not only reduces alienated social forms to its human content but also answers (or does so more fully) the question as to why that content takes on such a fetishised form.

But 'if the point is to change the world', then the subsequent problem is how to turn the insight in the human basis of the alienated objectivity of economic categories into *practical critique*, that is, how to convert it into emancipating conscious practice. And it is here where, eventually, the recourse to a moment of exteriority to capitalist social relations tends to creep in as the source of the transformative powers of revolutionary action. Broadly put, for such Marxists the transformative powers of our action are located not in commodity-determined practice itself, but in the essential character of an abstract material content deprived of social determinations which is deemed 'logically' prior to its perverted social form as value-producing, albeit only appearing and existing immanently in and through it. For those readings, this mere discovery of the human content of 'economic categories' exhausts the thinking needed consciously to organise the practical critique of capitalism. Let us examine this matter more closely through a discussion of some of these contributions.

Perhaps a good place to start is the work of Hans-Georg Backhaus, who explicitly traces the Feuerbachian lineage of Marx's method of critique. According to Backhaus, from an initial application 'in his critique of the metaphysical theory of the state', Marx expanded the scope of this method to economic objects as material forms of self-estrangement, commensurable to its metaphysical and theological forms (Backhaus 2005, pp. 18–19). This 'critical genetic method' is said to have two main aspects – the critical and the anthropological. The former does not simply consist in describing and denouncing the existing contradictions between dogmas and institutions, but centrally aims at explicating the inner genesis or necessity of those contradictions (Backhaus 2005, p. 19). In turn, the anthropological aspect of the method involves an *ad hominem* reduction, the demonstration of the human basis of

the economic object as a material form of self-estrangement, which is thus rendered in its totality as an object of critique (ibid.). The critique of economic categories thus entails the transcendence of the economic standpoint (Backhaus 2005, p. 23).

In Backhaus's reading, this 'application' of the 'critical genetic method' to the discipline of economics is employed by Marx not only in his early writings (an indisputable fact as I see it), but also in his mature critique of political economy (Backhaus 2005, pp. 21ss). The main thrust of the critique remains the same: whilst economics:

accept[s] economic forms and categories without thought, that is in an unreflective manner ... Marx, in contrast, seeks to 'derive' these forms and categories as inverted forms of social relations (Backhaus 2005, p. 21).

The 'dialectical method of exposition' is thus essentially seen as the genetic development of those alienated forms of *objectivity* out of human sensuous practice. (Backhaus 2005, p. 22). The general method of critique does not change in this reading, only its terminology (Backhaus 2005, p. 25). In the words of Backhaus himself:

In variation of this thought process, Marx argues in the mature *Critique* of 1859 that what the economists 'have just ponderously described as a thing reappears as a social relation and, a moment later, having been defined as a social relation, teases them once more as a thing' (Marx 1971, p. 35). If one replaces 'social relation' by 'appearance of humanness' and thing qua 'value thing' by the thing in 'difference from humanness' that, as a transcendental thing, is transposed in a sphere 'outside of Man', then the continuity of the fundamental character of Marx's critique of economics from the early writing to *Capital* becomes sufficiently clear (Backhaus 2005, p. 25).

Now, lest my argument be misread, my claim is not that these contributions from the *Neue Lektüre* see no methodological change whatsoever between Marx's early critique of economics and his mature version. My point is that they do not posit any change insofar as the nature of *critique* is concerned: the *reductio ad hominem* is considered to be the continuing ground for revolutionary praxis (Reichelt 2005, p. 38). Yet, this novel reading does develop two additional methodological elements which are relevant for the purpose of the present discussion.

In the first place, these authors argue that in Marx's mature critique, the genetic aspect of his method is not simply predicated on Feuerbach. Insofar as the 'inverted world of capital' (as self-valorising value) resembles Hegel's second supersensible world, 'which in its reality ... contains within itself ... both the sensuous and the first supersensible world', (Reichelt 2005, p. 32), Marx's mature critique also drew on Hegel's logic for the 'dialectical development of categories' (Reichelt 2005, p. 43). In other words, Hegel's dialectical method provided Marx with the general form of motion of *synthetic* exposition of the necessary sequence of form-determinations understood as 'objective forms of thought' (Reichelt 2005, p. 57).

Secondly, taking cue from Adorno's concept of society as the 'unity of subject and object', (Backhaus 1992, p. 56), which involves 'an ongoing process of inversion of subjectivity and objectivity, and vice versa', (Backhaus 1992, p. 60), both Backhaus and Reichelt posit the alienated determination of human beings as 'personifications of economic categories' or 'character masks', as a central element of Marx's dialectical method in *Capital* (Backhaus 1992, p. 60; Reichelt 1982, p. 168). While this insight could be a promising programmatic starting point for an attempt at a critical investigation of the determinations of revolutionary subjectivity, this is not a path that these German scholars follow. Their discussion unfortunately tends to remain at a very high level of abstraction, dealing with the simpler form determinations of capital. As *Endnotes 2* write, 'class plays little role in the writings of Backhaus and Reichelt and they treat the question of revolution as outside their field of academic expertise' (Endnotes 2010, p. 99).<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, it is possible to examine the practical implications of this approach by turning to the work of Werner Bonefeld who, as stated above, has not only introduced it into Anglophone Marxism, but also developed it further along resolutely political lines, i.e. by putting the revolutionary class struggle at the centre of his investigation (Endnotes 2010, p. 98).<sup>3</sup>

### *Bringing Politics into the Neue Marx-Lektüre: Bonefeld and Open Marxism*

A recent article by Bonefeld on Adorno and social praxis is a fertile ground to discuss this issue. The starting point of Bonefeld's discussion is the recognition that in capitalism the 'subject's objectification exists in an inverted form, in which the thing subjectifies itself in the person, and the person objectifies him- or herself in the thing' (Bonefeld 2012, p. 125). In other words, Bonefeld takes up the Adornian insight, which originally triggered the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* (Reichelt 1982), that in this society individuals become determined as 'character masks' or 'agents of value': their social

activity becomes the activity of 'personifications of economic categories' (Bonefeld 2012, p. 124). In more overtly Adornian terms, Bonefeld speaks of this phenomenon as involving a specific 'objective conceptuality', which 'holds sway in reality (*Sache*) itself' (Bonefeld 2012, pp. 125–6). However, unlike Backhaus and Reichelt, Bonefeld explicitly poses the question of the implication of this form-determination of human individuality for emancipatory praxis, i.e. for revolutionary class struggle:

The critique of political economy is not satisfied with perpetuating the labourer. Its reasoning is subversive of all relations of human indignity. Subversion is not the business of alternative elites that seek revolution as mere conformist rebellion – a revolution for the perpetuation of wage slavery. Their business is to lead labour, not its self-emancipation. Subversion aims at general human emancipation (Bonefeld 2010a, pp. 62–3).

The interesting thing about Bonefeld's answer to this question is that, at least in principle, he explicitly rejects those attempts at grounding 'resistance' against reification in an 'asserted subject conceived in contradistinction to society', and whose transhistorical basis would be the worker's 'humanity and soul' (Lukács), 'the inner transcendence of matter' (Bloch), a 'materialist instinct' (Negt and Kluge), or biopower (Hardt and Negri) (Bonefeld 2012, p. 131). In other words, Bonefeld is at pains not to relapse into any exteriority to the perverted forms of existence of the social individual as the ground for the revolutionary subject:

And Adorno? He would have none of this. The idea that there is a world out there that has not yet been colonized by the logic of things is nonsensical. Instead of a concept of society, these differentiations of society into system and soul/transcendent matter/materialist instinct/bio-power separate what belongs together (Bonefeld 2012, p. 131).

