in ⇒ out

I

If social revolution is a matter of getting out of the mode of production we're in, what is the nature of this inclusion? What does it mean to be 'in' capitalism, capitalist society, the capitalist mode of production, or even—perhaps—capital? And what could it mean to get 'out' of such things? Is this the inclusion of an egg in an egg box, a prisoner in a prison, a member in a group, an item in a list, a grain in a heap, an organ in a body?

Although they undoubtedly have distinct spatial and physical implications, modes of production are not primarily spatial or physical affairs. Nor are they immediately identical with particular groups of people; nor with 'society'—though they of course have plenty of implications at those levels too. Nor are they mere collections of component elements; their articulations are more orderly—they exhibit a greater necessity—than that. Yet if there is something 'systematic' about modes of production, individuals themselves remain relatively contingent to whatever the system is: unlike organs in a body, they come into life and pass away without creating so much as a twitch in the overall functioning. So what is the nature of this inclusion?

It is worth recalling for a moment that a mode of production is a *way of producing—eine Produktionsweise*, in Marx's words. It would seem, on the face of it, strange to think of the inclusion of individuals within a 'way of producing' as that of eggs in boxes, prisoners in prisons, members in groups, items in lists, grains in heaps, or organs in bodies. A mode of production is in an important sense a matter of what those individuals—as instances of the class categories that constitute some larger ensemble of relations between people—*do*. Thus, to be 'in' a mode of production is, in a sense, to 'do' it, and getting out is a matter of not doing so. The revolutionary question of how to get out of a mode of production thus becomes that of how not to engage in a certain mode of activity.

II

Might social revolution then be a simple matter of declaring the Grand National Holiday once called for by a nonconformist shoemaker, William Benbow?

> Our holy day is established to establish plenty, to abolish want, to render all men equal! In our holy day we shall legislate for all mankind; the constitution

> drawn up during our holiday, shall place every human being on the same footing.[1]

Benbow's idea was that if the mass of people only downed tools all at once, they would be in a position to 'boldly lay hands upon that which is their own'. Their exploitation had only succeeded hitherto, he thought, due to the unity in thought and action of the exploiting classes, and the disunity of the exploited:

> The bulls in the fable, whilst united, defied the strength of the lion; he sowed jealousy and disunion among them, and they became his prey. Our enemies, by their unity of thought and action—numerically and physically weak as they are—have succeeded in making us their prey. A small portion of mankind, by adopting plan and method, by putting their heads together, have been able to do as they pleased with the greater portion. The smaller portion, by their unanimity, have made the greater portion toil for them: by unity of thought and action, the smaller party have become lords and masters, the greater party slaves.

The task for the working class was thus simply to actualize its own 'unity of thought and action' in the Grand National Holiday, fusing a social mass numerically far greater than that of its enemies. But if the answer—unity is strength—was so simple as to be found in a fable heralding from Archaic Greece, why had this not already happened? As many revolutionaries have discovered to their disappointment, people don't readily all tend to down tools at once, even if there have been some impressive moments in history where quite a lot of them did so. The explanation, thought Benbow, was that ruling classes had cultivated the ignorance of the exploited. Yet how could they have been so successful in consistently maintaining such a strategy, while preserving their own unity, down the millennia of class society? Were the mass of people really always so supine or so ignorant?

III

Far from being an explanation, the simple principle of 'unity in thought and action' itself begs further questions. It is very easy to posit some essential unity and to condemn departures from it as so many little fallings into sin or illusion. Though the wisdom of time-honoured appeals to class unity can seem so self-evident, in itself it occupies an extremity of abstraction. Everything depends upon what kind of unity we are talking about, and between what kind of thing. It may be in the best interests of the working class to unite and fight, but people may not even experience themselves as members of a class capable of such unity unless they are already united and fighting.

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[1] William Benbow, *Grand National Holiday, And Congress Of The Productive Classes* (1832), London 1977.

In Benbow's time it appeared obvious at least to some that a primordial unity called 'the people' had been sundered into an opposition between the productive many and the idle few. His appeals to a 'unity of thought and action' took for granted that the agent of this action would be the 'half-starving producers', whose unity was already in some sense sociologically pre-given, out there in the world—albeit shrouded by a veil of ignorance that must be torn aside. (This is an early instance of the concept of 'class consciousness' that would come to be associated with the more vulgar formulations of the Marxist tradition). Thus there were at once two potential unities at play: that of the primordial indeterminate (the people), and that of the sundered specific (the producers). It was the task of the latter to overcome their specificity in a united act of generalized idleness—the Grand National Holiday—through which, in a strange double inversion, the idle would be forced to join the ranks of the productive so that all would be able to overcome work through its generalization: 'Every portion must be made work, and then the work will become so light, that it will not be considered work, but wholesome exercise.' In so doing, the greater unity would be regained in a classic example of that three-step narrative arc that typically characterises historical periodisations and other dramatisations of human affairs: like a good story, here the revolutionary imaginary charts a course from unity to disunity and back again. The latent unity of Benbow's 'people' is sundered into classes, but the unity of the class that represents the greatest numerical mass offers the prospect of an overcoming of this sundering in something like a return to origins.

