

THE PROBLEM OF FREEDOM AND UNIVERSALITY: MARXIAN PHILOSOPHICAL
ANTHROPOLOGY

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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This dissertation has two principal aims. First, it provides a critical reconsideration of Marx's philosophical anthropology as it bears on the essential continuity of his emancipatory critique of political economy. Second, it makes an argument for well-suitedness of Marxian philosophical anthropology in critically assessing the systematic irrationality of capitalist society, that is, its incorrigible failure to meet substantive human needs and its ecologically destructive accumulative imperatives. It is argued, then, that the normative underpinnings of Marx's critique of capitalist society derive from his philosophical anthropology and that the latter therefore proves indissociable from the positive necessity of the socialist alternative.

Traditionally conceived, philosophical anthropology involves a form of inquiry concerned with articulating the qualities distinctive of, and essential to, human beings. A Marxian philosophical anthropology, however, does not propose a rigid taxonomy of human qualities, but instead develops a critical dialectic capable of grasping the immanent, developmental character of the necessary material and ontological determinations constitutive of human sociality, paradigmatically expressed in the cooperative form of the labor process as the very locus of the process of conscious human self-mediation. Hence, the actualization of universal human freedom pertains to the conscious socialization—or the substantive humanization—of those determinations which form both the limits of social existence generally

and which, in their distorted and antagonistically constituted form, become sources of a dysfunctional, irrational, and deficient form of human self-mediation; that is, they assume the form of alienated actualizations of our social nature or essence. In the case of Marxian critique, the *necessarily* social character of the labor process constitutes not only the primary object of critique in its antagonistically constituted and alienated form, but also constitutes the point of immanence needed for specifying the necessary transcendence of capitalist social relations and hence the destructive social metabolism sustained by capital and its alienated compulsions.

In reconstructing Marx's early work and its constitutive philosophical anthropological concepts, in returning to his metacritique of G. W. F. Hegel, and in tracing the ambivalent reception of the 'essentialist' and 'naturalist premises' of Marx's claims within Marxist theory and critical theory more broadly, the dissertation makes the case that the historical materialist critique of capitalist society requires a positive notion of human self-mediation, and that such a notion is supplied by Marx's philosophical anthropology. Essential to this philosophical anthropology is not only an account of self-mediation as the open-ended development of human needs and powers, but also as the very need for social relations in which social individuals, conscious of their universal interdependence, become for each other the positive condition of their reciprocal self-actualizing freedom, transcending thereby the antagonisms whereby sociality appears as an alienated, altogether external constraint. It is in this way that universal, substantive socialist freedom becomes intelligible—a human necessity.

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I: INTRODUCTION

The central contention of this dissertation is that Marx’s philosophical anthropology—his distinctive account of human beings as conscious social beings whose practical activity is characterized by universality—remains well-suited not only for a critique of capitalist society, but also for the positive elaboration of key values pertinent to a socialist alternative. Crucial to this argument is the notion of self-mediation, a concept that captures the process of self-transcendence immanent to the social character of the labor process and productive activity generally. Self-transcendence here indicates not only self-transformation, however; it also indicates that this universal self-mediating activity distinctive of human beings bears significantly on the way we assess whether a given form of organizing our social metabolism serves the need for free, consciously pursued self-development as an end in itself or a necessity “external” to, and abstracted from, this end.

In *The Sociology of Marx*, Henri Lefebvre observes the following: “*Marx is not a sociologist, but there is a sociology in Marx.*”¹ A similar case can be made for the status of Marx as a philosophical anthropologist: *Marx is not a philosophical anthropologist, but there is a philosophical anthropology in Marx.* Let me elaborate further. If we seek to reduce Marx’s work to an exclusive concern with philosophical anthropology—that is to say, an exclusive concern, however critical, with the problem of the ontological and normative determinations constitutive of human beings—we inevitably hypostatize a moment of Marx’s many-sided, dialectical approach to historical reality, taking what amounts to a moment for the whole. If, however, we fail to acknowledge that philosophical anthropology constitutes an indispensable *moment* of the

¹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Sociology of Marx*, Translated by Norbert Guterman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 22.

overall emancipatory aims of the critique of political economy, it becomes clear that Marx's critical approach to capital as a historically specific mode of organizing our social metabolism proves unintelligible, self-defeating, ridden with 'performative contradictions'.² Indeed, Marx's philosophical anthropology provides what philosophers today call the 'normative' dimension through which the critique of political economy becomes intelligible as a critique of *capitalist alienation* and *domination* in its manifold forms.

Furthermore, if the extant literature on this matter is any indication, the referent of alienation and domination—for instance, *alienation from what?* and *domination in what precise sense?*—remains an open question. At the very least, I believe it can be said that the attempt to separate philosophical anthropology from the critique of political economy presupposes precisely what needs to be explained: namely, why it is that capital as a historically specific form of social metabolism *ought to be superseded* if substantive freedom, and perhaps even human survival, is to have a chance. Hence, this question is not incidental, since the critique of political economy effectively implies a critical judgment as to the historical obsolescence of the capitalist mode of production in view of its ongoing contradictions, irrationalities, and inversions in *historically determinate* terms, which cannot but be of philosophical anthropological significance insofar as they refer to the constraints to and prospects of freedom and the genuine—universal—satisfaction of needs. At stake is nothing less than how we determine the necessity of a social order qualitatively different from the devastating contradictions of the capitalist mode of production, and this cannot be accomplished without an appeal to certain values and practical parameters which must define the alternative. “Forward materialism or the warmth-doctrine of

² I use the term 'performative contradiction' here as understood by Jürgen Habermas, that is, as an implicit reliance on normative principles which one has either explicitly or implicitly rejected. See specifically *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995): 105-130.

Marxism is thus theory-practice of reaching home or of departure from inappropriate objectification; through it the world is developed towards the No-Longer-Alienation of its subjects-objects, hence towards freedom,” writes Ernst Bloch.³

It is in this spirit that I develop this project, for the philosophical anthropological concepts of historical materialism deal precisely with problems as considerable as that which Bloch designates as “inappropriate objectification,” not least of all the dire necessity of its historical transcendence. From Marx’s earliest attempts at a critique of political economy, he frequently refers to a notion of social mediation as a perennial human necessity, as “species-activity.” The necessity of social mediation as a process of self-actualization natural to the life of the species, a communal process consisting of the unity of individuals and their social conditions of existence, is always materially implicit, even under conditions when this process of self-actualization assumes a distorted, antagonistic, and irrational form. The realization of communal reciprocity and mutual complementarity between social individuals—“What occurs on my side has also to occur on yours”—is key to grasping the substance of socialist freedom, constituting its living actuality.

Given this last point, we need not have recourse to an abstract humanism devoid of historical content that would regard capitalism as the distortion of a pre-existing, aprioristically determined “nature.”⁴ Instead, the materialist critique of capitalist society rests on an account

³ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, Vol. 1, trans. Neville Plaice, Steven Plaice, and Paul Knight (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), 205.