Bonefeld elaborates further on this through a 'philosophical' discussion of Hegel's conception of the relation between essence and appearance (Bonefeld 2012, pp. 127–8). Essence, he argues following Hegel, has to appear (it cannot choose not to do so). Moreover, this appearance is its (only) mode of existence. This means that there is no exteriority to essence's actual manifestation, however perverted the latter might be: 'its appearance is thus at the same time its disappearance' (Bonefeld 2012, p. 128). Translated into social theory, this philosophical argument means that human



sensuous practice (essence) does exist as personification of economic categories (appearance), and that this inversion is no mere subjective illusion, but is all too real. Now, whilst this certainly allows Bonefeld to formally avoid relapsing into an externality between human subject and society, it begs the question as to how to avoid the political dead-end to which Adorno pessimistically succumbed? In other words, the question arises as to how to avoid the conclusion that 'there could be no such thing as emancipatory praxis because the reified world of bourgeois society would only allow reified activity' (Bonefeld 2012, p. 124)?

Here lies the crux of the matter, because, in my view, Bonefeld can remain true to the project of emancipatory praxis only by backtracking on his declamation to reject any exteriority between 'essence' and 'appearance'. Thus, right after claiming that the former vanishes in the latter, he endorses Adorno's claim in *Negative Dialectics* that 'objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder' since 'the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived' (Adorno 1992, p. 13). According to Bonefeld, the critical move consists in 'opening the non-conceptual within the concept' (Bonefeld 2012, p. 130). This non-conceptual content, Bonefeld further argues, 'subsists within its concept but *cannot be reduced to it* (Bonefeld 2012, p. 130, my emphasis). Crucially, *it is this moment of irreducibility of the content which, in its simplicity and unmediatedness, constitutes the ground of revolutionary subjectivity*. In other words, the latter is seen by Bonefeld as the expression of the direct affirmation of the ('non-conceptual') content. The fact that he does not see this affirmation as a pure positivity but only as negation of 'the negative human condition' (Bonefeld 2012, p. 130) makes no difference. The point is that the immediate 'source' of that negativity is located in the (formless) content itself: 'Subversion is able to negate the established order because it is "man" made' (Bonefeld 2010, p. 66). The postulate of immanence between content and form ultimately thereby remains just a formal declaration which is belied as the argument unfolds. In the end, an element of exteriority to alienated social practice creeps back in as the residual 'substance' of revolutionary subjectivity.<sup>4</sup>

We shall return below to the substantive shortcomings of this kind of approach. Here the important point to address is the implication of this conception of revolutionary subjectivity for the *meaning of science as critique*. Briefly put, for Bonefeld, dialectical critique comes down to the demystification of 'economic categories' by revealing their social constitution as perverted modes of existence of human activity, that is, by discovering sensuous practice as the negated content behind those reified forms of social mediation (Bonefeld 2001, pp. 56–9; and 2012, p.

127). What follows from this is that, for Bonefeld, the 'subversive' moment of Marx's methodological programme is essentially *analytic*: it consists in the discovery of the content of a determinate form. Drawing on the work of Backhaus commented on above (Bonefeld 1998), it is through *reductio ad hominem* that science as critique provides enlightenment on revolutionary practice.

The problem with this approach is, as argued elsewhere (Starosta 2008; Caligaris and Starosta 2014), that dialectical analysis is actually incapable of offering an *explanation* (hence comprehension) of the *raison d'être* of determinate concrete forms of reality. In moving 'backwards' from concrete form to content, dialectical analysis can at most reveal *what* are the more abstract determinations whose realisation is presupposed and carried by the immediate concrete form under scrutiny. But it cannot account for its 'why' (i.e. its fully unfolded immanent necessity). In this sense, although it does comprise a necessary methodological stage of dialectical research, the analytical discovery of the human content of fetishised relations between things can shed little light on the comprehension of revolutionary subjectivity. In fact, that was the scientific achievement of the Marxian critique of political economy as early as in the *1844 Paris Manuscripts*, which allowed him to grasp the *simplest* (human) determination behind the content and form of the abolition of the fetishism of capitalist social relations (Starosta 2015, Chapter 1). But the whole point of Marx's subsequent scientific endeavour was precisely to advance in the comprehension of the *further mediations* entailed by the material and social constitution of the revolutionary subject, which could only be the result of their *synthetic* ideal reproduction.

Evidently, this presupposes that one considers that there actually *are* further mediations that need to be unfolded synthetically in order fully to comprehend revolutionary practice. But this is what Bonefeld's approach denies. As I have argued, despite his critique of other perspectives that resort to the immediacy of 'an asserted subject externally counterposed to society', his own endeavour ultimately finds the immanent ground of revolutionary subjectivity in something simple and unmediated, i.e. the abstract materiality of 'sensuous human practice' which 'lives within and through relations between things'. Bonefeld's restriction of the subversive moment of dialectical critique to analysis is therefore perfectly coherent on this score. In his view, when it comes to revolutionary subjectivity, there are actually no *determinations* at stake, there is nothing to be explained. In other words, the revolutionary abolition of capital has no material, social or historical *immanent necessity* Bonefeld (2010, p. 64).<sup>5</sup> Its only 'necessity' is moral, the practical realisation

of the 'communist categorical imperative of human emancipation' (Bonefeld 2010, pp. 66, 77). In brief, the revolutionary abolition of capital is the result of an abstractly free and socially autonomous political action, represented as the absolute opposite of the alienated automatism of the capital form (albeit one that can only exist as 'negativity', i.e. in the struggles 'in and against' capitalist oppression):

The existence of the labourer as an economic category does therefore not entail reduction of consciousness to economic consciousness. It entails the concept of economy as an experienced concept, and economic consciousness as an experienced consciousness. At the very least, economic consciousness is an unhappy consciousness. It is this consciousness that demands reconciliation: freedom turns concrete in the changing forms of repression as resistance to repression (Bonefeld 2010, p. 71).

It follows that the only thing that actually requires explanation is the social constitution of the fetishised forms of objectivity in which human practice exists in capitalism. In this sense, Bonefeld acknowledges that the critical power of the dialectical method involves not only analysis, but also, fundamentally, synthetic or 'genetic' reproduction. Thus, in an article on the meaning of critique, he approvingly quotes Marx's methodological remark that

It is, in reality, much easier to discover by analysis the earthly kernel of the misty creations of religion than to do the opposite, i.e. to develop from the actual, given relations of life the forms in which these have been apotheosized (Marx 1976, p. 494).

However, this synthetic reproduction is recognised by Bonefeld as the only materialist and scientific method for the genetic development of perverted social forms, i.e. for the social constitution of fetishised *forms of objectivity* out of human relations. As far as forms of *subjectivity* are concerned, they might at most be considered part of the genetic development of forms only insofar as individuals 'act rationally as executors of economic laws over which they have no control' (Bonefeld 2012, p. 128), which for this approach is the only aspect under which human beings act as personifications of economic categories. But as for *antagonistic* forms of subjectivity and action, they seem to fall outside the scope of the systematic unfolding of 'economic categories' (except, of course, as instances of negation of the

latter's self-movement, i.e. as struggles *against* it). Thus, Bonefeld states: 'Does it really make sense to say that workers personify variable capital? Variable capital does not go on strike. Workers do' (Bonefeld 2010, p. 68). And they do so not as owners of labour power trying to secure the reproduction of their commodity. More importantly, the workers struggle daily against 'the capitalist reduction of human purposes to cash and product' (Bonefeld 2010, p. 72).<sup>6</sup>

In sum, for this kind of approach the synthetic movement of the dialectical exposition concerns the social constitution of 'economic categories' and the continuous process of reproduction of the constitutive premise of their existence at every turn of the conceptual development. Bonefeld locates this premise in the 'logic of separation' of labour from its conditions (Bonefeld 2011, p. 395), i.e. in the *formal subsumption of labour to capital*. But the systematic sequence does not entail any progress in the knowledge of the immanent determinations of revolutionary subjectivity. The significance that Bonefeld attaches to the culminating point of Marx's systematic exposition in Volume I of *Capital*, which for him should be better confined to the concept of *primitive accumulation*, is symptomatic in this regard.<sup>7</sup> The chapter on the 'historical tendency of capitalist accumulation' only matters insofar as 'it also continues the process of expropriation in its own terms, as capital centralization' (Bonefeld 2011, p. 394). As for the revolutionary expropriation of the expropriators and the bursting asunder of the capitalist integument that Marx posits as the necessary outcome of the alienated socialisation of private labour, Bonefeld considers that they should be left aside as 'desperately triumphal remarks' (Bonefeld 2011, p. 395). This should come as no surprise. As I have shown, according to his approach, revolutionary subjectivity is quite simply self-grounded in an abstract inner negativity, which is expressed, however 'contradictorily', in every manifestation of resistance to oppression.

