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## Object-oriented Critique of Political Economy<sup>1</sup>

In his 2006 book entitled *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*<sup>2</sup> Meillassoux argues that correlation has been the central notion of modern philosophy since Kant. By correlation he means the idea according to which we only ever have access to the relation between thinking and being, and never to either considered apart from the other. By embodying this position, modern correlationist philosophies denied the existence of being anterior to every form of human relation to the world and were as a result forced to conduct infinite investigations of the transcendental conditions of the knowing subject. For Meillassoux, the biggest flaw of such a position is that it cannot think the world without thought, and can only think the world as it is given, not as it is. What is needed in the philosophical situation described by Meillassoux is a philosophy that would be able to access the uncorrelated – the world in itself, the world as it is prior to every correlation, without falling into the traps of the old metaphysical and dogmatic philosophies. In the aforementioned book, Meillassoux outlines the basic conditions of such a philosophy and names it *speculative materialism*. According to him, speculative materialism can gain knowledge of the absolute through the facticity of things and thus think the absolute *as a fact*. For a thinking that encompasses only facts, everything in the world is without reason and could become otherwise – the trees and the stars, and physical and logical laws. The only positive knowledge of the world is the knowledge that everything has a capacity to-be-other or not-to-be and the only thing necessary is *contingency* itself.

According to Meillassoux, things are contingent because the potentiality of what they could become cannot be totalised. For this reason, only theories that ratify the non-All of the social structure have a sufficient ontological scope to think the

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a result of the research programme P6-0014 “Conditions and Problems of Contemporary Philosophy”, which is funded by the Slovenian Research Agency.

<sup>2</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2015.

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existence of contingency, thereby rendering the old materialist theories, such as the materialism presented in the works of Karl Marx, outdated. Meillassoux does not mention Marx directly in *After Finitude*; however, he does mention him at the end of his book *The Number and the Siren*, where he implies that he is a modernist, which is merely another term he uses for correlationists.<sup>3</sup> Several critiques of Marx are nevertheless present in the numerous theories of speculative materialism (later renamed *speculative realisms*) that share a criticism of the correlationist logic – the *object oriented ontology* of Graham Harman, the *actor network theory* of Bruno Latour, the *vibrant materialism* of Janet Bennett, and the re-actualisation of Deleuze’s *assemblage theory* by Manuel DeLanda, to name only a few. In one way or another, they all reject Marx’s approach to science, his notion of agency and its underlying ontology, which they claim to be correlationist.<sup>4</sup>

In this article I will subject Marx’s materialist theory to the anti-correlationist demands of speculative materialism. My intention is not so much to evaluate and examine all the criticisms put forward by new materialisms against their predecessor, but to see if Marx’s ontology is indeed correlationist, meaning that there is not any place for contingency in its theoretical framework. To do that, I believe it is necessary to focus on the question of the role of objects in Marx’s critical theory. My claim is that Marx’s understanding of objects evolves from his earlier works towards his later works. By focusing on the changes in the comprehension of objects, I want to show that Marx’s theory cannot simply be subsumed under the logic of correlationism, that it can ratify the non-All of the social structure it criticises, and that it is able to form a sufficient conceptual apparatus that allows one to think the moment of contingency in what seems to be the deterministic structure of the capitalist mode of production.

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In the first section, I focus on the theory of objectification developed by Marx in his early works such as the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and *Theses on Feuerbach*. In his theory of objectification – which, according to Meillassoux’s criteria, is still correlationist – Marx claims that society exists

<sup>3</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *The Number and the Siren: A Decipherment of Mallarmé’s Coup de dés*, trans. R. Mackay, Sequence Press, New York 2012, p. 221.

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of new materialist criticisms of historical materialism, see Simon Choat, “Science, Agency and Ontology: A Historical-Materialist Response to New Materialism”, *Political Studies*, 66 (4/2018), 1027–1042.

only as a cluster of objects that affirm themselves in other objects. The same objectification that befalls society also befalls the worker as a subject. I show how this general theory of objectification affects both Marx's theory of alienation and his critique of the capitalist mode of production. In the second section, I argue that in his later texts, such as *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, Marx does not abandon his theory of objectification altogether, but focuses on a specific mode of objectification present in the capitalist mode of production. The objectification of capital is the objectification of a specific social relation and produces a special object – surplus value, which functions as a condition of possibility of all other forms of objectification. In the last section, I analyse the distinction between the object of *Capital*, which is the object of Marx's scientific discourse, and the object of the critique of political economy, which is the object of Marx's critical discourse. This distinction was already mentioned, but never explicitly elaborated, by Althusser in *Reading Capital*. Although it may seem like a small analytical distinction at first, I argue that it brings significant consequences for Marx's critical endeavour, since it reveals that his entire theory of objectification can be comprehended only from the standpoint of class struggle, which is a position in the social structure that cannot be objectified. This is the point in Marx's materialist theory where I believe he is able to surpass the correlationist logic from within.