⁴ Although not formulated in terms of “nature,” the implicit appeal to this category constitutes one of the central tenets of liberal political and social theory. Conditions of unfreedom and oppression are understood in terms of the abrogation of human rights or norms which enable the development “basic capabilities”—for instance, in the theories of Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen. These approaches, however, frequently leave the structural determinations of the capitalist mode of production untouched. For instance, in the case of Sen, though he frequently refers to the “substantive freedoms of people,” and includes under this category a broad range of freedoms (political, cultural, to name just a couple) the critique of economic unfreedom and the stipulated solutions are reduced to better regulating capitalist markets to serve human needs, either through state intervention or local cooperatives (33). The market, however, is understood in an altogether naturalized manner, so that “freedom and exchange and transaction

that scrutinizes the irreducible *unity* of certain ontological and natural determinations of social being and the historically specific, contradictory forms these determinations assume. It would therefore not be inaccurate to say that certain problems concerning the meaning and stakes of such transhistorical notions as labor, the human being, and even nature itself become historically and universally salient only under totalizing imperatives of the capitalist mode of production, and in such a way that compels us to think about the dialectical unity of nature and history in all its contradictory, destructive, and potentially emancipatory significance. Further, given the struggles unfolding today not only in the realm of production, but also over capitalist forms of dispossession and ecological spoliation—all of which concern the metabolic exchange with nature—an elucidation of the critical role played by philosophical anthropology in the critique of political economy is more than warranted.

Yet it must be said here that I neither purport to establish an absolute continuity nor an absolute break between the thought of the early Marx and that of the mature Marx. The thesis of absolute continuity proves hermeneutically suspect insofar as it obscures genuine theoretical developments and shifts in emphasis related to changes in the object of analysis. The thesis of absolute discontinuity, on the other hand, denies the very possibility that a theoretical approach could be both continuous and discontinuous at one and the same time. We would we be hard-pressed to deny that concepts such as species-being, the “human essence,” ontology and anthropology—concepts which grasp the determinations constitutive of human beings—appear to lose their theoretical salience in the overall development of Marx’s thought. Nevertheless, it is clear that the alternative to capital envisioned by Marx cannot abstain from certain commitments

is itself part and parcel of the basic liberties that people have reason to value” (508). See Amartya K. Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000); see also his essay “What is Development About?” *Frontiers of Development Economics: The Future in Perspective*, eds. Gerald M. Meier and Joseph E. Stiglitz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 508.

immanent to the distinct nature of human activity: labor as productive social activity, self-mediation, needs, objectification.

Marx's central concern in the mature critique of political economy is no longer *explicitly* anthropological, but instead contends with the historically specific contradictions of the capitalist mode of production as a historical totality in their anthropological significance. Its critical concepts—notably alienation and fetishism—express the inversions of capital as a form of life, that is, as an alienated ensemble of social relations between human beings and their metabolism [*Stoffwechsel*] with nature. The critique of political economy, then, appears to rely less on humanist concepts than on a critical exposition of the specific manner through which the essence of capital—alienated, abstract labor and the value-mediated social relations it presupposes—is obscured by capital's forms of appearance, what Marx calls the 'value-forms'. The demystification of the fetishism of capital and its forms of appearance exposes the inversions through which the social characteristics of historically specific social objects—commodity, value, capital—appear as natural rather than socio-historical properties of these same objects. Such an approach, it would seem, no longer dwells on such indeterminate concerns as the "human essence." Rather, the object of critical concern becomes the domination and alienation implied in the historically peculiar way that capital assumes the form of a subject, subordinating the totality of social life as a whole to its value-driven imperatives.

Yet a question must be posed at this point: What demands that such inversions and obfuscations be not only explained historically and genetically, but also subjected to critique? What makes it so that socio-historical explanation is also a critical judgment internal to the very logic driving of the capitalist mode of production? In other words, if it is true that capitalism is held captive by the fetish-character of its own social forms and by the forms of alienation and

exploitation its constitutive social relations presuppose, how should we understand this unfreedom in *human terms*, in light of *human emancipation*? For does not the very idea that capital both requires and produces unfreedom, domination, and exploitation imply a notion of freedom, a notion that human beings ought not to live according to relations which not only present themselves as opaque and unchangeable, but actively suppress not only historically developed potentials and tendencies, but also the very nature of self-mediation? Certainly, such an understanding of freedom must differ from the atomistic ontology of liberalism and political economy. Indeed, it must privilege a distinct conception of *social freedom*, and this social freedom is all but unintelligible without a philosophical anthropology with specific ontological commitments pertaining to our social activity and our metabolism with nature—in short, with a conception of human beings as “self-mediating beings of nature.”⁵ To contend anew with these commitments permits a more thorough understanding not only of the nature of Marx’s theoretical project, however, but also makes possible a more thorough critical confrontation with the contradictions of capital itself.

As I mentioned earlier, this reconstruction would lay bare both the *humanism* distinctive of Marx’s materialism as well as its salience within the critique of political economy. Thus, even if we reject those forms of social critique which ground themselves in an *ahistorical* norm, pushing too far in the opposite direction by abdicating from any reference to determinations specific to human life undermines the possibility of identifying those determinations the domination and alienation of which proves essential to capital. Such abstract determinations are not arbitrary, but necessary material premises of the kinds of creatures that human beings are, then; they unify the descriptive and the evaluative aspects of the critique of political economy.

⁵ István Mészáros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation*, 5th ed (London: Merlin Press, 2005), 163.

The alienated world of capital, with all its inversions and contradictions, can on this basis be simultaneously described and subjected to critical judgment.

To repeat, it is my contention that this ‘ought’ cannot be grounded in an arbitrary moral postulate—an unchanging norm such as is popular today among those who speak of so-called ‘justice as fairness’—just as it cannot be sought for in a mere description of capital’s own contradictory dynamics separate from the material reality to which they refer. Instead, Marx’s philosophical anthropology poses a different question: How do we critically articulate the dialectical unity of those material determinations of human life—production and objectification, for example—together with those historically specific conditions—capital as a totalizing and alienating form of social mediation—which, in their contradictory character, deform and alienate, as well as develop new possibilities for the development of, the former?

Of course, this raises several problems for any philosophical anthropology insofar as the very fetishistic logic of capital—its structural tendency to totalize human life and to establish itself as the inescapable horizon of social life as such—produces the socially necessary appearance that human activity is identical with the alienated forms of activity and need which characterize human beings under capitalism. Take, for example, the antagonistic social relations distinctive of capitalism. Such social relations are eternalized in bourgeois political theory from Hobbes to Rawls, which assume as a natural given—a unquestioned immediacy—the competitive, atomized, and abstract individual which is itself the product of bourgeois society.⁶

⁶ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 11. Here Rawls claims that his view regarding the rationality of action derives from ‘standard’ economic theory. The question as to whether such standard economic theory belongs to a particular kind of society cannot even be posed within Rawls’s theoretical framework. For the rational principles which govern human action are assumed to be a priori forms, even though Rawls appears to reject metaphysical and philosophical presuppositions he considers “controversial.” Facile criticisms tend to hold that Rawls’s theory of justice *assumes* a society free of conflicts, but this could not be further from the truth. In fact, Rawls’s entire theoretical edifice *assumes as given* and *as inevitable* the conflicts of interest which form the basis of the unstated anthropology of liberal political thought itself, its ‘possessive individualism’ and its ideological debt to neoclassical economics. What is most peculiar about this view, however, is that

How such individuals come to be, their historical genesis, never even emerges as a problem for such political theories; the historically specific, but by no means natural, fact of abstract individuals becomes a veritable anthropology.⁷ Precisely because of the highly problematic character of any claims about the human being as such, particularly when historical investigation reveals traits conceived as ‘natural’ or eternal to be socially constituted, those engaged in the critique of capitalism have reason to be wary.