At first sight, and in contradistinction to the 'fatalism' and 'quietism' entailed by orthodox perspectives that posit the supersession of capital in terms of the 'mechanic' impossibility of its expanded reproduction (i.e. the different versions of theories of capitalist breakdown), *Open Marxism* seems to extoll and 'empower' the political action of the working class. At the same time, this conception appears to avoid the lapse into the naïve immediatism and subjectivism characteristic of, for instance, so-called '*Autonomist Marxism*'.<sup>8</sup> However, I shall show in the next section that the *Open Marxist* perspective is also deeply problematic.

## The limits of *Open Marxism*

The first fundamental substantive critical remark that can be made about the *Open Marxist* approach is that despite its valuable attempt to undertake an uncompromising and radical criticism of capitalist social relations in their totality, it ends up *naturalising* the *historically-specific social form of personal freedom* characterising the private and independent individual, i.e. the subjectivity of the commodity producer. As a consequence, this perspective cannot but lead to the practical impotence to abolish the fetishism of the commodity- and capital-forms of social relations. In order to substantiate this point, let us examine the matter more closely.

In effect, as Iñigo Carrera (2007, Chapter 3) forcefully argues in what I think is one of his most important contributions to the contemporary reconstruction of the Marxian critique of political economy, in capitalism free consciousness is neither the abstract opposite to nor the content of alienated consciousness. Instead, the consciousness that is free from all relations of personal subjection is but the mode in which the alienated consciousness of the commodity producer affirms through its own negation. In other words, the other side of the coin by which the human individual sees her/his social powers as the objective attribute of the product of social labour (i.e. value) is her/his self-conception as the bearer of an abstractly free, 'self-determining' subjectivity. Thus, it is by seeing herself/himself – and therefore practically acting – as abstractly free that the individual affirms and reproduces her/his alienated productive practice, that is, her/his social determination as personification of the objectified forms of the general social relation of production (the commodity, money, capital and so on).<sup>9</sup>

As Marx himself points out in the *Grundrisse*, the subjective form of personal freedom is but an expression of the fact 'that the individual has an existence only as a producer of exchange value' (Marx 1976, pp. 717–19):

Therefore, when the economic form, exchange, posits the all-sided equality of its subjects, then the content, the individual as well as the objective material which drives towards the exchange, is *freedom*. Equality and freedom are thus not only respected in exchange based on exchange values but, also, the exchange of exchange values is the productive, real basis of all *equality* and *freedom*. As pure ideas they are merely the idealized expressions of this

basis; as developed in juridical, political, social relations, they are merely this basis to a higher power. And so it has been in history. Equality and freedom as developed to this extent are exactly the opposite of the freedom and equality in the world of antiquity, where developed exchange value was not their basis, but where, rather, the development of that basis destroyed them. Equality and freedom presuppose relations of production as yet unrealized in the ancient world and in the Middle Ages. Direct forced labour is the foundation of the ancient world; the community rests on this as its foundation; labour itself as a 'privilege', as still particularized, not yet generally producing exchange values, is the basis of the world of the Middle Ages. Labour is neither forced labour; nor, as in the second case, does it take place with respect to a common, higher unit (the guild) (Marx 1993, p. 245).

Now, we have seen that despite *Open Marxism's* valiant efforts to eliminate all exteriority between human productive practice and its alienated social forms of existence, when it comes to grounding the radical transformative powers of the working class, these authors end up reintroducing through the back door a 'moment' of subjectivity which is set into motion as an unmediated expression of the generic 'constitutive power' of human labour. Revolutionary action is thus not seen as undertaken by wage-workers in their alienated determination as *personifications* of their reified social being (i.e. capital). Instead, Revolutionary action becomes represented as *abstractly free* and the content of that freedom as working class *self-determination*. In other words, the source of the potentiality to achieve the revolutionary abolition of capital is seen as having no material and social determination other than the will of wage-workers who, through their irreducible refusal to subordinate their 'human dignity' to the 'cash nexus', unleash, albeit always in a 'contradictory' fashion (on which more below), the radical transformation of materiality of the social life-process.

This is openly manifest already in Bonefeld's early work (Bonefeld 1993, pp. 26-8), precisely in the way he appears to be at pains to overcome the externality between labour and capital extolled by 'Autonomist Marxists', without relapsing into a structural functionalism (e.g. Jessop 1991) that reduces class struggle to a form of the reproduction of capital and denies its capital-transcending potentialities (Bonefeld 1993, pp. 26-8). Bonefeld attempts to navigate through this antinomy by emphatically stressing the 'internal or dialectical relation' between labour and capital as one between material content ('the constitutive power of human practice') and its

alienated mode of existence ('social reproduction as domination'). Thus, it follows from this (allegedly) immanent nexus between content and form that alienation permeates all capitalist social existence, so that the two poles cut across every manifestation of class struggle (indeed, the singularity of each human subject): there being no privileged form of action which can be said to express the affirmation of a pure non-alienated subjectivity. 'Reform' ('labour as a moment of social reproduction in the form of capital') and 'Revolution' are therefore seen as constituting 'extreme poles of a dialectical continuum that social practice represents' (Bonefeld 1992, p. 102). However, in what I think is key to the argument of this paper, Bonefeld explicitly characterises the revolutionary moment of 'transcendence' as a 'process in and against capital *in terms of working class self-determination*', so that the resolution of the 'dialectical continuum' between 'Reform' and 'Revolution' is not determined but is 'open to the process of struggle itself' (ibid., *my emphasis*). In other words, this discussion makes evident that *Open Marxists* consider that the moment of 'transcendence' (i.e. revolutionary subjectivity), even if always intertwined with 'integration' (the determination of the wage worker's alienated subjectivity as personification of the reproduction of capital), ultimately is the expression of working-class self-determination, that is, as an element of subjectivity that is not a mode of existence of (hence determined by) the capital form. The specifically revolutionary resolution of the class struggle is thereby seen as an *unmediated* assertion of this undetermined, residual and pristine human content lurking behind the fetishised social forms of capitalist society.

This leads us to a further weakness of the *Open Marxist* approach, which is of a more methodological dimension. Specifically, I think that despite the recurring insistence on 'internal or dialectical' relations, this perspective actually entails an external representation of the immanent nexus between the content and concrete form of revolutionary subjectivity in terms of a 'pseudo-dialectic' consisting in the 'unity of opposites'. This becomes apparent in its treatment of the notion of contradiction, which is usually initially postulated correctly (at least formally) as the self-negating form of existence of a determinate content (hence as the *self-movement of affirmation through negation*), but which then surreptitiously turns, in the very course of the same argument, in the 'Intertwining' of two different *immediate affirmations*, extrinsically united in a process of 'struggle between antagonistic opposites' (Iñigo Carrera 2013, Chapter 1; Starosta 2015, Chapter 3). Although this should be already clear from Bonefeld's passages discussed above, it is thrown into even sharper relief in the work of Richard Gunn, who offers the most rigorous and in-

depth methodological discussion within the *Open Marxist* tradition. Interestingly and relevantly for the theme of this section, in what is a foundational article from this perspective, Gunn poses the question in terms of the contradictory relationship between freedom and alienation in capitalist society.