### Theory of Objectification in Marx's Early Works

In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*<sup>5</sup> Marx develops his theory of objectification [*Vergegenständlichung*], arguing that by working the worker objectifies his labour in the material objects he produces. The crucial element of the theory of objectification is the argument that the worker as an individual is deeply intertwined with both the act of working and its product. These three moments cannot be separated since they cannot exist or function on their own. Saying that the act of working is what makes the product is, for Marx, similarly misguided as it would be for a physicist to attribute reality to Newton's concept of force, which states that forces are the cause of the motion they generate, which is a pure tautology and means nothing at all. There are no physical forces in themselves; there are only abstract concepts that we can deduce from the

<sup>5</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. M. Milligan, Dover Publications, Inc., Mineola/New York 2014.

consequences of their functioning. If an apple falls off a tree we say it did so because of gravity. Gravity as such, however, does not exist; it is just an abstract construct that helps us understand motion. The movement of an apple is the working of gravity. Similarly, Marx argues that there is no labour as such, there is only concrete labour and it can only be comprehended through the effects of its realisation, i.e. the production of a certain object. The same that is valid for the relation between the worker and the act of working is also valid for the relation between the worker and the object he produces. In the act of producing objects there is no privileged position for the worker. Marx argues that the worker creates objects because he is established by objects, because at his core *he is an objective being*:

To say that man is a corporeal, living, real, sensuous, objective being full of natural vigour is to say that he has real, sensuous, objects as the objects of his being or of his life, or that he can only express his life in real, sensuous objects. To be objective, natural and sensuous, and at the same time to have object, nature and sense outside oneself, or oneself to be object, nature and sense for a third party, is one and the same thing.<sup>6</sup>

By arguing that the worker is an objective being and can therefore affirm himself as a being only in objects, Marx makes two points: *firstly*, he abolishes one of “philosophy’s most ancient taboos,” to use Balibar’s expression, i.e. the distinction between *praxis* and *poiêsis*.<sup>7</sup> Since the Greeks, *praxis* has been the action in which man realises and transforms himself, while *poiêsis* entails actions that are subject to the constraints of their material conditions. In *praxis*, people as free men seek to perfect themselves, while in *poiêsis*, perfection is the perfection of things, of products for use. Marx abolishes this distinction by showing how *praxis* constantly passes over into *poiêsis* and vice versa. One can never strictly distinguish between the object and the subject, since there is no such thing as a non-objective subject. There are only objects that affirm (objectify) themselves in other objects. A particular subject is merely a cluster of different acts of objectification. The logic is universal and it functions in the same way for all existing things. “The sun is the object of the plant,” writes Marx, “an indispensable object to it, confirming its life,” but at the same time, “the plant is an object of the

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>7</sup> Étienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*, trans. C. Jones et al., Verso, New York 2011.

sun, being an expression of the life-awakening power of the sun, of the sun's objective essential power."<sup>8</sup> There is no essence of the plant that would manifest itself in the sun. The plant consists only of its act of affirming its qualities through the sun as another object.

*Secondly*, Marx argues that in the process of objectification it is not just one's individual life that is objectified but also one's species-being (*Gattungswesen*).<sup>9</sup> By arguing that, Marx produces a theory of *alienation* that distinguishes his theory from the theories of his predecessors – especially the one posited by Feuerbach and Hegel. For Hegel, alienation is a positive term and it designates the activity that the subject exercises upon himself in order to affirm himself. It is a double operation consisting of *estrangement* (*Entfremdung*) as a process in which the subject objectifies himself so he can separate himself from his interiority; and *externalisation* (*Entäußerung*) as a process in which the subject recognises objectivity as something that belongs to him. In the first part of the process the subject loses himself in the object. In the second part the subject loses the loss itself by recognising the objectivity as *his* objectivity. For Hegel, alienation is therefore a positive operation that enables the subject to know himself as an objective being. In the *Manuscripts* Marx presents a critique of such a conception of alienation, arguing that Hegel inverted the relation between world and mind by subsuming the former under the latter. In the double process of alienation, the otherness of the object gets annihilated, which results in consciousness becoming an autonomous force that drives history forward. Wealth, state power, religion, etc., are misunderstood by Hegel as products of the mind, as mind-dependent entities.