The point of comparing this to a story is not to trivialise such thoughts, as if their bearing this structure was meant to imply that they inherited all the arbitrariness, all the distance from truth, of *mere stories*; it is more likely the case that the ubiquity of such structures indicates something profound about the nature of thinking—and perhaps also of things. Indeed, there is a certain strange logic to the fact that the original unity at play in such cases can be something as indeterminate as 'the people'. For if, in Spinoza's words, all determination is negation, every determinate social actor is always implicitly thought of as the sundering of a greater unity which itself—within the terms of the narrative at least—will ultimately resist definition. The indeterminacy of concepts like Benbow's 'people' thus seems a fairly straightforward corollary of the determinacy of the social mass that revolutionary imaginings like his aim rhetorically to rally around some programme of radical change; the greater unity from whence we came, and which we aim at, is constitutionally indeterminate. There is, we might say, something about revolutionary thinking which gives it a certain horizon like this. Thus, while Benbow's language is still that of the era of the French Revolution, and while nowadays people have with some justification grown sceptical about 'the people', the outlines of the conceptual structure have obvious resonances with later moments.

Sometimes death-defying levels of abstraction like these are useful to distil and clarify something peculiar which is normally simply accepted or ignored. Certain strange generic structures seem to stake out the perimeters of revolutionary thinking, and can often occur in all their abstractness in the most seemingly commonplace of utterances: generic left-wing attempts to conjure up an unspecified 'unity' around one or another organisational vehicle may *feel* more concrete than Spinoza, but their strategic weakness itself may betray the extent to which these structures remain merely abstract. Social questions of revolutionary strategy can sometimes seem strangely to echo the loftiest of metaphysical speculations—perhaps because it is in those speculations that people have been the least abashed about allowing such structures to stand out in all their radiant abstraction. Engaging critically with these questions may thus involve something that looks a little like metaphysics—or its critique.

Thus we might even recognise something in pre-Socratic enquiries into a single identical *archē* behind all things. Here is Anaximander:

> From what things existing objects come to be, into them too does their destruction take place, according to what must be: for they give recompense and pay restitution to each other for their injustice according to the ordering of time[2]

Underlying all things, for Anaximander, is what we may term a 'unity of the indeterminate' (*apeiron*), in which all that is definite has its origin and end. That which comes into being as something distinct thereby owes a debt to the indistinct, which must ultimately be repaid in its destruction. To return to our thematic of class unity, it is as if there is a sort of primordial sectarianism of things which is always preceded by, and passing into, the unity of the indeterminate.

There is a structural template here for the revolutionary problematic that we find in crude form in Benbow's pamphlet: social class is to pay up the dues owed for its own determinate being and negate itself into the unity of the indeterminate. This abstract doubling of unities and their negations, distinctions and indistinctions, appears as a sort of *ur*-form for the thinking of radical change as such, and finds its echo even in Marx's more sophisticated conceptualization of the proletariat as the class that abolishes classes. Whether it is named as 'humanity' or left simply unlabeled due to our squeamishness in such matters; whether it is specified as 'communism' or 'anarchism'—suggesting it might be something just as indefinite as 'capitalism'—or dissolved into some Heraclitean communisation process where all is flow and nothing is fixed, some substantial and singular indeterminate is always imagined as the outcome of a key indistinguishing process, and for that process to

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[2] Anaximander, possibly being paraphrased by Simplicius, in Daniel Graham ed., *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy: The Complete Fragments and Selected Testimonies of the Major Presocratics*, part 1, Cambridge 2010, p. 51.

occur, a prior, provisional unity must play out. Thus the class must be unified at minimum in its self-negation to give way to a more boundless unity. And as a particular class it can thereby be conceived as the seed of a coming universal. *Its unity—the determinate principle of which we do not yet know—must be found in order to realize the true unity of the indeterminate.*