Gunn's point of departure is in itself already problematic, insofar as he overtly postulates 'freedom *qua* self-determination' as a general, hence transhistorical, feature of the human species being, this being what distinguishes the latter from other natural forms of the material world (Gunn 1992, p. 28). But what is actually of interest here is the way in which he confronts the question of alienation in capitalism and its revolutionary overcoming, which is posed by Gunn as involving the following paradox:

If we move *freely* then we were not unfree to begin with, but if we move unfreely then freedom (at any rate in the sense of self-determination) can never be the result (ibid., p. 29).

The 'trick', Gunn continues, 'has to be to see unfreedom as a mode of existence of freedom' (ibid.). In this sense, he concludes that in reality there is no such thing as *un*freedom, but 'unfree freedom, freedom subsisting alienatedly, i.e. in the mode of being denied' (ibid.). In brief, and leaving aside for the moment the inverted form in which he represents the nexus between 'freedom *qua* self-determination' and alienation in capitalism, it is clear that so far his argument revolves around the self-negating affirmation of a determinate content in its concrete form of realisation, that is, the movement of contradiction.

How, according to Gunn, does this contradiction between the essential content of freedom of human subjectivity and its alienated mode of existence develop into the form of a revolutionary action that puts alienation to an end? In order to examine this question, let us now turn our attention to a more recent article (co-authored with Adrian Wilding) in which, in the context of a sympathetic critical assessment of John Holloway's book *Crack Capitalism* (Holloway 2010), the two authors revisit and elaborate further this question (Gunn and Wilding 2012; see also Gunn and Wilding 2014). The terms of the problem remain the same, albeit now approached from a slightly different angle: the apparent antinomy that they track down in Holloway's book between what they call the 'attractive' view of revolution, according to which freedom already exists in a pristine and undistorted form in a pre-revolutionary situation (thus making the revolutionary task clearly possible but all too



simple and voluntarist), and the 'unattractive' view, which assumes that freedom is literally absent in a pre-revolutionary situation (which sounds more 'realistic' but, according to these authors, makes it impossible for freedom to be the result of revolution) (Gunn and Wilding, pp. 178-80). The solution to this antinomy is, in line with Gunn's argument reviewed above, to acknowledge *both* that revolution effectively is an act which ends voluntary servitude and therefore 'is an expression and articulation of already-free action' (Gunn y Wilding 2012, p. 178) *and* that in a pre-revolutionary social world, such freedom exists but in a 'distorted' or 'self-contradictory and alienated' form (Gunn y Wilding 2012, pp. 181–2). Thus, the question is seen as involving a transition from a situation in which freedom already obtains but in an alienated form (pre-revolutionary situation), to a situation in which freedom exists in an uncontradicted and non-alienated form (revolution) (Gunn y Wilding 2012, p. 182). In other words, for Gunn and Wilding, mediation only pertains to capital-reproducing 'moments' of subjectivity, but not to the revolutionary 'pole of the continuum', which is seen as an affirmation of the human being's innately free self-determining subjectivity that 'breaks through' its alienated 'integument'.

This shows very clearly in the way they conceptualise 'uncontradicted self-determination', in a twofold sense. In the first place, when they claim that in a generally non-revolutionary situation, such an uncontradicted self-determination already makes its appearance within an alienated society, albeit in a 'proleptic or prefigurative' fashion, in and through 'islands of mutual recognition' in the 'cracks and fissures' of a contradictory social world (Gunn and Wilding 2014). Out of the blue, human life is now turned into the *unity of two intertwining opposites*: an alienated pole for the greater part of social existence and a free one in those 'islands of mutual recognition'. In the second place, it is noteworthy how they construct their concept of freedom on the basis of Hegel's concept of recognition as played out in the Master-Slave dialectic from Chapter IV of his *Phenomenology of Spirit* and further developed historically in Chapter VI, which culminates with the discussion of patterns of recognition in the French Revolution. In other words, they construct the ground of the communist revolution based on a conceptual framework whose actual content is but the emergence and concrete development of the modern, capitalistic 'self-determining' freedom of the commodity owner out of relations of personal dependence, which is ideologically presented by Hegel in an inverted fashion as the movement of an abstract individual self-consciousness deprived of social determinations.<sup>10</sup> As a consequence of all this, their critique of Holloway's occasional appeal to a 'pristine' or 'undistorted' freedom is thus limited to noting that 'such an

immediacy that lies outside alienation's realm' cannot be taken 'as starting point' for the search for the genesis of revolutionary subjectivity within a non-revolutionary situation (Gunn and Wilding 2012, p. 184), yet it does constitute the 'key' to (i.e. the content of) its interstitial emergence and eventual proliferation. Hence, despite their best efforts, *Open Marxists* end up sneaking an abstractly free subjectivity through the backdoor as the ground for the revolutionary transformation of society. In the end, the difference from the Autonomists comes down to a more sober and cautious *subjective attitude* when assessing 'really-existing' working-class struggles. Against the 'euphoric and triumphalist poetry that prevails in various *Autonomia*-influenced accounts', Gunn and Wilding's *Open Marxist* perspective 'allows for respect for a reality principle (in Freud's sense)' (2012, p. 182), a 'word of warning' about the 'difficulties' and 'complexities' involved in revolution. But the ground of revolutionary subjectivity in an abstractly free and self-determined subject remains the same.

Now, from where does this notion of free (*qua* self-determining) subjectivity by nature, which constitutes for these Marxist authors the content of revolutionary action, arise? Certainly not from the imagination of the theorist. When looked at more closely, we can realise that it is in fact the concrete form of the alienated consciousness abstracted from its content and transformed into its 'logical' opposite. It is from that apparent exteriority that free subjectivity is posited as the source of the revolutionary negation of alienated subjectivity. Emancipation is positioned as the removal of the inevitable external coercion imposed by social objectivity upon the natural self-determination of apparently free consciousness. In other words, that reading aspires to get rid of the commodity, money, capital and the state *precisely on the basis* of the immediate affirmation of the concrete form of the most general subjective form of existence of alienated human practice which is the necessary complement of those forms of objectivity, namely: the personal freedom of personifications of commodities.<sup>11</sup> Which is, quite simply, an oxymoron. In sum, the connection between science as critique and the abolition of the fetishism of capitalist social relations needs to be approached differently. In the next section, we propose and develop such an alternative perspective.

## Commodity fetishism and science as practical critique

As anticipated in the introduction, I think that a fruitful alternative perspective can be found in the substantive and methodological contributions of Iñigo Carrera to the critique of political economy. According to this reading, the question of science

as critique must be approached in a radically different manner. More concretely, it is about a development of the dialectical method which, insofar as it recognises knowledge's own immanent material determination as the organisational 'moment' of human action, gives science the specific form of *practical critique*. In this sense, the proper starting point and immediate object of the dialectical critique of political economy is the question about the conscious organisation of the radical transformative action which aims at revolutionising the forms of social life. This means that it is not just a question of the centrality of class struggle as the fundamental 'substantive abstraction' that constitutes the *object* of an abstractly theoretical process of cognition, which therefore renders it inevitably external to practice, despite rhetorical claims to the contrary in the name of the 'immanence of theory within its object' (Gunn 1992; Bonefeld 1992, 1995). Instead, it is a matter of the scientific inquiry into the conscious self-organisation of one's own transformative action in its singularity, albeit acknowledged as an individual organic moment of such radical collective action. To put it differently, at stake in radically critical scientific cognition is the objective knowledge of the social determinations, the immanent necessity, of our own individual action beyond any appearance (Iñigo Carrera 1992, p.1). Only on this basis is it possible to attain the voluntary revolutionary transformation of the social world.