That is also the reason why, at least in the *Manuscripts*, Marx prefers Feuerbach over Hegel. Feuerbach also claims that man is nothing without objects and that objectification is a process of the self-expression of a subjective being. Man cannot exist for himself; he has to express himself through objects, which is why one can know the essence of a man only through the effects of such objectification (language, religion, culture, etc.). Unlike Hegel, Feuerbach does not understand

<sup>8</sup> Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, p. 157.

<sup>9</sup> "Man is not lost in his object only when the object becomes for him a human object or objective man. This is possible only when the object becomes for him a social object, he himself for himself a social being, just as society becomes a being for him in this object." *Ibid.*, p. 107.

alienation as a positive term consisting of the activity of double negation, but as a negative situation that arises when the subject transfers his own activity to the activity of an object. Alienation is the loss of the subject in the object, which now controls the subject. It is not a process of objectification, but a process of reification (*Verdinglichung*) that turns man into the object of his object. The best example of such a process is religion. Man objectifies his being in religious objects; yet this process is subsequently reversed so it looks like man is the expression of his own product (God created man and not the other way around).<sup>10</sup> The subject-object relation is therefore crucial for both Hegel and Feuerbach, while there is a big distinction in the way they comprehend the process of alienation. For Hegel, alienation is a positive process in which the object as something other than the subject gains a subjective form and becomes a part of the subject. For Feuerbach, alienation is a negative process in which the object, which originally belongs to the subject, is transformed through reification in a way that makes it appear to be something foreign to him.

In *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845), Marx argues that Feuerbach correctly dissolves religious essence into the human essence but fails to recognise the correct meaning of the latter. He accurately poses the relation of “man to man” as the fundamental relation, but fails to see that this relation is not a relation between one human essence and another but “the ensemble of the social relations.”<sup>11</sup> There is no such thing as a pre-defined social essence. Society is formed by a specific manner of mutual confirmation between a plurality of objects. What makes the worker a species-being is the fact that in the act of objectification he does not affirm only his own objective being but also the social relations that function as the historical conditions of the possibility of the act of objectification. The act of objectification is therefore social because objectification is not only an individual process in which one object affirms itself in another object, but also a process in which the relation between the acts of objectification are objectified. This is what Marx means by saying that objectification is always the objectification of one’s species-being. And this is also the point where alienation occurs. Alienation is not the loss of an individual in his objects (Feuerbach) or

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<sup>10</sup> “Religion immediately represents the inner nature of man as an objective, external being.” Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. G. Eliot, Mt. San Antonio College, Walnut 2008, p. 156.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, in: *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels Works, Volume 5, April 1845–April 1847*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 2010.

the loss of the concrete objects themselves (Hegel). For Marx, alienation occurs when the worker loses his ability to objectify himself. The alienation is therefore the *failure of objectification*.<sup>12</sup>

One needs to be careful how one understands the meaning of this failure. Every objectification is in some sense a failure. It is a failure since it designates the fact that no object is sufficient in itself so it constantly needs to affirm itself in other objects. This kind of failure is therefore constitutive of the identity of every object and is very similar to the concept of alienation outlined by Hegel. However, the process of alienation described by Marx designates a different kind of failure. It designates the moment when the process of objectification turns into its opposite and creates a separation between the worker, the act of working, and the produced objects.<sup>13</sup> Alienation is the ensemble of social relations in which the act of objectification leads to non-objectivity, and the act of self-affirmation leads to the loss of the affirmation. It is a process that puts the worker in a paradoxical state where “whatever the product of his labour is, he is not,”<sup>14</sup> where he “does not affirm himself in his work but denies himself,”<sup>15</sup> and where his activity becomes “an alien activity not belonging to him.”<sup>16</sup>

### Object(s) of Capital

The point of Marx’s analysis of alienation in the *Manuscripts* is not so much the insight that in the capitalist mode of production the objectification of social relations fails. It is more an inquiry into how this failure itself becomes a specific form of social objectification. In his later works, such as *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, he conceptualises this form as *capital*. Capital is a “social relation”<sup>17</sup> that exists as a specific way of separating the worker from the act of working and the produced object. This separation is possible due to the primal division between *the act of producing* and *the means of production*. This division produces additional

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<sup>12</sup> This thesis is elaborated in Franck Fischbach, *Sans objet. Capitalisme, subjectivité, alienation*, Vrin, Paris 2009.

<sup>13</sup> The process of separation is described in more detail in the next section.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, p. 70.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>17</sup> Marx, “Capital. A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production [London 1887]”, in: *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe II. 9.*, Dietz Verlag, Berlin 1990, p. 664.

splits. The act of producing splits into *the act of doing labour* and *the produced object*. The former splits into *concrete* and *abstract labour* and the latter splits into *use value* and *exchange value*. Marx shows how this chain of separations produces the *value form*, which is driven by its own quest for representation that forces it to objectify itself as *labour power* and *money*. He also shows how this whole process of the objectification of capital produces a special kind of object – *surplus value* – which (and this is the main point) becomes the condition of possibility of all other forms of objectification.