On the other hand, and in an important sense, it would also seem to be the positing of this indeterminate that enables us to imagine that there could be such a principle: What is the proletariat if not that which has as its vocation to unify and thereby negate itself? What is Benbow's working class other than that into which the people has been sundered, and which takes as its goal the overcoming of this sundering? Isn't this horizon of indeterminacy a necessary component in our conception of a determinate revolutionary agent? Perhaps it is precisely the mistiest thought of 'communism', 'anarchism', 'socialism', 'humanity' or 'the people' that enables us speculatively to unite a concrete mass into a revolutionary process or project. And when one tries forcibly to draw something determinate out of that mist—such as in Michael Albert's 'Parecon' project, Eric Olin Wright's 'real utopias', or even the 1930 councilist programme *Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution*—what one finds is simply a different type of thing. It should not be surprising that utopian schemes, however seemingly practical, tend to remain the playthings of intellectuals; if revolutionary masses are not found rallying around them, this is perhaps not simply because such masses are not found rallying around much these days. It is also because the speculative unity of a class in a revolutionary process depends on the pre-positing of a greater—and thus more vacuous—speculative unity of the indeterminate.[3] The goal is vague more or less by definition.

If the unity of revolutionary mass action is to be distinct from that of the grave—or of all negated things—it itself must find a determinate content or principle. And this is always the question: what is that principle to be? The wage? The point of production? The hegemony of the industrial worker? Working class culture? The single world market? Or, if we do not yet know, how might the answer be found? Through spontaneous mass action or strenuously constructed organization? In themselves both of these formalisms merely rephrase the question in terms that offer themselves up more or less readily to the rituals of one or another revolutionary 'tradition'—for what is to be the basis and content of spontaneous mass action if we do not yet know the principle of its unity? Is it to be a mere miracle? Or, on the other hand, why should people form themselves into a determinate organisation if we do not yet know the principle that would bring them together? Another miracle? It was always a question, but at this historical juncture it can seem like a riddle.

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[3] Even in realms other than social revolution, strictly speaking, something similar may apply: consider the slipperiness and insubstantiality of 'the nation' as the object of programmes of national liberation.

IV

If the determinacy of the revolutionary agent may be related to the indeterminacy of its horizon, something similar seems to be true of both its object and its project. If the object is the capitalist mode of production and the project to overcome it, these both depend upon the positing of something vague like 'communism', 'anarchism' or 'socialism'. We might consider this ineffable extra something another mode of production, or perhaps—if we are a certain kind of radical social theorist who thinks concepts are exhaustively constructed by the mode of production 'in' which they arise—we might even view this concept itself as irreparably tainted by its capitalist formation (then things get *really* ineffable). Its indeterminacy seems to be one of its most obstinate characteristics.

Yet either way, whatever it is must be determinate enough to specifically negate a mode of production: the project of social revolution cannot take a giant meteor or the heat death of the universe as the thing that does away with its object. Though hunter-gatherers can reasonably be considered to lack a mode of production more or less by definition, every form of human association premised on agriculture—everything stemming from what V. Gordon Childe called the 'Neolithic Revolution'—depends upon something being produced and consumed in a certain way, and thus upon a 'mode of production'. And thus unless our speculative overcoming of capitalism is also to be an overcoming of agriculture, it would seem like sophistry to deny that if we are to get 'out' of the capitalist mode production, there must be some determinate other mode lurking in the fog. Yet, in all our efforts to think it, we tend to find it taking on the character of a mere shadow of the already-existent. According to Jacques Camatte, Bordiga said somewhere that *Capital* is a book about communism in the negative. But does that mean that communism is all or only some of the things that capitalism is not? Which ones?

It may be that the cardinal virtue of this indeterminate that is projected in our speculative orientation to the question of revolution, lies in the determinacy that it reflects back upon the present. The glare of its abstraction might perhaps bring the strategic terrain into a crisp contrast, clarify the stakes and sort into positions; we may think more clearly about the present if we particularise it, assume that it is non-eternal. But if it is hard to say much that is positive about whatever is to replace this mode of production, by the same token it is also hard to sketch its contrasts themselves in any detail. What is included and what is not included in the present that is to be overcome?

Marxists have long been fond of lengthy ramblings about 'totality', from the precedent of Hegel's 'Das Wahre ist das Ganze', through Lukács, Korsch, Adorno, Althusser. But if the truth is the whole, or if the whole is the false, what is the whole? Is there only one whole, and if not, which one are we talking about? In *Capital*,

Marx's own use of the term tends to be either contextually specific and non-technical—'since the existence of commodities as values is purely social, this social existence can be expressed by the totality of their social relations alone'; 'the capitalist class in department I is the totality of capitalists who produce means of production'—or implicitly defined in a technical sense as the unity of a particular set of mutually-related moments: 'industrial capital, considered as a self-moving totality'. In neither case do we have the sort of 'saturated' or all-encompassing totality that necessarily raises the ontological question with which we began: How do we get 'out' of the mode of production we are 'in'? Yet revolutionary theory seems to constantly pivot upon this question of inclusion, and it displays a recurrent—and perhaps rather morbid—fixation on the idea that this has, in some sense, now been *completed*: Adorno, Debord, Camatte, Théorie Communiste, Negri, Jameson &c. And when we think in such terms, the question of revolution shades into a somewhat 'theological' problematic of immanence and transcendence.