From the standpoint of the scientific-critical method which is necessary for the immanent discovery of revolutionary subjectivity, both the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* and the *Open Marxist* approach conceive of the 'defetishising' moment of the critique of political economy as limited to the analytical movement of '*reductio ad hominem*' by which cognition traces the human origins of objectified forms of capitalist social mediation. However, at least with regards to knowledge of the grounds of revolutionary subjectivity, the properly *critical* moment of dialectical research is exhausted in the exposition of the most simple and general expression of capitalist alienation, that is, in the 'fetishism of commodities'. By contrast, my own alternative perspective on Marx's dialectical investigation of the determinations of the commodity form (commodity fetishism included) leads to a different conclusion regarding the connection between revolutionary praxis and these simpler fetishised forms of the general social relation of production which mediate the unity of social life.

True enough, in this process of cognition we become aware of the human content of the objective social powers borne by the commodity. However, what follows from this insight is not that we therefore immediately carry the power to

negate the commodity form of our general social relation. Rather, it follows that whatever power we might have to radically transform the world must be a concrete form of the commodity itself. Yet, far from revealing the existence of that transformative power, the abstract determinations of social existence contained in the commodity form show no potentiality other than the reproduction of that alienated social form. So much so that the free association of individuals (the *determinate* negation of capitalism) appears in Chapter 1 (incidentally, precisely in the section on fetishism) as the *abstract* opposite of value-producing labour and hence, as the *extrinsic* product of the *imagination* of the subject engaged in that process of cognition. Thus, Marx starts that passage referring to communism by saying 'let us finally *imagine ...*' (Marx 1976, p. 171, *my emphasis*).

Thus, the defetishising critique of revolutionary science does not simply consist in discovering the constituting power of a generic human practice as the negated content of capitalist alienated forms, which would constitute the ground for our revolutionary transformation of the world. Rather, it involves the production of the self-awareness that the reproduction of human life in all of its moments, *including our transformative action*, takes an alienated form in capitalism. The immediate result of the demystifying critique of the fetishism of commodities is to become conscious of our own alienated existence, i.e. of our determination as personifications or 'character masks'. This *is* our general social being and there is no exteriority to it. Fetishism is total which, in turn, means the social powers of our transformative action are effectively borne by the product of labour and we cannot but personify them.

This obviously bears on the question discussed earlier on the relationship between alienation and freedom. Specifically, this means that upon consciously discovering the social basis of the value form, we do not cease to be determined as its personifications and become able to affirm an abstractly free self-determining action. What this discovery changes is, as Iñigo Carrea puts it, that our social determination as personification of the commodity no longer operates behind our backs (Iñigo Carrera 2007, p. 204). In this way, we do affirm our freedom. However, we do so not because we realise that 'in reality' we are free beings by nature and could thereby 'choose' to 'stop making capitalism' if we tried hard enough, i.e. if we *turned our backs* on our social being (Cf. Holloway 2010). Instead, through the critical investigation of the value form we affirm our freedom because we come *consciously to cognise* our own determination as alienated social subjects (Iñigo Carrera 2007, p. 204). Armed with that objective knowledge of the alienated nature of our subjectivity,

we could *consciously act upon* those alienated determinations in order to transform them in the direction of their revolutionary transcendence. Still, this would only be possible if those determinations actually carried the objective potentiality for their self-abolition, which is something that the simple commodity form of social relations does not show. This does not mean that commodity fetishism cannot be abolished. It only signals the need to move forward in the dialectical investigation of the more concrete social determinations of its revolutionary abolition.

Perhaps a good way to clarify this argument is by examining a methodological external remark that Marx introduces when discussing the function of money as means of payment in the 1859 *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. It is worth quoting that profoundly rich text at length:

But the metamorphosis of commodities, in the course of which the various distinct forms of money are evolved, transforms the commodity-owners as well, and alters the social role they play in relation to one another. In the course of the metamorphosis of commodities the keeper of commodities changes his skin as often as the commodity undergoes a change or as money appears in a new form. Commodity-owners thus faced each other originally simply as commodity-owners; then one of them became a seller, the other a buyer; then each became alternately buyer and seller; then they became hoarders and finally rich men. Commodity-owners emerging from the process of circulation are accordingly different from those entering the process. The different forms which money assumes in the process of circulation are in fact only crystallisations of the transformation of commodities, a transformation which is in its turn only the objective expression of the changing social relations in which commodity-owners conduct their exchange. New relations of intercourse arise in the process of circulation, and commodity-owners, who represent these changed relations, acquire new economic characteristics (Marx 1987, p. 371).

This passage could be read as a kind of *dynamic* development of the alienated determination of human productive individuality, whose simplest expression Marx presented through the discussion of the fetishism of commodities. As I have argued elsewhere (Starosta 2015, Chapter 5), in the latter text Marx unfolds the way in which the productive consciousness of the private individual unconsciously posits its own immanent determinations in the external form of the

value-objectivity. Subsequently, he shows how the very subjectivity of the commodity producer becomes determined as the personification of those objectified forms of social mediation it had unconsciously engendered. What we have here is a statement of the transformative dynamics structuring the constitution of novel forms of subjectivity as an expression of the further concretisation of the 'law of value' beyond its simplest form. It is, as it were, the 'law of private subjectivity' that regulates the development of further concrete forms in which human beings act as 'personifications of economic categories'.

Certainly, those more complex forms in which the movement of value attains unity remain 'only the objective expression of the changing social relations in which commodity owners conduct their exchange', i.e. their simplest (social) content remains the general productive relation between human beings. However, the real inversion of those social relations as attributes of things means that human beings cannot consciously control the self-transformation of their subjectivity (at least not with the determinations unfolded up to that point). This transformation thereby occurs 'behind their back' as a result of the self-movement of the alienated forms of objectivity through which their social metabolic process takes place. As those objectified forms self-develop and change, commodity owners 'who represent these changed relations, acquire new economic characteristics', i.e. they progressively emerge from the circulation process wearing different 'character masks' from those with which they entered.

In the passage above, Marx specifies the forms of subjectivity that have emerged up to that particular stage of his presentation. More concretely, he mentions the figure of simple commodity owner, buyer and seller, hoarder and rich man. However, the implication of this discussion is that commodity owners shall undergo further 'changes of skin'. Thus, a few pages later he develops the figure of debtor and creditor (Marx 1987, p. 373), noting also how the corresponding general ideological forms change as well. From religion as the ideological form corresponding to the hoarder, we now move to jurisprudence as the one corresponding to the subjective form of creditor (ibid.). Furthermore, 'as money develops into world money, so the commodity owner becomes a cosmopolitan', the general ideological form of which is that of 'cosmopolitanism, a cult of practical reason, in opposition to traditional religious, national and other prejudices which impede the metabolic process of mankind' (Marx 1987, p. 384).

The fundamental point of this discussion is that those passages from the 1859 *Contribution* bring out very nicely a fundamental aspect of Marx's 'systematic

dialectic': it includes both the forms of *objectivity and subjectivity* of capitalist society. But additionally, they implicitly contain important methodological insights into the way in which the genesis of different forms of subjectivity should be materialistically investigated, namely, as necessary mediations of the autonomised self-movement of forms of objectivity. This, I think, is the only method which allows us *immanently* to ground forms of consciousness and will (i.e. subjectivity) *within* the movement of present-day social relations. Crucially, my central claim is that if we want to stay true to this materialistic approach, this method should not only 'apply' to 'value-reproducing' forms of subjectivity and action, *but must also include revolutionary subjectivity as well*. In other words, the form of 'revolutionary political subject' (more specifically, of our own subjectivity as an individual organ of such a collective class subject) must be immanently unfolded as a much more developed mode of existence taken by the original commodity owner with which the dialectical exposition started.