Marx's whole analysis is a result of the investigation of the social conditions of objectification resulting in the capitalist mode of production. What the worker sells on the capitalist market is not his labour as an activity (the act of objectification) but *the promise* of such an activity. The worker enters the market with a promise that says "I can work" and under the right conditions "I will work." The worker does not own his labour. What he owns is his *labour power*. As labour power, the act of working is transformed into what Pierre Macherey calls a "quasi-existence," an existence that is stuck in the intermediate state "between being and non-being."<sup>18</sup> According to Macherey, this transformation is one of the biggest absurdities achieved by capital.

[T]he miracle that the system of wage-labour performs consists in separating power from its action by artificially creating conditions that allow a power to be considered independently from its action, as if a non-acting power, a power that would not be active, would still be a power. From the physical point of view, this is more than a mystery: it is an absurdity.<sup>19</sup>

80 Trying to understand this paradox, one could argue that labour power is merely labour that is *not yet what it already is*, meaning it already exists on some level but its specific mode of existence has not been objectified yet. Labour is not yet labour, meaning it is not yet actual, but one can argue with enough certainty that eventually it will be realised and such knowledge of its future realisation is that which grants it a certain existence prior to its concrete existence.

<sup>18</sup> Pierre Macherey, "The Productive Subject", in: *Viewpoint Magazine*, Issue 5: Social Reproduction, 31 October 2015. Available at: <https://viewpointmag.com/2015/10/31/the-productive-subject/>.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

Understood like this, the process of objectification is transformed into what Aristotle calls *dynamis* (potentiality). Aristotle distinguishes two modes of *dynamis*, potentiality as possibility and potentiality as capacity.<sup>20</sup> While the former grasps possibility in its most basic ontological determination and defines it as an ability of something to change into something else, the latter represents the ability to come into action, to realise an already existent skill, knowledge, or capacity. One could therefore argue that labour power is *dynamis* in the second meaning of the term. It is a set of certain skills that already exist as capacities but cannot be realised unless the external circumstances (access to the means of production) allow such. According to Macherey, this answer is not sufficient since it does not include the other side of the paradoxical existence of labour power. Labour power is not just a capacity for certain skills that may or may not be realised in the future. At the same time, it *already is that which it is not yet*. It is a pure nothing, but it is a “nothing that is something.”<sup>21</sup> It is a nothing that can be bound, limited, and formed according to the capitalist’s will. Its future existence is inscribed into its current state of quasi-existence in a way that fetishises its non-existence. On the one hand, it is a double abstraction – abstraction from all the concrete activities of labour and abstraction from all the qualities of labour in general; on the other hand, this abstraction is *real* since it is not merely a thought process but *a social act that has a form of thought*.<sup>22</sup> In this sense, labour power is *already existent* even before its objectification. It exists as an act of *practical metaphysics*,<sup>23</sup> a metaphysics with a performative function that can change the reality to which it is applied, even before its concrete realisation.

The quasi-existence of labour power presents a certain challenge. If one tries to grasp it as something concrete, as something that it *already is*, one can only locate it as a promise, as something that is *not yet*. If one tries to comprehend it as something that is *not yet*, one discovers that it is already present and working in a bizarre way. Labour power is therefore a specific state where labour

<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, Aristotle in 23 Volumes, Vols. 17, 18, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, London 1989, 1048b–1049b.

<sup>21</sup> The formulation of labour power as “nothing that is something” is a formulation presented by Rado Riha in his lectures at the ZRC SAZU Postgraduate School, academic year 2014/2015.

<sup>22</sup> Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, The Macmillan Press, London 1978.

<sup>23</sup> Macherey, “The Productive Subject”.

simultaneously *is not yet what it already is* and *already is that which it is not yet*. What may seem like a small, analytical distinction is soon revealed to be one of the main contradictions of the capitalist mode of production. When the non-working power starts to work, the paradox of its bizarre existence is not extinguished but becomes objectified as a certain surplus added to the produced objects. This surplus is what Marx calls *value*. Value has a very specific materiality, a non-materiality, to be exact. At the beginning of *Capital* Marx argues that “not an atom of matter enters into its composition.”<sup>24</sup> It does not have materiality since it is the objectification of pure nothingness.<sup>25</sup> To put it differently, it is a product of labour power that objectifies itself as an “empty space”<sup>26</sup> added to the products of concrete labour, thereby turning them into commodities. By inheriting the bizarre existence of labour power, the commodity, this elementary form of value, also inherits its problem. It is the embodiment of something that already is and something that is not yet. It is a certain amount of labour power, but its exact amount cannot be determined. For this reason, it needs to affirm (objectify) its identity in something else. Marx distinguishes three main forms of such an affirmation.