V

This structure of thinking is so ubiquitous in radical discourse one probably ought to hesitate before characterising it as a mere mistake. Does the revolutionary imaginary perhaps display certain generic structures which are amenable to critical interrogation after the manner of Kant's examination of the transcendental subject? Might we, that is to say, conduct a systematic critique of this imaginary, not in order to identify mere lapses of judgement, but a more necessary kind of straying? Doing so would have the virtue, if not of dispelling falsehoods, then at least of drawing our attention to certain conceptual artefacts that seem to affect our capacity to adequately think through the problem of fundamental social change. There is always, we might say, a constitutive indeterminacy, and perhaps a constitutive role for the imaginary, in enabling us to think about the world at all—to gather it into a determinate situation—that seems to become quite vicious in the abstractions of revolutionary thinking. Here's Sartre:

> To posit an image is to constitute an object in the margin of the totality of the real, it is therefore to hold the real at a distance, to be freed from it, in a word, to deny it…
>
> The imaginary appears 'on the ground of the world', but reciprocally all apprehension of the real as world implies a hidden surpassing towards the imaginary. All imaging consciousness maintains the world as the nihilated ground of the imaginary and reciprocally all consciousness of the world calls and motivates an imaging consciousness as grasping the particular sense of the situation.[4]

[4] Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination* [1940], Abingdon 2004, pp. 183, 188.

To be properly understood these theorisations would have to be placed in the context of Sartre's Husserlian approach to analysing the distinctions between perception and imagination, his enquiry into whether the latter is a contingent or necessary structure of consciousness as such, and so on. None of that is a direct concern for us here, but we can at least note the resonances. What is important is that there seems to be a certain constitutive negativity or absence, and a role specifically for a kind of imagining, in social—and all the more so in revolutionary—thinking. What is 'society' or 'the nation' without the hazy imagining of some open-ended set of unidentified particulars? And what then could it be to overcome it? Whatever is at play here, it is not the kind of 'totality' we saw in those examples from Marx.

In Marxist theory, things like 'society' tend to be closely identified with concepts derived from Marx's critique of political economy such as 'the capitalist mode of production', or more loosely, 'capitalism'. Or, if we are thinking through Marx's earlier writing, the imagined generality may be identified as 'bourgeois society'. There is often an implicit telescoping of terms, such that 'society'—which has all the indeterminacy we just noted—is understood to be identical to 'capitalism', which is in turn understood to be identical to 'the capitalist mode of production', or simply 'capital'. This kind of telescoping identification can lead to certain illusions. Marx was pretty good at explaining what capital is, how individual capitals relate to each other, how they form something more general, how capital relates to workers, why the classical political economists were systematically blind to certain things about all this, and so on. This does not however mean that Marx had a general theory of whatever it might be that 'society' denotes, or even 'capitalism'.

In such cases there seems to be a sort of implicit doubling of totalities. There is the technical kind that Marx described quite precisely in *Capital*: the systematic unity of all the moments that necessarily make up capital's existence. And then there is another kind of totality which is closer to 'the nation' or 'society'—this is totality as the imagined unity of our social world. Although they are no doubt in many ways related, these are two quite distinct things. This doubling can bring with it an illusion of explanation, such that the one totality seems to promise to exhaustively account for the other—as if all the moments of capital's systematic self-positing could be enough to explain whatever 'society' is. But the reality is that we cannot construct a theory of 'society', or even of 'capitalism', in the way that we can construct a theory of capital. That is because the totality in this case is of a different sort: it is a kind of projective gathering-together of diverse particulars whose relations do not form a necessary system. That is to say, it is an artefact of the social imaginary.

This telescoping and doubling has a bearing on our strategic horizons: if it is capital or the capitalist mode of production that is to be overcome, but these are identified directly with society as such we risk entering into a hopeless chiliasm where an

indeterminate set—potentially stretching to encompass literally everything in the world—must be turned on its head before we can be said to have our 'revolution'. What, then, is to be done? Both everything and nothing. Somehow the object must become more tractable; a critical awareness of the wild, speculative abstractions to which the revolutionary imaginary is prone may be of help here; and also perhaps the odd, fairly banal, reminder that we know of revolutions 'from the outside', so to speak, as discrete—and actually relatively generic—phenomena occurring sporadically across historical time.[5]

VI

But from the inside, isn't there perhaps something necessary in the grandiose totalisation of the present and its speculative negation? When assuming a revolutionary orientation, are we supposed to specify all the limits and qualifications to our ambitions from the get-go like the terms and conditions on a new contract? No, we'd rather speak in impractical absolutes: we want everything; we keep nothing &c. As Debord recognized, Cohn's anti-radical unearthing of the 'revolutionary millenarians and mystical anarchists of the middle ages' offers itself up for an inversion: Why not chiliasm? Weren't these people right to want the Millennium?[6] It is hard to conceive of a revolutionary imaginary that does not posit something ludicrously maximal. For what could be more contemptible than a call to revolution in the name of 'realistic goals'? Absurd impossibility is, in part, the point. It is, perhaps, a question of genre.