To put it in more general terms, *the immanent ground of revolutionary subjectivity is not simple and unmediated*. Instead, it is a 'unity of many determinations', which therefore means that its scientific comprehension can only be the result of a complex dialectical investigation involving both the analytic movement from the concrete to the abstract, and the synthetic, mediated return to the concrete starting point, i.e. revolutionary transformative action. Dialectical research must therefore analytically apprehend all relevant social forms and synthetically reproduce the 'inner connections' leading to the constitution of the political action of wage labourers as the form taken by the revolutionary transformation of the historical mode of existence of the human life process.

Now, if the 'reproduction of the concrete in thought' shows that the determinations immanent in the commodity form do not carry, in their simplicity, the necessity of transcending value-production, the search for the latter must move forward unfolding the subsequent concrete forms in which the former develop. Our process of cognition still needs to go through more mediations in order to become fully aware of the necessity of our action in the totality of its determinations, i.e. beyond any appearance presented by it. In order to develop the plenitude of its potentiality, this conscious development must reach a concrete form of our alienated social being which embodies a determinate potentiality whose realisation: (a) entails the abolition of alienated labour itself; and (b) has our transformative action as its necessary concrete form. In sum, revolutionary action must personify a concrete

determination of value-producing human practice; a determination, however, whose realisation precisely consists in the abolition of value production itself.

In this sense, far from exhausting science's 'critical-practical moment', the ideal reproduction of the commodity form and its fetish-character (in the unity of its analytic and synthetic phases) is thereby but the *first step* in the broader process of dialectical cognition through which the subject of revolutionary transformation discovers the alienated character of her/his social being and, consequently, of her/his consciousness and will (including her/his transformative will). However, this process also produces the awareness of the historical powers developed in this alienated form and, consequently, of the revolutionary action that, as sheer personification of 'economic categories', the emancipatory subject needs to undertake (Iñigo Carrera 2013). Such development of those subsequent determinations whose unity underlies the constitution of the working class as revolutionary subject obviously exceeds the scope of this paper. However, by way of conclusion, in the final section I sketch out the essential moments of the systematic-dialectical unfolding of the movement of the capital form whose historical tendency leads to the necessity of its self-abolition in the concrete form of the radical transformative action of the proletariat.<sup>12</sup>

### **Concluding remarks: from the commodity to the revolutionary subject**

I pointed out earlier that, from a materialist perspective, the necessity underlying the social constitution of the revolutionary subject should immanently derive from the unfolding of the potentialities of the commodity producer from which the dialectical exposition started, which make the latter undergo a 'change of skin'. However, the transformations at stake are not exhausted with those commodity producers's experience as a result of the subsequent determinations of the general circulation of commodities as such. In fact, the very development of the full potentialities of the general commodity circulation process shows that their realisation involves their self-transcendence into an internal moment of the circulation of capital (Marx 1976, pp. 247–50). In becoming capital, value – the materialised social relation of the private and independent individuals – turns into the concrete *subject* of the process of circulation of social wealth. In turn, the commodity and money, the particular and the general mode of existence of mercantile wealth, become determined as transitory forms which value-as-capital takes in its process of self-expansion (Marx 1976, p. 255). The alienation of the human individual thus



reaches a new stage. It is not only about a process of social production mediated by the value form of the product. Nor is it even about one that simply has value as the direct *object* of the exchange process. The objectified abstract labour represented as the exchangeability of commodities has taken possession of the potencies of the process of circulation of social wealth itself. This moment of the human life process is turned into an attribute of the life cycle of capital, which has the production of more of itself, i.e. its *quantitative* increase or the production of *surplus value*, as its only general *qualitative* determination.

Now, although having circulation as its point of departure and hence with this sphere as one of its moments, the process of value's self-expansion pushes beyond circulation itself. The movement of capital shows the necessity to find within the circulation of commodities a commodity whose use value for capital is to produce more value than it costs. The existence of the doubly free worker provides capital with this requirement (Marx 1976, p. 270). As an independent human being, this worker can freely dispose of her/his individual productive powers (Marx 1976, p. 271). However, insofar as she/he is deprived of the objective conditions in which to externalise her/his personally-free subjectivity, she/he must give her/his labour power the form of a commodity to be sold on the market to the immediate personification of capital (Marx 1976, p. 272). As stated above, it is through the appropriation of the use value of this peculiar commodity that capital is able to valorise itself. The exposition must therefore develop the determinations of the process of consumption of labour power, which takes place 'outside the market' (Marx 1976, p. 279). In this way, Marx's presentation demonstrates how capital not only becomes the subject of the process of circulation of social wealth, but also turns into the formal subject of the labour process, which it subsumes as the material bearer of its self-valorisation. And this means that the production of use values, *hence of human life*, has ceased to be the immediate content of the movement of social reproduction and has become the unconscious or 'blind' outcome of the production of surplus value, that is, of the *alienated content* presiding over the movement of modern society. This is where the formal specificity of capital as an *indirect*, hence *fetishised*, general social relation resides. From this point onwards, the dialectical exposition will show that individuals, *precisely* for being the *material* subjects of this process (rather than 'in spite of'), shall become fully *form-determined* as personifications of different determinations emerging out of the movement of value's self-valorisation.

Thus, with the development of the content of the general social relation into the process of capital's self-valorisation, commodity owners who 'who represent these changed relations, acquire new economic characteristics'. In the first place, they become differentiated, respectively, into personifications of money-as-capital (the capitalist) and the commodity labour power (the wage-worker). Secondly, given the peculiarity of this latter commodity, the antagonism immanent in the purchase of labour power transcends the circulation process and carries over into the conditions of appropriation of its use value in the direct process of production, i.e. into the determination of the *normal* duration of the working day (Marx, 1976, pp. 342-3). Furthermore, this analysis shows that the realisation of the *full value* of labour-power, and therefore its long-term reproduction in the very conditions that capital in general (as opposed to the individual capital) demands from the wage worker as the only source of surplus value, is not independent from the determination of the *extensive* magnitude of its productive consumption (Marx 1976, p. 343). The purchase of the commodity labour power can thereby only be resolved by making the antagonistic relationship between its buyer and seller transcend its merely individual character in order to take the concrete form of *class struggle* (Marx 1976, pp. 344ff). The latter thus becomes determined as the most general *direct* social relation between *collective personifications of commodities* which mediates the establishment of the unity of the essentially *indirect* relations of capitalist production ruled by the valorisation of capital. In other words, though clearly an 'endemic' reality of the capitalist mode of production, the class struggle is not '*ontologically*' but *socially* constitutive of capitalism, since capitalists and wage-workers, *as owners of commodities* (not as embodiments of ontologically different principles of social reproduction), personify social determinations of the process of valorisation of capital whose realisation is antagonistic. More generally, this implies that the determinations implicated in the mere existence of labour power as commodity, or the merely *formal subsumption* of labour to capital, do not give the class struggle the transformative potentiality to go beyond the capitalist mode of production. In this simple determination, the political action of the working class only exists as a necessary concrete form of the *reproduction* of capitalist social relations and not of its revolutionary overcoming.<sup>13</sup>

As a matter of fact, the unfolding of the sequence of form determinations shows that the socio-historical genesis of the emancipatory subject can actually be found in the transformations in the *materiality* of social life brought about by the *real subsumption* of humanity to capital; more specifically, in the concrete form of *large-*

*scale industry* which constitutes capital's most developed method of production of relative surplus value. In effect, as Marx shows in *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*, through the constant revolution in the material conditions of social labour, capital transforms, contradictorily but progressively, the productive subjectivity of wage workers according to a determinate tendency: they eventually become *universal labourers*, that is, organs of a directly collective productive body capable of self-consciously ruling their individual participation in the social metabolic process by virtue of their power scientifically to organise the production process of any system of machinery and, therefore, any form of social co-operation.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the *alienated* social necessity arises for each individual member of the collective labourer to be produced as a subject that is fully and objectively aware of the social determinations of her/his individual powers and activity and who therefore consciously recognises the social necessity of the expenditure of her/his labour power in organic association with the other producers. However, this form of productive subjectivity necessarily collides with a social form (capital) that produces human beings as *private and independent individuals* who consequently see their general social interdependence and its historical development as an alien and hostile power borne by the product of social labour. The determination of the material forms of the labour process as bearers of objectified social relations can no longer mediate the reproduction of human life. *Capital accumulation must therefore come to an end and give way to the free association of individuals*. This is the inner material *content* of social life which is expressed in the *form* of the political revolutionary subjectivity of workers.