In its *elementary form*, value tries to express itself in another value. The argument is that the part of nothingness added to the use value of one commodity equals the part of nothingness added to the use value of another commodity ( $x$  commodity A =  $y$  commodity B). The value of the second commodity therefore functions as an expression of the value (the amount of nothingness) of the first one. The problem is that the second commodity indeed functions as the equivalent of the first one, but it cannot express the quantitative amount of value. It can only express their *sameness*. If one were to try to determine the amount of value in the second commodity, one would have to compare this commodity to a third one. For Marx, this is not really a problem as, according to his analysis, value is a product of specific social relations and cannot exist as a relation between only two commodities. The logic of objectification is not valid for the exchange between the two commodities if it is not valid for the whole universe of commod-

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<sup>24</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 40.

<sup>25</sup> Marx argues that “human labour-power in motion, or human labour, creates value, but is not itself value. It becomes value only in its congealed state, when embodied in the form of some object.” (*Ibid.*, p. 43.)

<sup>26</sup> Rado Riha, “Badiou, Marx in analiza vrednostne forme blaga”, *Filozofski vestnik*, 37 (1/2017), pp. 153–169.

ities. Value therefore needs to affirm itself in all objects. It does so by shifting from one commodity to another, thus transforming the whole process into what Marx calls *the expanded form of value*. Every value can now be expressed in all the other values (x commodity A = y commodity B = z commodity C, etc.).<sup>27</sup>

The problem of the expanded form of value is similar to the problem of its elementary form. The value of one commodity can be expressed in all the others; however, it can only express the sameness of their nothingness and not its measure. Value is expressed in every commodity as a “this is not it,” thus driving the whole process forward. In the last form, *the general form of value*, it therefore tries to express all commodities in one special commodity. The amount of nothingness of this one commodity now becomes the measure of all other commodities. The problem is that not every commodity is suitable for this task. To put it differently, no commodity is suitable for this task since all of the commodities are split between the use value and exchange value. To find the appropriate representative, value needs to find an object that is not a commodity. Since this kind of object cannot exist in the world of commodities, it needs to exclude itself from this world.<sup>28</sup> What happens next is that value objectifies the lack of its appropriate representative in the world of commodities. “Nothing that is something” becomes “something that is pure nothing.”<sup>29</sup> In Marx’s analysis, this object is *money*. Marx argues that only money is “the universal equivalent form of all other commodities, and the immediate social incarnation of all human labour.”<sup>30</sup> Money is a singular object that expresses something universal.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Since Marx’s value-form analysis is based on the elimination of materiality as something empirically given, it could be read as a parallel of the Lacanian logic of the signifier. Rado Riha, “Badiou, Marx in analiza vrednostne forme blaga”.

<sup>28</sup> “If a commodity be found to have assumed the universal equivalent form (form C), this is only because and in so far as it has been excluded from the rest of all other commodities as their equivalent.” MEGA II. 9., p. 60.

<sup>29</sup> Rado Riha, “Problemi teorije fetišizma”, in: *Filozofija skozi psihoanalizo II*, Univerzum, Ljubljana 1985, p. 22. The formulation of money as “something that is nothing” was also formulated during lectures at the ZRC SAZU Postgraduate School in the academic year 2014/2015.

<sup>30</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 116.

<sup>31</sup> “Labour on the basis of exchange values presupposes, precisely, that neither the labour of the individual nor his product are directly general; that the product attains this form only by passing through an objective mediation, by means of a form of money distinct from itself.” Marx, *Grundrisse*, Penguin Books and New Left Review, London 1993, p. 176.

It is an object that cannot be included in the universe of commodities but can at the same time express the nothingness of all commodities.

By analysing the two main forms of objectification, “nothing that is something” (labour power) and “something that is nothing” (money), Marx de-fetishises the two main objects of the capitalist mode of production and reveals their massive power. Together they can stop the constant shifting of value from one commodity to another and can unify the world of commodities, making a meaningful whole out of the previous disunity of elements. They suture the commodity structure of the capitalist mode of production so that it becomes a coherent and homogenous totality. As the universal equivalent, money can equate the value of every commodity with the value of every other commodity. It functions as an object of mutual affirmation in which one amount of nothing confirms itself in another. The same affirms the same. All the commodities get their measures from the symbolic place they occupy in relation to this universal equivalent. At this point, the universe of commodities seems to have resolved all of its paradoxes. However, Marx shows that this is not the case. As the universal equivalent, money indeed represents the measurement of value, but by doing so it does not extinguish (nor represent) its non-identity. Since there is no final resolution of the initial contradiction, Marx argues that money acquires the occult quality of being able to add value to itself, “it brings forth living offspring, or, at the least, lays golden eggs.”<sup>32</sup> Money is therefore also split into two parts. On the one hand, it represents the identity part of value (C-M-C), so it seems like the whole process is a closed one. On the other hand, it represents its non-identity, a certain surplus added to the initial money (M-C-M’). In the last part of his value form analysis Marx therefore shows that money, “this final product of the circulation of commodities[,] is the first form in which capital appears.”<sup>33</sup>