But more than that, there is something about capital's own peculiar totalisations that parallels the over-reach of its antagonists. Identified, in a key moment, with the monetary universal equivalent—which can, in principle, be the equivalent of anything—capital can seem, potentially at least, to squat astride the entire cosmos. In a world reduced to equivalence, wouldn't we be delusional to appeal to something exterior, transcendent, pristine, as the ground of our radical hopes, like those who once thought they saw it in Chiapas, in Free Software, in their local squat or in some crusty subculture? No, everything—*everything*—is cast under capital's doom, and it all must go. Such talk may sound infantile, but social tumults are made primarily by the young. Even if, from the jaded outside, novelty may shade into

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[5] To pick an essentially arbitrary example, but one which may be particularly helpful in displacing any overly millenarian imagining of revolution as a single, one-off event at the end of time, take the Corcyrean and other Greek revolutions, sparked—like those of the early twentieth century—in the chaos of war from 427 BCE: Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, book 3.

[6] Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, London 1957; Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, §138.

eternal recurrence, children are closer to origins, and thus to radical novelty; in the revolutionary imaginary, infantilism is structural.

And that totalising claim on the part of capital is no mere ancillary detail. It didn't just happen to come into its global dominance through haphazard chains of historical contingency. Universalisation is built into the nature of money, and infinite accumulation is part of the definition of capital. Both habitually stake a ludicrous claim to everything, even if that claim is always, of course, contestable, qualifiable. Each is as totalizing as our infantile radical, and thus perhaps demands its absurdist match. And that figure might have to start out by making, in face of the infinite claims of its antagonist, the melancholy admission of its own terminal inclusion. We return to our opening question.

VII

But if capital stakes a claim to include us within itself, what could be the nature of that claim? We are included in the capitalist mode of production in an ontological sense when a wage posits our labour as its content. Here our labour appears as 'part of' the capitalist mode of production not just in the manner of this or that incidental aspect of the forces and relations of production of a given capitalist society, but as a systemic aspect of capital's own production process—indeed, as part of capital itself. In the wage, an abstract monetary magnitude ranges our labouring capacity under itself, such that certain of our concrete exertions become a facet of capital's own self-aggrandising project. The peculiarity of such arrangements led Marx to conceptualise them with a word borrowed from logic and ontology: the technical term for some ranging of particulars under a universal—such as that of animals under their species—is 'subsumption'.[7]

This is different from mere 'domination', which is simply a matter of being ruled over by the master of the house—the *domus*. In a relation of domination the two poles remain relatively external to each other, unimplicated in one another's being. When some particular is subsumed under a universal, the relation is one between two inextricable logical facets of some self-same being: a whale is both *this* whale, and *a whale*. The universal presents itself as the essential truth of the particular, the particular as a mere instance of the universal. Monetary exchange is peculiar in realising something like this not just as a mental operation, but as something practically real and socially objective. In every act of exchange, a monetary quantity presents itself momentarily as the true measure of some thing, in all its qualitative irreducibility; a mass of particulars is subsumed.

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[7] For a more extensive elaboration of these points see 'History of Subsumption', *Endnotes 2*.

VIII

Of course, we can follow the historical threads of monetary exchange back into the Neolithic; only there—along with the rest of what we think of as human society—do they vanish. Does this then mean that 'subsumption' is as ancient as Gilgamesh? Early in the second millennium BC, monetary exchange occurred throughout the Babylonian Empire, along with property law, credit, accounting and wage labour. Each cuneiform inscription of a Babylonian merchant, listing numeric values for goods sold or received, would seem to record a little act of subsumption in this generic sense. To be sure, for the most part these exchanges were peripheral to subsistence agriculture and a dominant institutional economy. And where it was only a matter of merchant trade, this was merely the simple, fleeting subsumption of use values under exchange values.