To be sure, critiques and even wholesale rejections of the very idea of natural determinations have been characteristic of philosophical discourse from the 20th century onwards. And contemporary theoretical discourse remains prejudiced in favor of anti-naturalism and even anti-ontological views. The ideological justifications for oppression and exploitation, particularly in the context of justifying capitalism’s colonial and imperialist projects, have often taken crudely naturalistic or ontologized forms; in this sense, the concern animating such rejections is not without merit. From the ideologically stipulated natural inferiority of colonized and racialized peoples to the violent imposition of the gender roles constitutive of the defense of

everything that is *not* liberalism is deemed “metaphysical,” since only liberalism allows for the kind of democratic culture, as Rawls writes, wherein “a plurality of conflicting and incommensurable conceptions of the good are affirmed by its citizens” (248). It turns out to be that this incommensurability between notions of the good, however, is only another way of stating the validity of the initial assumption: namely, that individuals are driven by the individualism of economic rationality and thus by whatever happens to be their notion of good. Naturally, while this might produce inequalities, the latter can be ameliorated but never eliminated. Is it not the case that the ostensibly non-metaphysical nature of this political theory is simply a way of *not naming* that liberal democracies have a capitalist content, distorting the fact that inequality does not stem from individuals pursuing their interests and contending over their incommensurable views about goodness, but from the class domination constitutive of capitalist social relations? For this non-metaphysical view of justice, see John Rawls, “Justice as Fairness: Political Not Metaphysical,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 14, no. 3 (1985): 223-251. On the notion of possessive individualism, see C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), in which he specifies the diverse ways in which this ‘possessive individualism’ of liberal theory, itself the ideological expression of a market-driven society, was read into the individual as a ‘natural’ fact. For a more detailed critique of Rawls, see C. B. Macpherson, *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979): 87-94.

⁷ Max Horkheimer already diagnosed this egoism out as distinctive of the “anthropology of the bourgeois era.” See his “Egoism and the Freedom Movements: On the Anthropology of the Bourgeois Era,” *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*, trans. G. Frederick Hunter. Eds. Matthew S. Kramer and John Torpey (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993).

the bourgeois family, ideological naturalization occupies a central place in the perpetuation of capitalist social relations. Such rationalizations continue to play a role today in financialized neoliberal capitalism, where, for example, the “unproductive”—i.e., those rendered superfluous by capital—are made responsible for their own misery as consequence of their laziness, lack of resilience, or a natural inability to adapt to the increasingly precarious conditions necessitated by social and ecological crises.

This fact notwithstanding, the explanatory force of historical materialism rests upon refusing to posit a rigid separation between nature and history and in grasping the dialectic between them as a dialectic of social being.⁸ History and nature are, in this view, intertwined in such a way as to make any crude conflation or radical separation between them methodologically and ontologically problematic. But even more importantly, Marx’s critical theory regards any perspective which disregards the corporeal, embodied, and social character of human life as ideologically suspect, an expression of the alienated socio-economic forms and relations constitutive of capital. That sensuous existence should be seen as inessential, then, proves symptomatic of a social order within which such matters in fact are subordinate to alienated ends—the domination intrinsic to the imperative to accumulate capital. For this reason, I claim it is all the more urgent to reconstruct the philosophical categories which constitute the anthropological and ontological premises of the critique of political economy.

⁸ It should be clear that I reject neither Frederick Engels’s coinage of the term “the materialist conception of history” nor Nikolai Bukharin’s term “historical materialism.” The attempt to present Marx and Engels as good and bad, respectively, by treating Engels as the inaugurator of ‘Marxism’ is spurious at best—and this even as we acknowledge that many of Engels’s interpretations of Marx can be problematized. For examples of the tendency to ‘return to Marx’ and move beyond ‘Engels’s Marx’, see Tom Rockmore, *Marx After Marxism: The Philosophy of Marxism* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 1-13; Terrell Carver, “The Engels-Marx Question: Interpretation, Identity/ies, Partnership, and Politics,” *Engels After Marx*, eds. Manfred B. Steger and Terrell Carver (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999): 17-36. For a more balanced view, see John O’Neill, “Engels Without Dogmatism,” *Engels Today: A Centenary Appreciation*, ed. Christopher J. Arthur (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996): 47-66.

In **Chapter II**, I carry out a critical reconstruction of Marx's early unpublished reflections, "Notes on James Mill," contained in Marx's 1844 *Paris Notebooks*. Even though Marx's critique of political economy remained nascent at this point—and it could not but be otherwise, given that he had not fully embarked upon a systematic study of classical political economy—these notes show the extent to which Marx's critique of capitalist economic forms and its distinctive forms of rationality always took as its point of departure the *problem of alienation as a problem of social mediation*. The critique of monetary mediation as alienated social mediation required that Marx not take at face value the categories of political economy, not least of all money itself. Not taking these categories at face entails an account, grounded in Marx's conception of interdependency and the mutual complementarity of human needs and social activity, of the qualitative social conditions of possibility of economic categories.

Chapter III deals with what I regard as key philosophical categories in the work of Marx: sociality as interdependency, species-being, self-mediation, rational abstraction, and the practical dialectic of subject and object to which these categories give expression. I assess the philosophical and normative aspects of these categories against the background of Marx's metacritique of Hegel, focusing, for my purposes, on the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and his *Aesthetics*. Contrary to many interpretations, I read these philosophical categories as *corporeally* grounded in the historical unfolding of human life. Marx's metacritique ought not be reduced, then, to a "materialist inversion" (though this element is certainly present) but, rather, to a critique of the contradictions of Hegelian philosophy, from which Marx develops a novel synthesis able to grasp the transhistorical determinations of human historical life and the historically specific determinations which mediate between human beings and between human beings and nature under the capitalist mode of production.

Put differently, they function as rational abstractions. Such rational abstraction as production in general (production as purposively driven towards the satisfaction and creation of human needs) allows us to *critically abstract from* production under capitalism, while nevertheless indicating the historically specific contradictions of the latter. Thus, a critical theory of capitalist society demands a dialectical treatment of those determinations fundamental to human life and those specific to capitalism, even as we keep in view their co-determination. I ultimately conclude that, while the categories of the philosophical anthropology of the early Marx remain fruitful for a critical theory of capitalist society today, the later critique of political economy renders them historically determinate while retaining their critical force. In this sense, there is a decisive shift in Marx's critique of political economy, one that has practical and normative implications for how we determine the parameters of a socialist project. In short, while shifts in emphasis indeed occur, I attempt to show, drawing on past and present scholarship, the essential continuity of the critique of political economy as far as its normative commitments go.

In **Chapter IV**, I draw on theorists belonging to what I call the post-Lukácsian constellation for the purposes of developing a conception of socialist autonomy as socially grounded self-determination, one grounded in a distinctive ontological account of the process of objectification. Drawing on the work of Agnès Heller, György Márkus, and István Mészáros, all of whom shared (at one point or another) a commitment to rethinking the meaning of socialist freedom, I shall argue that philosophical anthropological and ontological arguments form the basis not only of their respective critiques of alienation, but also prove equally essential in the notion of socialist freedom itself as a *radical need*. Moreover, by clarifying the way they theorize the dialectic of actuality and potentiality, between what is and what could be, I hope to make

clear that socialist freedom and autonomy as a radical need implies a universal humanism which takes its bearings from the critical distinction between value and material wealth analyzed by Marx. I argue that this perspective remains crucial for a critique of capitalist society today. In this regard, this chapter shall also involve clarifying the place of *modal categories* in a critical philosophical anthropology.