In sum, it is the historically-determined necessity for the all-sided and directly social development of the universality of productive attributes of workers beyond its capitalist 'integument' – though generated by the alienated movement of capital itself – that is realised in the concrete form of the communist revolution. And this means that *the revolutionary political consciousness of the working class can only be a concrete mode of existence of their productive consciousness*. In other words, what the revolutionary movement realises (its content) is, fundamentally, the transformation of the materiality of the productive forces of the human individual and, *therefore*, of their social forms of organisation and development. It is about a *material* mutation of the production process of human life, which takes concrete shape through a *social* transformation, which, in turn, expresses itself through a *political* action.

On the other hand, this also means that revolutionary powers are not 'self-developed' by the workers, but are an alienated attribute that capital puts into their

own hands through the transformations of their productive subjectivity produced by the alienated socialisation and universalisation of labour through which the production of relative surplus value takes place. This is the reason why *revolutionary consciousness is itself a concrete form of the alienation of human powers as capital's powers*. The abolition of capital is not an abstractly free, self-determining political action, but one that the workers are *compelled* to undertake as *personifications* of the alienated laws of movement of capital itself. When the workers consciously organise the revolutionary abolition of the capitalist mode of production, they do so not as the incarnation of the powers of an abstract human practice deprived of social determinations, but as 'character masks' or 'representatives' of the inverted existence of the powers of their social labour, i.e. capital. The point is that it is an alienated action that *in the course of its own development* liberates itself from all trace of its alienated existence. Paraphrasing the above-quoted passage from the *1859 Contribution*, individuals 'emerging from the reproduction process are accordingly different from those entering it'. They enter it as wage workers personifying capital's need to produce relative surplus value. Yet, in the course of the revolutionary action they undertake as such personifications, they 'change skin' and emerge as consciously (thus freely) associated fully developed social individuals. In this sense, what sets capital-transcending political action apart from capital-reproducing forms of the class-struggle is its specific determination as a political action that is fully conscious of its own alienated nature, i.e. of personifying a necessity of capital. However, by becoming conscious of their determination as a mode of existence of capital, revolutionary workers also discover the historic task that as fully conscious yet alienated individuals they have to undertake: the supersession of capital through the production of the communist organisation of social life.

Finally, let us briefly draw the main implications of all this for one of the central methodological issues on which this paper has focused, namely, the determination of *science as critique*. In a nutshell, this discussion suggests that the content and product of the process of cognition entailed by the critique of political economy is therefore not the awareness of the *external circumstances* of a self-determining action. Instead, it is the self-awareness of the *inner material and social determinations* of our own alienated transformative action. Thus, dialectical social science does not look outside our action in order to comprehend the 'objective conditions' that 'constrain' its abstractly free affirmation, but rather, in penetrating its immediate appearances (including that of being abstractly free), goes right 'inside' it.

In this way, the field of human practice is never abandoned. Moreover, only by virtue of its *dialectical form*, involving both its analytic and synthetic moments, does the critique of political economy become determined as the fully conscious organisation of human practice in the capitalist mode of production and, hence, as the revolutionary science of the working class (Iñigo Carrera 2007, pp. 7-8).

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<sup>1</sup> For a concise historical and intellectual contextualisation of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* in English, see Endnotes 2010 and Bellofiore and Riva 2015.

<sup>2</sup> It goes without saying that the treatment of the question of revolution as 'outside their field of expertise' by scholars whose research programme revolves around the Marxian notion of *critique* seems quite odd, to say the least. The real reason seems to reside at a deeper level and is actually political. As *Endnotes 2* further remark: 'Most accounts of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* understand as one of its main characteristics to be a rejection of Marx's attribution of an historical mission to the proletariat and a sensibility of scepticism towards the class struggle has been prevalent on the German Left' (2010, p. 98). Moreover, although seldom discussed explicitly by these scholars, there are certain passages in their work which give the impression that they would tend to locate the source of revolutionary subjectivity in a moment of human individuality which transcends its alienated existence as 'character mask': 'Marx presents the humans themselves only insofar as they have intercourse with one another as character masks. Insofar as they come into relation with one another as individuals, they are not the object of the theory. Insofar as they act as individuals, they withdraw from the building of theory in this specific sense; there they anticipate something which still has to be constructed' (Reichelt 1982, p. 168). If my reading is correct, rather than simply residing 'outside their field of expertise', for these scholars revolutionary subjectivity would lie outside the scope of the dialectical presentation of 'economic categories'.

<sup>3</sup> For an earlier assessment of the relation between value-form theory, systematic dialectics and revolutionary politics, see also the discussion provided by Eldred 1981.

<sup>4</sup> In more concrete terms, Bonefeld puts it as follows: 'For example, the conceptuality of the wage-labourer as a personification of variable capital entails what it denies. It denies sensuous practice, and this practice is immanent in the concept wage-labour. Sensuous practice exists within the concept of variable capital in the mode of being denied – sensuous practice cannot be reduced to the concept of variable capital – it subsists within its concept but cannot be reduced to it. Further, for variable capital to function, it requires the ingenuity and spontaneity of human purposeful practice. Yet, this too is denied in its concept' (2012, p. 130). The revolutionary class struggle is seen by Bonefeld as an expression of that sensuous human practice that 'variable capital' denies. In actual fact, his point seems to be that all struggles by workers express something more than their social determination as personifications of 'variable capital', namely, their 'human social autonomy' and 'freedom'. That is why they can always potentially develop, in and of themselves (i.e. not as expressions of any concrete social determination), into communist struggles. See: Bonefeld 2010a, pp. 68–72.

<sup>5</sup> Taking at face value the orthodox Marxist *mechanistic* (hence extrinsic) notion of determination of subjectivity for the only available one, Bonefeld can only see in the idea of historical necessity an accommodating and passive attitude towards the alienated laws of motion of capital. It can never be

the point of departure for the conscious organisation of its practical abolition: 'The future that will come will not result from some objective laws of historical development but will result from the struggles of today. The orthodox argument about the objective laws of historical development does not reveal abstract historical laws. It reveals accommodation to "objective conditions", and derives socialism from capitalism, not as an alternative but as its supposedly more effective competitor. There is no universal historical law that leads humankind from some imagined historical beginning via capitalism to socialism. Neither is history on the side of the working class. History takes no sides: it can as easily be the history of barbarism as of socialism' (Bonefeld 2010a, pp. 63–4).

° Strictly speaking, workers do not go on strike as 'variable capital', but as owners of the commodity labour power. Be that as it may, the point is that they do it in full accordance with their alienated social being as 'executors of economic laws that they cannot control' and not in 'defiance' of them.