Though the claims of money over what it buys may be viewed as always having had a certain ontological character, as long as we are focused only on the moment of exchange this inclusion appears as strictly momentary. If the monetary measure seems to subsume the qualities of the commodity, it does so only for an instant: once bought, my phone ceases to perform as a commodity, subsisting simply as my phone (unless I decide to sell it on to someone else). Likewise labour power, once bought with a wage, ceases to present itself as a commodity, dissolving itself into the flows of daily activity; the wage presents itself as the truth of the worker's labour only when they go to market. During the day, my labour feeds the capitalist glutton, but my *capacity* to work comes home with me in the evening, itself unsubsumed by this particular capital, and free in principle to go elsewhere. The movements of such things do not yet in themselves describe a totality in the systematic sense, since they fall out of the circuit without any guarantee that they will enter it again. Thus this deeper, more ontological mode of inclusion so far signalled by the term 'subsumption' appears, by the same token, extremely weak. Insofar as labour is only ever posited momentarily as the content of the wage, in instants of mere exchange, it barely raises the question of inclusion with which we started.

VIII

The abstract system we are skirting here is primarily that of an individual capital. This makes sense, because it is on this level that the peculiar systematicity of capital's system is really established: the drive to accumulate has the individual firm as its irreducible nexus. It is always a particular capital that offers a wage in order to keep in motion its own production process, that aims to sell the result at a profit, and that returns again to the labour market with the resulting revenues. Strictly speaking—that is to say, understood rigorously not simply as domination, but as a logical or ontological matter—'subsumption under capital' occurs only within this basic circuit. Whether merely formal or fully real, subsumption under capital by

definition occurs only within individual production processes, for it is only there that anything is directly identified with, or included within, capital itself.

But particularly in relation to this issue of subsumption, one often encounters that familiar telescoping pattern of identification between different kinds of totalities. This or that aspect of society, reason, culture, nature may be said to be 'subsumed' by 'capitalist logic' or suchlike. 'Real subsumption' may be said to characterise entire social epochs. Théorie Communiste have constructed what is in many ways an extremely sophisticated and compelling theoretico-historical apparatus on this basis. The telescoping movement may provide an illusion of systematicity as well as of explanation: if we can elaborate in some theoretical detail what it is for capital to subsume the moments of the production process, and if this subsumption seems to give us a ticket to the level of 'society' as such, then volume 1 of *Capital* (read through its 'missing' sixth chapter) becomes a total theory of society and everything in it, and the problem of revolution again becomes the ontological one of inclusion within a capital-saturated totality, a problem of immanence and transcendence.

Of course, capitalist production processes have major implications beyond their own narrow circuit, rippling out to the melting of the ice caps. But implications are not identifications: something does not have to become capital to be affected by it, even dramatically. If subsumption under capital occurs only at the level of individual capitals, it cannot directly characterise 'society' as such, especially not at a global level. Each individual capital will negotiate its relationship to each of the things that compose its production process in a particular way, accepting them as is, reorganising or transforming them. In so doing, and as they deepen, these subsumptive relationships will tend to chart a trajectory from 'formal' to 'real', and such developments will spread from one capital to another, ultimately generalising throughout the global economy. And thus the aggregate too will tend to chart a trajectory from 'formal' to 'real'. But if everything tends to run in one direction, that 'everything' is a vast chaotic manifold that cannot itself be reduced to single 'stages' at given points in history, as if last year the wider world was only formally subsumed while this year it *really* is.[8] This is because the distinction between formal

[8] For Théorie Communiste, as for the regulation school, this shift occurred around the First World War, when increasing productivity of labour supposedly first began to cheapen goods consumed by the working class. In *Endnotes* we have already pointed out the empirical implausibility of this claim, referring readers to Robert Brenner and Mark Glick's forceful critique of regulationism; I do so again: 'The Regulation Approach: Theory and History,' *New Left Review* I/188, July–August 1991. The key problem, as we argued there, is that 'capitalist production tends to commoditise and cheapen consumer goods from the outset, and agriculture is not something that is capitalised late, except perhaps in particular cases such as that of France, whose rural landscape remained dominated throughout the 19th century by small peasant owner-producers.' Indeed, simple logic suggests that the development of large proletarianised populations living in cities could not take place without

and real subsumption describes, in the abstract, the *generic temporality* of the capitalist production process, not its *social history*. The human ageing process too is pretty unilinear, and we may say that the human race in aggregate is now demographically older than it was a few decades ago, but any claim that human history *as a whole* could be divided into such things as an 'adolescence' and a 'maturity' could only ever be a dubious metaphor; here too, there is a key distinction to be made between temporality and history.

Once we get down to the 6th century BCE, the monetisation of the Babylonian economy was such that the wage—paid in silver shekels—could apparently obtain a certain systemic predominance in relation to the multiform slaveries and forms of dependent labour with which it coexisted.[9] Where such wage labour merely substituted for other kinds, and was not performed for an enterprise aiming primarily at monetary profit, its resemblance to that of the current epoch is still only at the level of the most abstract form. This remains merely the 'subsumption' of the fleeting instant of exchange—of use value under exchange value. Yet, unsurprisingly, even in ancient Babylonia there were profit-oriented enterprises, such as breweries and taverns, which could hire wage labour.[10] And where that labour occurs as an integral moment of an accumulation process, a circle is formed; what previously appeared as fleeting, momentary, contingent, suddenly takes on the necessity of a system, and the components of that accumulation process appear as subsumed under capital.