Chapter V turns to Martin Hägglund's intervention concerning the normative underpinnings of what he calls 'democratic socialism'. There the reader will find an immanent critique of the limitations of an understanding of socialism guided by a decisively post-Kantian reading of both Hegel and Marx. While Hägglund's interpretation of Marx through a Hegelian notion of finitude yields fundamental insights regarding the irrationality of the temporal determinations of value in capitalist society, I propose that the abandonment of an anthropological and ontological conception of species-beings, as well as the labor process, reduces the critical capacity of Hägglund's approach, and ultimately proves detrimental to his account of socialism.

II: 'WHAT OCCURS ON MY SIDE HAS ALSO TO OCCUR ON YOURS': SOCIAL RECIPROCITY AND THE CONTRADICTIONS OF MONETARY MEDIATION

Introduction

It is my contention that an adequate critique of capitalist society cannot bypass the role played by philosophical anthropology in a critical theory of capitalist society. Given the importance of Marx's thought toward this end, it is crucial, I claim, to critically reconsider the Marxian view of the human-nature metabolism as a form of *self-mediating activity*, especially in view of criticisms which regard any attempt to center human activity in historical explanation and critique as symptomatic of the excesses of anthropocentrism, productivism, and problematic conceptions of economic growth and development, to name but a few. The question thus becomes: What place does Marx's distinctive philosophical anthropology hold in historical materialism as a critical method and framework? What is the account of human activity *qua* freedom distinctive of Marx's materialism? In a word, how can a reconsideration of Marx's notion of productive activity, together the notion of freedom it advances, shape how we approach the *immanent normativity* of critical social theory, the theoretical project of giving an account of the historically compromised yet emancipatory character of critique? Finally, why does the production paradigm represented by Marx's theory remain constitutive for any critique of the capitalist mode of production, notwithstanding the persistent proclamations as to its obsolescence?

In my view, these questions prove to be of fundamental importance not only for assessing the ongoing relevance and adequacy of Marx's critique of the capitalist mode of production, but also for clarifying the fraught problem as to *how* and *why* a critical social theory acquires critical traction in the first place, that is, the force of its emancipatory motivations. As I shall argue,

Marx's philosophical anthropology, especially its account of the metabolism between human beings and nature and the specific form of activity expressed thereby, remains essential for grasping the meaning and prospect of freedom in the context of a critique of capital as a historically specific form of social mediation. Marx's historical materialism, I argue, gives us both an account of the anthropological and ontological determinations of social reality while tracking the contradictory expression of such determinations in the interest of their emancipatory transformation. In this sense, I maintain that Marx's philosophical anthropology, conceived as a moment of the critique of political economy, continues to provide us with indispensable contributions for clarifying the problem of socialist emancipation and freedom—a question which has become increasingly urgent in view of the destructive contradictions of contemporary global capitalism.

It is well known that, from the 20th century onwards, Marxist theory has been beset with debates about the status of Marx's philosophical anthropology. Louis Althusser famously inscribed in Marx's thought an "epistemological break," one that entailed the abandonment of "ideological" and unscientific concepts such as alienation, human essence, the problematic notion of expression at the core of Hegelian-Marxism's reliance on the subject-object dialectic, and, most important for my purposes here, any and all philosophical anthropology—in a word, the totality of concepts which presumably implicated Marx in the framework of bourgeois ideology.⁹ These concepts possessed, for Althusser, little to no "theoretical value" inasmuch as they designated real relations but failed to *know* them, to comprehend their necessary material and ideological basis, a task reserved for "scientific practice."¹⁰ "The rupture with every *philosophical anthropology*," writes Althusser, "is no secondary detail; it is Marx's scientific

⁹ Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2005), 229.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 223.

discovery.”¹¹ While my purpose here is not a systematic engagement with Althusser’s position, even a cursory assessment of Marx’s corpus renders this reading rather arbitrary and tendentious. One need only consider that this position must presuppose precisely what needs to be explained, since the categorical nature of the assertions above serve to *foreclose* from the beginning the *theoretical* stakes of seriously contending with Marx’s philosophical anthropology through a convenient appeal to an equally problematic and rigid opposition between “science” (disinterested theoretical knowledge) and “ideology” (ideological representations in general and the realm of human values).¹²

While Althusser’s reading of Marx no longer holds the same weight it once did, its influence on the reception of Marx’s philosophical anthropology remains, not least of all given Althusser’s impact on post-structuralism and other theoretical tendencies which seek to problematize, if not altogether discard, the need for any universal philosophical anthropological or ontological claims.¹³ Indeed, the general theoretical sensibility of our times is characterized by

¹¹ Ibid., 227.

¹² Ibid., 223.

¹³ See, for example, Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1994). Here Foucault collapses the philosophical anthropological basis of the Marxist theory of history with that of classical political economy, for both, in his view, proceed on the assumption of the taken-for-granted “empiricities” of “scarcity” and “labour” (261). Unlike Althusser, who saw a total break between hitherto existing philosophy and economic theory and Marx’s own elaboration of a positive science of history, Foucault sees only absolute continuity. Marxism, like bourgeois political economy, remains beholden to identical logico-epistemological premises: namely, the appeal to History as the final realization of or confrontation with “finitude,” conceived here as the paradoxical gesture of centering of finitude while pronouncing its final fulfillment or end. Hence Foucault can write of classical political economy and Marx the following: “History, anthropology, and the suspension of development are all linked together in a figure that defines one of the major networks of nineteenth-century thought” (262). Nevertheless, Foucault’s criticisms tells us very little about whether the Marxian theory of history and its philosophical anthropological postulates prove adequate to a critique and explanation of the capitalist mode of production, which is, after all, the object of its analysis. For Foucault simply assesses the theory on the level of an ostensibly shared “episteme” and hence fails to grasp how the relation to the *historical content* of categories such as labor, history, and nature in Marx’s emancipatory theory differs radically from that of classical political economy. By reducing them to a shared epistemic horizon, however, such differences can be effaced in a virtuoso display of philosophical reduction. Marx’s critical, emancipatory claim that human beings can and ought to supersede the social relations and structures that dominate and render them *objects* of the production process and market coercions altogether disappears beneath claims stipulating a commitment shared by both classical political economy and Marx’s thought to the notion of the end of history. Such a claim, however, could not be more foreign to Marx’s effort to delineate the possibility and necessity of a conscious intervention in order to *break* the

a rejection of humanism and philosophical anthropology *tout court*, articulated in the variegated of positions of posthumanism, transhumanism, and New Materialisms, among others.¹⁴ Jane Bennett, a key voice in these trends, speaks, for instance, of a “thing-power materialism” which “pursues the quixotic task of a materialism that is not also an anthropology.”¹⁵ Overwhelmingly, these criticisms seek to displace anthropological and socio-ontological questions as mere expressions of an “anthropocentric” and “totalizing” conception of the human subject which conceptually reproduces the domination of both non-human and human beings and nature as a whole. Of course, the concerns are not unwarranted, but their frameworks problematically conflate the tasks of an emancipatory theory concerned with the peculiarities of human historical development and the distinctiveness of human activity as self-mediating with anthropocentrism full stop. However, as we shall see, to grasp the universality of productive activity in human history is simultaneously to grasp its specificity, *for we are concerned here with a universal self-mediating being of nature which by its very nature concretizes or particularizes itself historically*. Thus, a concern with the normative stakes of universality as articulated in the human

domination of capital over social labor and over social life as a whole. For a similar gesture of conflating Marx’s critical project with the so-called “metaphysical” pretensions of philosophical discourse—here conflated with the effort to “totalize,” without even bothering to explain the meaning of this term—see Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 13.