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Capital is the end, the beginning, and the whole of the process of production. Commodity<sup>34</sup> and money are different forms it can assume and cast off along its way. It is an objectification of social relations that are grounded on the non-relation between the worker, the act of working, and the produced object. In this

<sup>32</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 134.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p. 127.

<sup>34</sup> The transformation of labour into the labour power is a transformation of labour into a commodity.

regard, the failure of social objectification is the specific form of the objectification of capital that comprises and subsumes all the other forms of objectification (the objectification of use-values). It produces the bizarre existence of labour power and is, at the same time, produced by its bizarre existence.<sup>35</sup> It is a necessary consequence of the separation between the workers and the means of production and it produces this separation at the same time. What is crucial for Marx is that this movement can never be completed. The reason for this is that by being objectified as labour power and money, capital actually produces more of the *nothingness* from which it had emerged. By endowing motion of its own, it makes sure that every non-working labour power that starts to work produces not only value but *surplus value*. The more the value tries to objectify its own nothingness, the more nothingness it produces, driving the whole cycle of capital's objectification in a never ending cycle. From power that produces, it turns into *productive power*.<sup>36</sup>

### The Object of *The Critique of Political Economy*

From an early point of his investigations up to his later works, Marx continued to examine the existing world from the perspective of objects, shifting from the more general theory of objectification presented in the *Manuscripts* to its specific form of realisation in the capitalist mode of production. He examines how the initial antagonism determines the production of objects specific to the capitalist mode of production and analyses their special form of objectification. By focusing on the value form, he shows how surplus value as a special object deter-

<sup>35</sup> “Now, in so far as capital, money existing in all particular forms of objectified labour, enters into the process with not objectified, but rather living labour, labour existing as process and as action, it is initially this qualitative difference of the substance in which it exists from the form in which it now also exists as labour. It is the process of this differentiation and of its suspension, in which capital itself becomes a process. Labour is the yeast thrown into it, which starts it fermenting.” Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, Penguin Books and New Left Review, London 1993, p. 298.

<sup>36</sup> In *Capital*, Marx argues that “value is here the active factor in a process, in which, while constantly assuming the form in turn of money and commodities, it at the same time changes in magnitude, differentiates itself by throwing off surplus-value from itself.” Marx, *Capital*, p. 133. In *Grundrisse*, he adds: “surplus value in general is value in excess of the equivalent. The equivalent, by definition, is only the identity of value with itself. Hence surplus value can never sprout out of the equivalent; nor can it do so originally out of circulation; it has to arise from the production process of capital itself.” Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 324.

mines the objectifications of all the other objects. Thus far, it seems there is no room for contingency in Marx's critical analysis. However, I would like to argue that there is an object present in Marx's theory that cannot be quite subsumed under the theories of objectification described in the previous chapters. This object was already implied by Althusser in *Reading Capital*, where he claims there is a small yet crucial distinction between *the object of Capital* and *the object of Marx's critique* of political economy.<sup>37</sup> Although Althusser never specifies their difference, he presupposes they belong to two different discourses, which are deeply intertwined. The former belongs to Marx's *scientific discourse*, while the latter belongs to Marx's *critical discourse* – to his “non-philosophy,”<sup>38</sup> to use Balibar's expression. The former introduces the above-mentioned concept of *value form* and deals with a certain *lack* that is produced by the objectification of capital. The latter introduces a concept of *class struggle*, which designates a *void* in the existing social structure, a special position that cannot be objectified. The point of this distinction is not so much that there are two objects but that the former is a necessary counterpart of the latter. To put it differently, value-form analysis is only possible from a position of class struggle.

Let us have a closer look at the distinction between both discourses. There are two kinds of lack present in Marx's scientific discourse. The first one is based on his critique of the conceptual apparatus produced by classical political economy. Marx's critique is not just any kind of critique, as it does not function in a metaphysical or dogmatic way, nor does it function in a strictly negative way. It does not build a new theory just to oppose it to the existing one, nor is it a negation or a deconstruction that would grind the previous theories and leave only fragments behind. It is posited inside the concepts produced by the theory of classical political economy and it functions as an account of their internal limitation. By limiting the theory of classical political economy, that is, by showing what it does not see in the things it sees,<sup>39</sup> Marx renders it with a *lack* that

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<sup>37</sup> Althusser posed this distinction at different places but he never specified it. Louis Althusser, “The Object of Capital”, *Reading Capital*, trans. B. Brewster and D. Fernbach, Verso, London 2015, pp. 215–357: p. 219.