Where labour power was being purchased with wages, where the aim was accumulate monetary wealth, and where there was thus a systemic pressure to economise on those wages, even in ancient Babylonia there may thus have been a certain drive towards, or even prefiguration of, the capitalist processes of subsumption that Marx analysed. Some historical economists even perceive endogenous capitalist-style growth—on the 'intensive margin', in the jargon of mainstream economics—in ancient Babylonia.[11] We might at least doubt whether

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productivity growth in agriculture, though it of course says nothing about the sources of that growth. For these, we need to look to the vagaries and outcomes of agrarian class struggle in pre-industrial England; see Brenner, 'The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism', in *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe*, Cambridge 1985.

[9] See Michael Jursa, 'Labour in Babylonia in the First Millennium BC', in Steinkeller and Hudson, eds, *Labour in the Ancient World*, Dresden 2015.

[10] Jursa, pp. 368–9.

[11] See, for example, Jursa, 'Babylonia in the first millennium BCE—economic growth in times of empire', in Larry Neal and Jeffrey G. Williamson (eds), *The Cambridge History of Capitalism, vol. 1*, Cambridge 2014, pp. 24–42. Like various other recent enquirers into ancient economies, Jursa positions his analyses against Moses Finley's famous arguments for the utter absence—indeed meaninglessness—of capitalist-style 'economic progress' in the ancient world (see also, for example, Kevin Greene, 'Technological

every single instance of monetary exchange prior to the present epoch could be simply placed under the heading of 'buying cheap in order to sell dear'—as if mutual cheating could be used to explain the dominant economic relations of whole ancient empires or the Mediterranean trade as a whole, for example.[12] It seems reasonable to assume, rather, that a certain proto-capitalist pressure to accumulate and to economise on wages through interventions into the labour process has been a potentiality—however latent or adulterated with other arrangements such as slavery or peonage—of monetary exchange from its origins. As an aspect of the generic logic of exchange relations, subsumption dates back to Methuselah—or thereabouts—but historical human societies have never been subsumed by capital. 'Real subsumption' thus cannot adequately frame any historically-grounded revolutionary question of what is to be done. Although our working practices may be, we ourselves are not 'under' or 'in' real subsumption. And if we are thus not included in this way, then at this level at least we don't even face the problem of how to get 'out'.

IX

Is our situation then indistinguishable from that of the ancient wage labourer? Did the employees of a Bronze Age businessman confront the question with which we began? Probably not. 'Society' must have seemed more porous and provisional prior to the capital-driven mineralisation of much of Earth's surface in the infrastructures of the modern world, and the consolidation of state bureaucratic structures: throughout much of human history, nomadism was still a relatively familiar phenomenon from beyond the bounds of the agrarian state; the physical walls of the polis gave way to relatively unprotected countryside which might readily change hands with some shift of fortune; the inhabitants might be moved en masse to some other location or colony; the ebbs and flows of imperial conquest could displace large populations; the Roman garrison formed a kind of city, but one which could

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innovation and economic progress in the ancient world: M. I. Finley re-considered', *Economic History Review*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2000). The Marxist instinct is, quite correctly, to suspect mainstream economic interpretations of ancient history of projecting the image of the capitalist present onto the past in order implicitly to naturalise what is actually historically peculiar. But if one is really to spell out precisely what are, to use the favoured Marxist expression, the *differentia specifica* of the present epoch, it helps to also know the *similitudines genericae* (excuse the Pig Latin). If one assumes that the present differs absolutely, and in every way, from whatever came before, this can have the perverse effect of obscuring what actually is specific in it, lumping it together with much that is not. Even the 3770-year old Code of Hammurabi can make for uncanny reading.

[12] On the latter, see Jairus Banaji, *Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation*, Leiden 2010. Banaji even finds ancient Islamic works of political economy which describe the accumulation of capital.

pack up and move on at short notice. Such things must have had a bearing on the character of the social imaginary; active membership of the citizen body, and its absence or withdrawal, could be central in policing the bounds of the polis (thus the importance of exile and ostracism), but could the individual ever have imagined themselves as included within some saturated, all-encompassing totality as we are prone to now?