¹⁴ See, for example, Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). In the preface to this book, Bennett situates herself in a current of materialism which takes its bearings from “the tradition of Democritus-Epicurus-Spinoza-Diderot-Deleuze more than Hegel-Marx-Adorno” (xiii). The explicit aim of Bennett’s intervention is to displace the centrality of human agency constitutive of forms of critical theory which take the approach of demystification insofar as the latter “tends to screen from view the vitality of matter and reduce *political agency* to *human agency*” (xv). For a similar position, see Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry*, 30, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 225-248. These theories share not simply a rejection of “anthropocentrism,” but a corresponding ethical disposition which protests the complicity of critique as demystification with the negation of the apparent agency and intrinsic wonders of objects themselves. In my view, however, the fact that objects become mere “bearers” of capitalistic value, the fact that capital’s self-expansion tends to destroy previously existing social and political limits and traditions, is a far more compelling *historical explanation* for the ongoing disenchantment of the world than a mere philosophical (“anthropocentric”) prejudice. For a critique of such tendencies from an eco-Marxist perspective, see Andreas Malm, *The Progress of this Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London: Verso, 2018).

¹⁵ Jane Bennett, “The Force of Things: Steps toward an Ecology of Matter,” *Political Theory* 32, no. 3 (2004): 347-342.

labor process (and productive activity more broadly) need not issue result in embracing the domination of nature.

In a word, these frameworks deprive us of a firm foundation for making determinate assessments as to the historically constituted conditions under which a critique of the capitalistic domination of nature becomes necessary in the first place. Instead, the very object of the critique of political economy—the domination of human beings by the products and relations resulting from their own activity—is theoretically sublimated in the form of a concern for *the power of objects as such*. Again, we must stress that there is nothing wrong in principle with the claim that human beings are the kinds of natural beings whose form of self-mediation, because conscious and historical, because capable of reflecting on the natural and historically objectified conditions of its existence in a way that proves irreducible to mere adaptation, is distinct from the metabolic processes which govern other living beings.

I am not convinced, therefore, that the problem lies in that often-invoked specter of “Cartesian dualism,” as argued, notably, by Jason W. Moore. In claiming that critical ecological analysis must abandon the allegedly undialectical “arithmetic” of “Nature” and “Society”—and with it, it would seem, the very notion of *subject* and *object*—Moore misapprehends the philosophical premises of historical materialism. For it is not only the elementary notion that nature and society are distinct and at the same time irreducibly bound together that escapes his notice. More significantly, Moore’s account must deny the *specific nature of human activity as self-mediation* which renders that couplet, nature and society, in its dialectical reciprocity, intelligible in the first place. It might be objected here that this “dualism” is “violent,” to use

Moore's words, because it illegitimately separates, at an epistemic level, what constitutes an integral, undifferentiated whole (the hallmark of Moore's monism).¹⁶

But what if one were to say here that defines the conscious process of self-transcendence distinctive of universal human activity, and which can only be understood through the concrete production of a historical world not identical with nature as such but that arises as specific form of mediated nature—"second nature"—is precisely not contingent upon an "epistemic" rift, but constitutes the enduring condition of the reproduction of conscious human life as such? By definition, in other words, we cannot be "one" with nature insofar as we are specific beings of nature whose very nature it is to constitute or self-mediate our own nature, overcoming thereby previously established limits to our needs and activities, though—and this is key—never overcoming limits altogether. Whether this separation assumes an antagonistic, alienated form, however, is another matter, since this can only be understood in light of the specificity of the social relations which mediate our relations to each other and to external nature.¹⁷

It would not be inaccurate to say, following Kieran Durkin, that such critiques themselves ought to be read as symptomatic of the fetishization of a kind of "negative anthropology," that is, an anthropology which analyzes human life in terms of what it is not while obscuring those determinations which suggest a positive capacity for self-transformation.¹⁸ So conceived, it becomes more difficult to accept that the anti-humanist tendency, along with the concomitant

¹⁶ Jason W. Moore, "Toward a Singular Metabolism: Epistemic Rifts and Environment-Making in the Capitalist World Ecology," *New Geographies: Grounding Metabolisms* 6 (2014), 11.

¹⁷ Let it be said, too, that this claim allows for an acknowledgement of the essential irreducibility of external nature to human activity. Indeed, the concept of productive activity as self-mediation does not, as in bourgeois political economy and social theory to this very day, pertain only to a one-sided instrumental, merely consumptive relation either towards nature or human beings. Philosophy, science, art and the aesthetic dimension, and culture more broadly are mediated forms of productive activity—all bring out and discover new aspects not only of human history, but of the many-sided particularity of nature itself.

¹⁸ Kieran Durkin, "Adventures in the Anti-Humanist Dialectic: Towards the Reappropriation of Humanism," *European Journal of Social Theory* 25, no. 2 (2021): 1-20, 14. For a similar perspective, see Jeff Noonan, *Critical Humanism and the Politics of Difference* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003).

ideological erosion of notions of universal human emancipation, *necessarily* constitutes theoretical progress, even if its acceptance constitutes the prevailing *doxa*—and this not only because I find the political consequences regrettable (e.g., a fetishization of historical arbitrariness, the rejection of the appeal to history and nature to ground the necessity of meaningful historical transformation, fundamentally pessimistic stances towards the possibility of progress and emancipation), but also because, in the final analysis, a rigorous engagement with philosophical anthropology and the problems it raises proves glaringly absent.¹⁹ Instead, we are left with often insouciant dismissals, not infrequently falling into reaction, which obscure the emancipatory significance of humanism and philosophical anthropological claims in the history of emancipatory struggles and theories.²⁰

For we cannot help but observe that a most striking ideological symptom of our times is that, in the face of devastating crises which involve a now *global humanity*—albeit one

¹⁹ See Jacques Derrida, “The Ends of Man,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 30, no. 1 (1969): 31-57. In this essay, Derrida, following Heidegger, polemicizes against “humanism” and “anthropologism” as exemplary of “metaphysics” and “onto-theology” (36). Derrida then goes on to highlight Edmund Husserl’s account of the “transcendental structures” of consciousness—a problem which, in his view, forms the core of transcendental phenomenology but has been obscured by the “humanist distortion,” that is, by the anthropologization of these concepts: “They are not essentially linked with society, culture or language, or even with man’s ‘soul’ or his ‘psyche,’” he writes (38). One cannot but ask: Do they drop from the sky? For Derrida, this formalistic tendency in Husserl, this detachment of concepts from historical mediation, becomes, paradoxically enough, the positive *ground* of the dissolution of humanism as a philosophical problem, only that he theorizes it precisely as the absence of any ground that is not *purely ideal* or quasi-transcendental. It could not appear, therefore, that such “anti-humanism” expresses the reification of philosophical concepts, an implicit presumption of their autonomy relative to the world of *human historical practice*. Even Heidegger’s irrationalist rejection of humanism as part of the technological and calculating mentality of the modern world appears to warrant no further discussion, since his move is seen innocently as an attempt to break out of “onto-theology” and “Western metaphysics,” and not at all as a philosophical gesture mediated by the historical contradictions of capitalism and the attempt to negate certain *misrepresented* aspects of the latter (“technological domination,” “machination”) while leaving the system overall unquestioned. In other words, Heidegger’s *reactionary* rejection of universalism and humanism, for him entwined with the technological machination of modernity, in the name of more “fundamental” questions untainted with concrete history and its contradictions, ought not be seen through the distortive prism of philosophical discourse which Derrida would have us adopt. Rather, it ought to be seen as the ideological transposition of the historical contradictions of capitalist modernity to a purely philosophical realm, all talk of a return to the “concrete” notwithstanding. Just as in the reified world of capital human relations assume the character of unchangeable, though in reality socially constituted things, so in the world of these philosophical discourses do concepts appear as insulated from human practical activity.