<sup>38</sup> Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, trans. G. Elliott and C. Turner, Verso, London 2014, p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> Althusser specifies this non-vision as a part of vision as follows: “what classical political economy does not see, is not what it does not see, it is what it sees; it is not what it lacks, on the contrary, it is what it does not lack; it is not what it misses, on the contrary, it is what

functions as a new object (value form) of his theory.<sup>40</sup> By establishing value form as an object of his scientific analysis, he is able to form a conceptual apparatus capable of articulating another lack, i.e. the *lack* (nothingness) produced by the process of the objectification of this form. As I tried to show in the previous section, value form cannot be represented in other objects since it cannot find a suitable object. Hence, it is objectified as *labour power* (something that is nothing) and *money* (nothing that is something), which exist as representatives of this lack of representation (their own nothingness). Together they compensate for the existence of the lack of any other object suitable for their representation. In the words of Jacques Alain Miller, “they exist only in order to hide the reason for their existence.”<sup>41</sup> What is important for Marx is the fact that the same “suture”<sup>42</sup> that enables labour power and money to form the social structure as a coherent and homogenised whole also produces a constant quest for the production of surplus value. To put it differently, labour power and money constantly produce the lack of representation of value that they try to get rid of. In this way, capital incorporates in its movement its own lack. Everything is subsumed under the movement of value transformation. It therefore lacks nothing. It does not have an outside meaning; there is no Other for capital. Since it does not have the Other, it is non-All. In his scientific discourse, Marx therefore thinks the non-All of the capitalist mode of production.<sup>43</sup>

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it does not miss. The oversight, then, is not to see what one sees, the oversight no longer concerns the object, but the sight itself. The oversight is an oversight that concerns vision: non-vision is therefore inside vision, it is a form of vision and hence has a necessary relationship with vision.” Louis Althusser, “From Capital to Marx’s Philosophy”, *Reading Capital*, trans. B. Brewster and D. Fernbach, Verso, London 2015, p. 19.

<sup>40</sup> In his analysis, Marx is therefore also not trying to find a new correlation between an already existing object and his own theory. He does not claim that his theory correctly reflects the object that is otherwise wrongly presented by classical political economy. As he emphasises in the first chapter of *Capital*, David Ricardo already identified labour as the substance of value and correctly figured out that its measure depends upon working time. He did not, however, pose the question of *the value form*.

<sup>41</sup> Jacques-Alain Miller, “Action of the Structure”, in: P. Hallward and K. Peden (Eds.), *Concept and Form, Volume 1*, Verso, London 2012, p. 72.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73. Miller focuses on the concept of suture in the text by Jacques Alain Miller, “Suture. Elements of the Logic of the Signifier”, in: *Ibid.*, pp. 91–103.

<sup>43</sup> The lack that Marx discovers in the movement of capital is therefore “the lack of a lack.” Here I am directly implying the formulation introduced by Jacques-Alain Miller: “the lack of a lack is also a lack.” Jacques-Alain Miller, “Suture. Elements of the Logic of the Signifier”, p. 80.

Marx was able to analyse the lack of representation of value only by discovering *a rational kernel in the Hegelian mystical shell*. This was due to his critical discourse, which in a way is very similar to Hegelian dialectics. The novelty of Hegel's theoretical approach was that the truth of the whole of the world was not given from the standpoint of an absolute knowledge that would extract itself from the studied object and judge it from a given exterior position. On the contrary, in the famous preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he writes that *die Wahre ist das Ganze* ("The truth is the whole"), which means that no simple criteria that would enable one to make objective judgments about the world exists. However, this does not mean that everything is relative. There are two positions – the position of *knowledge* and the position of *ruth*. Knowledge is driven by the desire to find the truth of a given object, but every time it thinks that it is finally getting closer, it realises that its presuppositions of what the truth would look like do not coincide with its findings (e.g. sense-certainty wants to comprehend something as purely concrete but is faced with something purely abstract). This logic repeats itself through the different shapes of knowledge and the path to the truth is set anew each and every time. Hegel therefore turns what could be seen as a weakness of dialectical thinking into its strength. All knowledge is produced precisely because of the distinction between the concrete and limited point of knowledge and the absolute truth. There is no final merging between the former and the latter, since at the end of the path knowledge realises that the path itself was everything there is. The whole is therefore the path that knowledge treads while it chases the truth and truth is the realisation of the whole as a trodden path.