⁷ It is also symptomatic that in his otherwise rigorous, stylised reconstruction of the systematic sequence of Marx's exposition in *Capital*, Volume I, the concrete forms of production of relative surplus value are absent (Bonefeld 2011b, pp. 392–5). As we shall see later on, it is precisely in those chapters on the *real subsumption of labour to capital* that Marx unfolds (albeit incompletely) the determinations of revolutionary subjectivity.

° Perhaps the most paradigmatic expression of the grounding of revolutionary action in a pure 'autonomous creativity' of the subject within Marxism can be found in the Autonomist's 'inversion of class perspective' centred on the concept of working-class 'self-valorisation', which designates the self-determined positive power to constitute new practices outside capitalist social forms (Clever 1992, pp. 128ff; De Angelis 2007, pp. 225ff). Furthermore, this pure affirmation of the working class as autonomous subject is considered as (onto)logically prior to its 'co-option' or 'repression' by capital, deliberately represented, in line with post-structuralist thinking, as an external and self-constituting 'disciplinary' power (Hardt 1993). Thus, according to De Angelis, the theoretical starting point for the understanding of revolutionary subjectivity must be the self-sustaining *affirmation* of the multiplicity of needs, aspirations, affects and relations of human subjects (De Angelis 2005).

° Note in this regard that from a materialist standpoint the meaning, content and scope of freedom can only derive from its role in the organisation and development of human *productive* subjectivity. It follows that complete freedom does not consist in the absence of all social determination (hence *necessity*) in the affirmation of human individuality (with alienation thereby conceived of as the external imposition of social relations of objective compulsion that would 'constrain' an otherwise naturally and absolutely self-determining subjectivity). Instead, fully-developed freedom consists in the self-conscious control by each human being over the *twofold immanent* character (individual and social) of her/his productive action, that is, over her/his *individual* participation in the *inherently social* process of human metabolism. Thus considered, the simplest *material* determination of the personal freedom of the private and independent producer consists in the full conscious control of the individual character of human productive action at the expense of all conscious control over its immanent general social character (Iñigo Carrera 2007, pp. 51ff.). In this sense, the overcoming of the fetishism of capitalist social relations entails the progressive *transformation of the very historical and social form of human freedom*, whose *material content or substance* thereby involves the '*aufheben*' of the personal freedom of the private and independent producer. In other words, while *preserving* the full conscious control over the individual determinations of human labour, *each working subject* must *also be materially-equipped* with the *full conscious knowledge* of the social determinations of her/his individual labour. Only under these circumstances, 'expending their many different forms of labour-

power in full self-awareness as one single social labour force', and hence *rationaly recognising the necessity* to affirm their own subjectivity as individual organs of a directly collective productive body, can the human life process eventually take the historical form of an 'association of free men [*Mensch*]', which consequently overcomes the fetish-character of the commodity as the general objectified form of social mediation (Marx 1976, p. 171).

<sup>10</sup> In this context, it comes as no surprise that Gunn and Wilding also draw inspiration from La Boétie's *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*, an author from the mid-sixteenth century who is evidently confronting the question of the dissolution of *direct* relations of authority and subjection between human beings in the face of the expansion (probably unstoppable by that stage) of the commodity as the *general indirect* form of social mediation. Indeed, the voluntary servitude which the *Discourse* discusses and aspires to put an end to is that which is subject to the *personal* power of the 'tyrant'. In other words, the *Discourse* is but a very early ideological expression of the historical emergence of the personal freedom of the personifications of commodities (whereas Hegel's *Phenomenology* is a later expression of its consolidation and generalisation).

<sup>11</sup> Some authors do develop and subject to criticism the notion of bourgeois individuality. But the latter is reduced to *individualism*, that is, to the *atomistic* affirmation of that abstractly free subjectivity. Hence, the collective, solidaristic affirmation of that very same subjectivity in the form of class struggle is seen as the absolute opposite of alienated subjectivity (or, at least, as embodying the immediate potentiality to 'self-develop' into such an absolute negation of bourgeois individuality). See, for instance, Shortall's derivation of a 'counter-dialectic of class struggle' – i.e. 'the potential class subjectivity of the working class' – that 'comes to delimit the functioning of the dialectic of capital', and whose foundation resides in the presupposition of the worker 'as both a free subject and as *non-capital*' (Shortall 1994, pp. 128–9, original emphasis). By contrast, as I have shown elsewhere, the solidaristic collective affirmation of that abstractly free subjectivity is but a more concrete realisation of the very same alienated content, hence, of the reproduction of capital (Starosta 2015, Chapter 7).

<sup>12</sup> For a more in-depth and extensive examination of these issues, see Starosta 2015.

<sup>13</sup> In contrast to my reading, Psychopedis (2005, pp. 80–1) sees in the implementation of legal norms to regulate the working day an immediate expression of the 'logic of revolution' already at work. Writing from a broadly understood '*Open Marxist*' perspective, Psychopedis grounds revolutionary subjectivity in the affirmation of a generic human materiality that exists in the mode of being denied, i.e. in an alienated social form. On this score, his argument does not substantially differ from that of Bonefeld discussed earlier in this article. However, Psychopedis gives the overall argument an idiosyncratic twist. In his own words, 'the dialectical presentation is not simply a matter of contrasting the "bad form" with the "good contents"' (Psychopedis 2005, p. 80). Instead, it is a matter of 'the demonstration that in capitalism the social forces of production become forces of destruction', so that 'this form poses a real threat to the continued existence of this materiality' (Ibid). The ground of the revolution is thereby seen as residing 'in the attempt of preserving the conditions of life' in the face of capitalism's destructive tendencies and the ultimately *unstable* character of the capitalist state's direct regulation of the material conditions of social reproduction, insofar as 'in the long run capital cannot tolerate regulations that reduce the profit margin' (Psychopedis 2005, p. 81). As compared to Bonefeld's approach, this train of thought has the merit of acknowledging that the foundation of revolution is not contained in the *simplest* contradiction between human content and reified form, but in a *more concrete determinate expression* of that contradiction. The further dialectical exposition of form-determinations beyond commodity fetishism thus becomes more meaningful for the discovery of the

social foundation of the emergence of the revolutionary subject. Nevertheless, Psychopedis still relapses into grounding revolutionary subjectivity in an element which is external to the contradictory self-movement of the capital form: revolution is seen as the affirmation of an abstractly self-determining struggle for society's survival in response to capital's destructive barbarism. Thus, the necessity of revolution is not *immanently* carried by the capital form; instead it is carried by the reproductive conditions of an abstractly conceived 'society' lacking in form-determinations, whose existence is 'thwarted' by its subsumption under the capital form. In the end, Psychopedis's account comes down to a more sophisticated version of Luxemburg's 'socialism or barbarism', i.e. of the classical Marxist view of socialism as the 'only salvation for humanity' in the face of 'war, famine and disease' (Luxemburg 1971, p. 367).

<sup>44</sup> Note, however, that Marx's respective presentations of this question in *Capital* and the *Grundrisse* differ in focus. While in the former text he rather one-sidedly unfolds this tendency for the production of universal productive subjects as it results from the increasing degradation of the wage-workers' particularistic dimension of their productive subjectivity, albeit meagerly offset by the compulsory elementary education clauses contained in the Factory Legislation (Marx 1976, pp. 545, 614-18), in the 1857-8 manuscript he offers a fuller picture of these determinations by also bringing to light the opposite movement of universalistic *scientific expansion* of human productive subjectivity which is entailed by the system of machinery (Marx 1993, pp. 699-700, 705-6, 709). In this sense, a systematic development of the grounds of revolutionary subjectivity in the real subsumption requires that both text be read together. For a more detailed treatment of this point, see Starosta (2015, Chapters 8 and 9).

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