²⁰ Durkin, “Adventures,” 15.

constituted unevenly by the contradictory development of capitalist social relations—questions of human solidarity, human needs, and the necessity of a *universal* historical alternative to capital should have fallen into disrepute. The corrosive proliferation of fundamentalisms and identitarian ideologies, especially in the form of racist nationalism, isolationism, the revival of neo-fascism, and a left which lacks a historical vision grounded in an emancipatory alternative to the capitalist mode of production, has effectively constrained the capacity to contend, practically and theoretically, with the questions posed to us by the contradictions of the present and their potential resolution.²¹ What is more, even ostensibly “critical” and “radical” discourses have become complicit with this one-sided particularism in regarding any universalizable philosophical anthropological and emancipatory claims as the summary ideological expression of Eurocentric, racist, anti-Black, and patriarchal prejudices.²² The lack of mediation between particularity and universality remains intact here, for the particular is unduly fetishized, obscuring that the universal emerges precisely through a particular which, in laying a claim to a vital human need for self-determination, universalizes itself, makes a demand that unsettles the existing structures and relations of domination and alienation. Here we encounter, contrary to the

²¹ For an analysis of the fraught status of socialist humanism, not least of all its historical eclipse, see Barbara Epstein, “The Rise, Decline and Possible Revival of Socialist Humanism,” *For Humanism: Explorations in Theory and Politics*, eds. David Alderson and Robert Spencer (London: Pluto Press, 2017): 17-67.

²² See, for example, Joseph Winters, “Humanism and the Human,” *The Oxford Handbook of Humanism*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019): 488-508. Drawing on Afro-Pessimism and other developments in Black Studies, Winters seeks to demonstrate how humanist concepts *tout court* are compelled by some largely unexplained logic to participate in anti-Blackness. Here we are confronted once more with the neo-idealist impulse by means of which critical concepts—in this case, “humanity,” humanism, etc.—are alleged to be *irreducibly* bound to racist ideology, so that even the concept of emancipation becomes suspect. Ironically, therefore, the objective denial of humanity which is hallmark of domination is not the problem, but the *concept of humanity itself*, so that we find ourselves in the peculiar situation of an anti-Black logic which has, it would appear, “ontologically” structured these categories from time immemorial. That real historical struggles have been waged in the name of universal human values, and not only in the “Western” world but *globally*, and that this is not an arbitrary fact, can be conveniently ignored here; that universality emerges precisely in and through concrete struggles for the self-humanization of the oppressed and exploited—all of this can, of course, be relegated to the status of unreality from this perspective. For a critique along similar lines, see Ato Sekyi-Otu, “Con-Texts of Critique,” *Partisan Universalism: Essays in Honour of Ato Sekyi-Otu*, eds. Gamal Abdel-Shehid and Sofia Noori (Québec: Daraja Press, 2021): 236-254.

anti-humanist and anti-universalist positions, what Ato Sekyi-Otu, whose work stands as a model of exemplary dialectical treatment of universal categories, calls “a programmatic and substantive position out of this necessary universalism, in answer to determinate exigencies of sociohistorical time and space,” in a word, “a measure and a questioning...of the *humaneness* of our given conditions of existence, practices and principles.”²³ This philosophical sensibility orients the arguments that follow.

For our purposes, it should also not be forgotten that Marx never ceased to insist upon the dire necessity of a universal alternative to a falsely universalized capitalist system and that, insofar as the conditions which generated this critique remain fundamentally intact, so too does its imperative of universal human emancipation. Naturally, I do not mean to suggest that a critical philosophical anthropology such as the one elaborated by Marx provides us with definitive answers as to what ought to be done. It does, however, allow us to cast the category of the human being in a new light: not as a purely theoretical postulate, but as a historical project to be struggled for beyond the privations, miseries, and inhumanities to which the capitalist system subjects the majority of the world’s people. And this historical project is not dissociable from a humanism, a philosophical anthropology, which can articulate a commonly shared and universal ground for elaborating the social conditions adequate to the kinds of creatures human beings are and can become as *free self-mediating natural-historical beings*, that is, as beings whose activity can actualize and evaluate itself in the form of reciprocal determination, freedom as intelligible only in and through the free affirmation of the activities of each other as a need.

Marx’s philosophical anthropology, then, is not incidental to either the critique of political economy or historical materialism, as I have insisted above; rather, it constitutes an

²³ Ato Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism, Africentric Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 78.

indispensable moment of its emancipatory force. For the radical character of Marx's conception of human beings is that historical constraints to social freedom are nothing but the products of determinate activity, and that they can, in principle, be transformed. The critique of religion, including the ideological rationalization of historical domination, thus contains "the categorical imperative to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, contemptible being."²⁴ Hence, it is less a question as to whether there *is* a philosophical anthropology in Marx than it is a matter of assessing its specific *critical meaning* and place within the critique of political economy, understood here not simply as economics, narrowly construed, but as a critical analysis that aims to grasp capitalism as a deficient, irrational, and contradictory form of social life, one at odds not only with itself, but with the very conditions of universal human flourishing and freely determined communal purposes and ends. In what follows, I shall turn to three texts to flesh out this claim and its stakes: the 1844 *Paris Manuscripts*, *Notes on James Mill*, and the *Grundrisse*.

The Logic of Social Reciprocity in Marx's 'Notes on James Mill'

In the past decade, Marx's 1844 critical notes on the political economist James Mill have received rich scholarly engagement, particularly their relevance for clarifying the disciplinary role of debt under conditions of financialized neoliberal capitalism.²⁵ At stake in Marx's analysis is indeed both a clarification of the role of debt and credit in its moral and social dimensions in political economy and a nascent critique of money in its capitalist manifestation as *alienated sociality*. What strikes us about these brief notes lies in their focus on the categories of political

²⁴ Karl Marx, "Contribution to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law," *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 3. (London: Lawrence & Wishart. 2010), 182.

²⁵ See, for example, Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (Amsterdam: Semiotext(e), 2011); Rocío Zambrana, *Colonial Debts: The Case of Puerto Rico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

economy, and money especially, as forms of *self-alienation*, as objects which express a determinate form of mediation between human beings. Indeed, the inversions of capitalism, for Marx, derive from an inversion of subject and object whereby the former becomes dominated by the alienated character of its own social relations and products such that the movements of objects and economic quantities *appear* as the natural subjects of the social process. In order to render this process of inversion intelligible, however, one must unfold that which is extinguished in its alienated appearance, its opposite through which alone it acquires concrete truth: namely, a relation of distorted reciprocity between subjects in and through their social relations, i.e., between human beings themselves.²⁶ One must demonstrate, in other words, that what appears as a self-standing entity is, in fact, a *mediated result* of a particular kind of social life, of human bonds which have *in reality* become untethered, increasingly autonomous, from consciously determined social ends. The abstraction at work here is socially objective, real. The practical force of the Marxian critique of political economy implies the rejection of any effort to reconcile human beings to this negative situation—and this by unfolding the *necessity* of abolishing those historically specific conditions and constraints under which the socio-ontological determinations of human interdependency become contradictions, sources of suffering, unfreedom, indeed unreason and irrationality.