The dual position between knowledge and truth is preserved in Marx's critical discourse but is materialised in the position of *value form* and *class struggle*. In the first few chapters of *Capital*, Marx analyses the path that commodity treads when it is trying to resolve its inner contradictions, a path that is presented through the above-described movement from commodity to capital. However, to be able to analyse this movement Marx already needed to take a certain position, i.e. the position of *class struggle*. Class struggle is not a point in the social structure, a neutral position that would enable one to objectively grasp society, but rather designates the impossibility of such a position. It signifies the fact that society is fundamentally split. It is true that Hegelian dialectics also includes contradiction as the main force that drives the whole of historical development forward. The difference is that the contradictions in Hegel's dialectics are internal to the dialectics itself, while the contradictions in Marx's dialectics

indicate a moment of exteriority. In Hegel's dialectics, one discovers the original unity over and over again, while in Marx's dialectics one repeatedly discovers the original contradictions. The original unity within Marx's dialectics cannot be re-discovered because it has never been lost. It has never been lost because it has never really existed.

The distinction between *value form* and *class struggle* reflects the distinction between the *lack* and the *void*. In the text "Toward a Materialist Ontology" Samo Tomšič defines this difference in the following way: "Lack still implies an empty place, which can be occupied by an object, which veils, or mystifies, as Marx would put it, the radical implication of the lack, namely the void, which stands for the abolition of the logic of places altogether."<sup>44</sup> In Marx's materialist ontology, the position of class struggle designates an ontological position in the social structure that cannot be objectified. However, one needs to be very careful not to confuse the impossibility of the objectification of society with the failure of the objectification of workers in the capitalist mode of production. While the latter indicates a certain impossibility of objectification that arises in specific social circumstances, the former indicates the ontological point of impossibility of every society. It designates that there is no society in itself, that social relations are not predetermined but are constituted anew in each system of production. To say that all hitherto existing history is the history of class struggle is to say that "there is no such thing as social *relations*."<sup>45</sup> This does not mean that society does not exist. It means that every society is grounded on the inexistence of social relations. Every form of society, including the capitalist one, is a specific way of dealing with the social non-relation. This is also the reason why in the *Capitalist Unconscious* Samo Tomšič argues that Marx's theory could be read as "*a non-relational theory of value*."<sup>46</sup> Marx examines the process of the objectification of capital as one specific way in which the social non-relation becomes objectified.

Marx's earlier works can be labelled as correlationist since in them Marx primarily deals with the relationship between the object, the subject, and the society and focuses on the question of how a specific ensemble of social relations deter-

<sup>44</sup> Samo Tomšič, "Toward a Materialist Ontology", *Continental Thought & Theory, A journal of intellectual freedom*, 2 (2/2018), p. 112.

<sup>45</sup> Samo Tomšič, *Capitalist Unconscious*, London, Verso 2015, p. 9.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

mines the specific mode of their objectification. This changes in his later works. His value-form analyses, on the one hand, enables him to ratify the non-All of the social structure he criticises. On the other hand, his critical analysis does not function as a closed system that would argue either that every object in society is determined or that it should be determined in another way. The fact that Marx's later analysis "is at once an exposé and, by the same token, a critique of the system"<sup>47</sup> is possible only because Marx proceeds from the position of class struggle, i.e. a position of the void and not the lack. Value-form analysis as a specific mode of objectification is possible only as a counterpart to the position of class struggle, as a point in the existing society that cannot be objectified. Lack, as the object of Marx's scientific discourse (the failure of social objectification as a specific form of social objectification), and the void, as the object of his critical discourse (the social non-relation), are deeply intertwined. This is also the reason why I believe Marx is able to show that value form is an absolute necessity of the capitalist mode of production without it being absolutely necessary. In this way he implicitly shows that contingency is a necessary counterpart of the otherwise deterministic functioning of labour power and money. Even though labour power and money render the whole process of objectification meaningful, the fact of their existence is not predetermined in any way. On the contrary, they exist merely as one possible outcome of the social non-relation. In this way, Marx can indicate the point in the all-encompassing totality of the capitalist mode of production where one is able to encounter something more than what currently exists therein. Not something that is hidden or not yet realised in the sense of the abstract capacities of labour power, but in the sense of the unrealised possibilities of new forms of social objectification.

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<sup>47</sup> *Marx an Ferdinand Lassalle*, MEW, 29:550. Available at [https://marxists.catbull.com/archive/marx/works/1858/letters/58\\_02\\_22.htm](https://marxists.catbull.com/archive/marx/works/1858/letters/58_02_22.htm).