The major difference at present is perhaps the degree to which we experience the Earth as an inescapable 'second nature', in which all territorial claims have a heavy, non-negotiable fixity, reinforced by surveillance systems and the militarised policing of boundaries; by the determinate shape of infrastructure and the built environment, which crystallise 'society' into solid, quite intractable form. If the first turn to agriculture was also the turn to sedentism, the capitalist epoch may be viewed in the long run as both an acceleration and a negation of the same process. Although one of its fundamental implications is the uprooting of humanity from the earth and from direct involvement in agriculture, it at the same time pins us ever more firmly to determinate territories, hemming us into particular landscapes with their infrastructures and authorities, ever further from the open-endedness of nomadic life.

In a world of widespread subsistence farming, it would always be possible to form the speculative idea of a genuinely immediate relation to the land, if one could only be free of the 'Norman yoke' or some other configuration of mere social relations; territory ought to be farmable without these constraints; the land in itself is not yet a prison. This was the revolutionary imaginary at play in the English Civil War.[13] But in a world where capitalist agriculture supports a population far vaster than anything that could be fed by traditional subsistence agriculture, where peasant life is at most a distant memory for the bulk of humanity, where vast destructive power is possessed by states, and where our everyday existence is supported by infrastructures without which we would confront mass death, we are all too aware of our dependence on an urban Ark—the provisions for which are of course capitalistically produced. This is an experience of inclusion far more profound than that of our individual subsumption under the wage, which is always provisional and partial, even in the most thoroughly capitalist of economies. And such inclusion may justifiably raise a problematic of immanence and transcendence.

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[13] 'The last enslaving yoke that England groaned under (and yet is not freed from) was the Norman, as you know; and since William the Conqueror came in, about six hundred years ago, all the kings that succeeded did confirm the old laws, or else make new ones, to uphold that Norman conquest over us; and the most favouring laws that we have doth still bind the hands of the enslaved English from enjoying the freedom of their creation.' Gerrard Winstanley, 'An Appeal to the House of Commons', in Christopher Hill, ed., *The Law of Freedom and Other Writings*, Cambridge 2006, p. 114.

The problem of world-level social revolution might then be thought of as that of overcoming the caging that followed from agrarian settlement and rigidified down the millennia of historic human society, without relinquishing agriculture; of realising the freedom from the earth that capital has brought about, recouping the benefits of our present capacity to cultivate the soil while breaking with an increasingly moribund enchainment to specific territories. If the state is to be at play as a negative object of our revolutionary aspirations, rather than a mere matter of the abstract rejection of authority in favour of some misty indeterminate or mere disorganisation, this is perhaps because the state, even in its pre-capitalist forms, is irrevocably entangled with this hitherto transhistorical process of fixation.

In place of the territorial state, determinate new organisational forms might guarantee our eating while facilitating a global freedom of movement, enabling a break with territorial authority and private property in land. Forget puerile apocalyptic visions of one great riot at the end of time that would redistribute finished commodities only to immediately run up against all the problems of capitalist logistics and organisation. This would be a real communising process: to make common the surface of the earth and the depths of the oceans—hydrosphere, lithosphere, biosphere, atmosphere—while feeding humanity. An epic task of coordination, it could not merely be entrusted to some vacuously metaphysical spontaneity or expected to happen in an instant, but nor would it involve the bureaucratic fantasy of a single monolithic plan for everything. There is one first thing to organise—eating—and all the rest can follow.

X

Why, then, are the revolutionary masses not already rallying around this programme? Perhaps it needs better publicity than this obscure text, but others have already done some of that work. Feed the world! It ought to be easy to convince them of that message. The unity of an internally undifferentiated humanity beckons us, knowing what is in its own best interest, holding out the promise of a certain oceanic feeling. Yet the real differentiations within that humanity in its present state are stark enough to suggest that the revolution will not be made by everyone—only some. Certain people, *by the way*, have a real interest in preventing the common feeding of humanity and the destruction of territorial authority, and they have all the guns.

Thus it will be necessary somehow to take the measure of those people, while fusing into a new unity a social mass far greater than theirs; the mass of all those who have a stake in the common feeding and freedom of humanity. Like Benbow's 'half-starving producers', speculatively all these are to be unified into a determinate revolutionary subject that will set about the process of negating its own determinations and thus rejoining the greater unity of humanity at large. His was an early vision of the revolutionary general strike, when a generalized downing of tools

could be imagined as the key step in overcoming the power of the ‘idle few’. In a world where a dwindling portion of humanity are called upon to labour productively, that old problematic of production and parasitism is irrelevant. The unity of the productive many can no longer be assumed to be latent in the world. It is necessary to discover a new principle of class unity.

The bulk of humanity is tendentially reduced to a state of dependency upon a planetary life support system that is not its own. If there is a latent, objective unity ‘out there in the world’ it is perhaps that of common dependency on something that feeds us without, for the most part, being fed by us. Dependency is not good for bargaining positions; we are reduced to an infantile state. But social tumults are made primarily by the young.