To be sure, it is worth noting that one of the constitutive features of Marx's historical materialism is an *affirmation* of sociality, of the human basis, no matter how distorted, of all

²⁶ On this matter, see Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971). Avineri writes: "Not only do conditions of production constitute more than mere economic facts, but all forms of inter-human relationships are conscious human conduct. Hence, they can be consciously mastered and directed" (80). It is therefore strange that, despite this claim, Avineri concludes that the Marxian conception of the human being as *homo faber* "provides a non-normative criterion for human activity" (106). As I hope to show, this cannot be the case, since it is a matter of determining the *immanent normativity* by means of which the fact-value dichotomy which besets traditional ethical theory is addressed and, in my view, critically suspended. The Marxian view no longer posits norms metaphysically but regards them as internal to the activity which constitutes unity of the transhistorical and the historically specific determinations of the social metabolism.

phenomena that appear as naturalized, ossified, beyond human intervention. Marx's approach thus radically undermines the atomistic anthropology of bourgeois economic and philosophical theories which rationalize, by means of appeals to an uncritical naturalism, the relations, institutions, and forms of self-understanding distinctive of the capitalist mode of production.²⁷ Indeed, the radical force of Marx's humanism lies in its refusal to subordinate human ends to alienated ends which come to appear, whether as metaphysical hypostatizations or reified naturalizations, independent of their human, that is, irreducibly social basis. I begin with Marx's comments on James Mill not because they contain a systematic treatment of his philosophical anthropology—though they do contain some of the clearest articulations as to the positive vision of free, unalienated productive activity—but because they give us a point of departure from which to reconstruct the philosophical anthropological presuppositions of the critique of capitalist alienation as an inverted form of human sociality.

For Marx, human interdependence as a socio-ontological determination is not identical with money-mediated exchange, even as the latter constitutes the particular form under critical scrutiny. For such interdependence refers to sociality of production as the *sine qua non* of the realization of human ends and needs. The negative condition which defines money-mediated exchange and its further development in debt becomes intelligible only if we can derive from such socioeconomic forms the self-alienation of human activity. Alienation is, then, an intrinsically self-reflexive and critical concept insofar as it brings to light the practical and theoretical inversions by means of which human activities assume the form of increasingly

²⁷ On this point, see Marcello Musto, "Marx in Paris: Manuscripts and Notebooks of 1844," *Science & Society* 75, no. 3 (2009): 386-402. Of Marx's early work Musto writes: "The guiding thread of his work was the need to unveil and oppose the greatest mystifications of political economy: the idea that its ideas and categories were valid at all times and all places. Marx was deeply affected by this blindness and lack of historical sense on the part of economists, who thereby tried to conceal and justify the inhumanity of the economic conditions of their time by presenting them as a fact of nature" (388).

impersonal and inhuman relations and imperatives, expressed most acutely in the subordination of human ends and self-determination to the ends of capitalist production and accumulation, with all the destructive and exploitative consequences necessitated thereby. Moreover, the concept of alienation as a critical category expresses a negative disunity and antagonism between social individuals and the conditions of their existence, for they can only be alienated from the conditions of their existence insofar as they are socially separated from communally determined ends.

Consequently, when Marx analyzes money in these notes, he does not see money as an inert thing, as a normatively neutral medium of instrumental exchanges between individuals. Rather, money articulates a particular form of social mediation, one that, as it were, acquires a life of its own and, furthermore, gives rise to a form of social irrationality. Money *is* the objective expression, in this respect, of an alienated social relation—in other words, it is the embodiment of a relation between individuals that is, at the same time, a separation, a mediation that is, simultaneously, but a semblance of genuine self-mediation, in which the conditions of freedom would be encountered not as alien things impervious to human agency, but as direct, because freely determined, sociality:

The essence of money is not, in the first place, that property is alienated in it, but that the *mediating activity* or movement, the *human*, social act by which man's products mutually complement one another, is *estranged* from man and becomes the attribute of money, a *material thing* outside man. Since man alienates this mediating activity itself, he is active here only as a man who has lost himself and is dehumanised; the *relation* itself between things, man's operation with them, becomes the operation of an entity outside man and above man.²⁸

²⁸ Karl Marx, "Comments on James Mill, *Éléments d'économie politique*," *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 3. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 211-228, 212.

Note firstly that, prior to identifying the inversion at work in the existence of money, Marx identifies “*mediating activity*” as the constitutive movement in and through which such an inversion is possible in the first place.²⁹ This identification of mediating activity as a socio-ontological determination does not, however, mean that such mediating activity, conceived at this indeterminate level, by necessity results in the inverted form of money. Rather, money is the *form* human activity as mediating activity—content—assumes under specific conditions, a claim that Marx will come to develop in a more historically determinate manner in his future investigations on money as one of the fetishized forms of value and, moreover, as the social power of disposal over labor-power. But the point remains: “This mediator... is the *alienated* species-activity of man, the *externalised mediation* between man’s production and man’s production.”³⁰ The form (money) mediates the content (species-activity), since only through the mediation of the former can the latter be made effective or actualized. At the same time, it is possible to analytically distinguish between species-activity as a general socio-ontological determination and its form *qua* money. Indeed, without this act of critical abstraction, it would not be possible to specify money *is in its historical specificity*, since the latter would be identical with all mediating activity. Marx does not concede to bourgeois economics the mystification that capitalist relations and socioeconomic forms represent the natural outgrowths of social life in general. These social relations form the basis of a *particular* form of life with its own peculiar characteristics, contradictions, and forms of consciousness.

What does it mean to say, however, that this mediating activity “becomes the attribute of money”? Firstly, it suggests that the inversion by means of which money as a social bond or

²⁹ For a similar reading developed in the context of a critique of Hannah Arendt’s reading of Marx, see Michael Lazarus, “Alienation and Action in the Young Marx, Aristotle and Arendt,” *Constellations* 29, no. 4 (2022): 1-17.

³⁰ Marx, “Comments,” 212.

relation acquires social power is *real*, hence not the mere result of the conscious projection of social significance into a thing. It is in this object—money, and the social bonds that it implies—that the social powers which properly belong to human subjects become an attribute of things. In this way, money becomes the *thingly mediation* by means of which human powers and needs find their expression; it is only through the power of this thingly mediation that a need is socially validated, such that to lack it amounts to deprivation, to the inability to satisfy not only the need for the objects necessary to live, but the very need for social relations that sustain life rather than deform it. It is in this spirit that we ought to read Marx’s famous claim in the *Paris Manuscripts*: “The *rich* human being is simultaneously the human being *in need* of a totality of human life-activities—the man in whom his own realization exists as an inner necessity, as *need*.”³¹ For Marx, the uncritical equation of the end of human activity with a thing the accumulation of which becomes an end in itself—in abstraction from human needs and intentions—must be critically suspended. Marx’s critical anthropological standpoint does not deny that, in reality, human activity is in the grips of things; it does deny, however, that this inversion represents a natural condition which stands apart from history as a process of self-mediation, a process in the face of which historically specific forms of activity are historically relativized, problematized, subjected to critical scrutiny.

It is in this sense that Marx approaches the peculiar character of money. For the dominating preponderance of money is such that the movement of social mediation becomes a property of the movement of money itself; the latter thereby acquires an objective social power which appears as an external, indeed “independent,” compulsion. At this point, we must stress that Marx does not lose sight of the practical determination of money as a form of sensuous

³¹ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988), 111.

human activity. The determination of money as a specific form of sensuous human activity does not, however, amount to its naturalization, for money as a social form is inseparable from the practices and social bonds which constitute it, even as it appears as an autonomous thing. Marx's philosophical anthropology thereby suspends the reification of money as an autonomous entity that bears no relationship to the determinate character of the activity through which it alone acquires objective power.

As Federica Gregoratto argues in her analysis of the relation between debtor and creditor mediated by monetary exchange, the alienation or "estrangement" in question is to be found "in the *perversion*, in the distortion of that *relation of recognition* that best defines human nature."³² It should be stressed that, however, this alienation (or estrangement) is not reducible to relations of mutual recognition which precede the process of production, for the emphasis lies in "*reciprocal* production," that is, on the *complementarity* between productive activities and their results.³³ In a reconstruction of Hegel's concept of work, which we shall take up in the next chapter and which, in my view, applies equally to Marx's conception of productive activity, Emmanuel Renault suggests that work implies a social world that "generates specific normative expectations toward the environment," normative concerns that contribute not only to the making

³² Federica Gregoratto, "Debt, Power and the Normativity of Interdependence: Current Debates and the Young Marx," *Hegel, Marx and the Contemporary World*, eds. Kaveh Boveiri, Emmaniel Chaput, and Arnaud Theurillat-Cloutier. (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016): 219-243, 228. It should also be noted that Marx consistently retained the language of perversion, inversion, distortion, derangement, etc. to describe the fetishistic character of capitalist social relations and socio-economic forms. As Hans-Georg Backhaus points out, the term "*verrückte Formen*" captures the peculiar character of capital and its value-forms of appearance: "Marx employs the phrase "*verrückte*" (perverted) forms in its double sense as, on the one hand, puzzling, mystical essence, and, on the other, as a sphere 'outside of Man', displaced or transposed" (Backhaus 2005, 25).

³³ For an incisive analysis of the concept of solidarity in Hegel and Marx from which I draw to make this point, see Andrew Chitty, "Human Solidarity in Hegel and Marx," *Reassessing Marx's Social and Political Philosophy*, ed. Jan Kandiyali (New York: Routledge, 2018): 120-146, esp. 134-140.

of a world in common, but to the mutual satisfaction of needs in the form of cooperative activity.³⁴

For the domination of social life by monetary exchange cannot be overturned by recognition alone, even if conscious recognition of the inverted social relations distinctive of capitalism is a necessary condition of their historical overcoming.³⁵ Moreover, the practical need to overcome the compulsions necessitated by monetary exchange does not entail the abolition of the necessity social life; it indicates, rather, the need to abolish those determinate constraints on social life which make sociality into a negative limitation on the powers and needs of human beings, and of the dispossessed class, the proletariat, in particular. The determination of monetary exchange as a form of human activity, no matter how dehumanizing its consequences, lies in the identification of sensuous social practice as the ultimate point of reference in relation to which such contradictions become intelligible in the first place.

Here, then, it becomes clear that Marx's philosophical anthropology serves as the basis for unfolding the material relations of content which, in their alienated form, deform those embedded in them. In this context, the deformation becomes palpable in its expression as money, which mediates the needs in such a way as to deprive those who lack money from the very capacity to satisfy them. Yet the implication is not that people ought to have enough money to access the means necessary for their survival; rather, the critique of money as an alienated form

³⁴ Emmanuel Renault, "Social Self and Work in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*." *"I that is We, We that is I."* *Perspectives on Contemporary Hegel: Social Ontology, Recognition, Naturalism, and the Critique of Kantian Constructivism*, eds. Italo Testa and Luigi Ruggiu (Leiden: Brill, 2016): 202-219, 214.

³⁵ For another account which stresses the Hegelian motif of the "struggle for recognition" in the young Marx, see Tony Burns, "The Idea of the 'Struggle for Recognition' in the Ethical Thought of the Young Marx and its Relevance Today," *Constructing Marxist Ethics: Critique, Normativity, Praxis*, ed. Michael J. Thompson (Chicago: Haymarket, 2014): 33-58. Burns', like Gregoratto, stresses the recognitive element, since the latter grasps the importance of "identity politics" beyond narrow redistributive concerns. I myself prefer to read the Marxian theory as a critical theory of the distortions of the capitalist mode of *production*, within which concerns about recognition and distribution alone acquire their full meaning.

of mediation grasps that the very problem lies in the *realization* of social life in and through the *indirect mediation of things*. Direct relations between things and indirect relations between people, the subordination of consciously determined ends to the heteronomous aims of monetary exchange and accumulation—this distortion and contradiction, even in this early text, defines the normative and practical horizon of the capitalist system as a definite form of life.³⁶

This distortion, it bears repeating, does not derive from the essence of mediating activity as such, but, rather, from the co-determination of content by means of the social forms in question.³⁷ In order to critique the dehumanization produced by them, however, Marx must set into a motion a movement which grasps, on the one hand, precisely *what* is alienated, and, on the other, the *how*, which is to say the historically specific conditions themselves. The preponderance of money and debt as economic relations is therefore not naturally given but socially constituted, the result of the prevailing money-mediated, capitalistic social relations. But the naturalization of these social relations, which inheres in the character of capitalist money as an alienated mediation between human activities, this peculiar untethering of social forms from their concrete basis, is dialectically intelligible only in light of the practical dimension of human action, which dissolves the illusion that money as economic object is self-referential,

³⁶ Lucio Colletti rightly detects in the inversion of subject and predicate in Marx's early writing the "embryo" of his later notion of the fetishism of commodities and, I would add, the fetish character of capital in all its value-forms. See Lucio Colletti, Introduction to *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), esp. 33-37.

³⁷ This seems to be the interpretation of Heikki Ikäheimo, "From the Old Hegel to the Young Marx: Two Sketches of an Evaluative Ontology of the Human Life-Form," *Reassessing Marx's Social and Political Philosophy*, ed. Jan Kandiyali (New York: Routledge, 2018): 83-101, esp. pp. 92-97. Ikäheimo concludes his analysis of Marx's vision of "non-estranged life" by suggesting that Marx's account lacks several key elements contained in Hegel's philosophy. Perhaps the most serious charge is that Marx, unlike Hegel, misses the positive role of norms and collective forms of authority and thus correspondingly fails to properly thematize the institutions within which such norms are articulated, a failure which potentially leads to a romantic rejection of institutional mediation altogether (97). That Marx has less faith in the rationality of bourgeois institution than Hegel does not imply his rejection of all mediation, however, but only a critical stance toward those mediations—the capitalist state and bourgeois realm of right, for example—which function as mechanisms in the perpetuation of capitalist society. Marx rightly saw them as an expression of the antagonistic totality of capitalism, one that, through the power of the capitalist state, seeks to insulate the substantive dimensions of social life from substantive decision-making processes.

autonomous. In critically assessing monetary exchange as a particular form of socially constituted mediation, social mediation becomes conscious of itself, and the power of money is thereby posited as *false objectivity*, that is, as an objectivity which has acquired a life of its own beyond human ends and seemingly impervious to human intervention.

Objects rules over subjects, then, but this domination is itself a result of social practice in the grips of money and private property. In this respect, Marx establishes self-reflexivity not merely as a *conceptual* but also as a *practical* determination indexed to the contradiction between subject and object, between activity and its results—and in such a way as to unfold the dynamic between them, the constant inversion of one into the other.

But this critical move can be made intelligible only through the concrete determination of the irreducible “interdependence” between human beings themselves. *Mediation presupposes what is immediate*, and the clarification of the tireless movement between them, of the one becoming the other, of the negation of the immediacy of needs and powers by the results of its own activity, proves central to the critique of capital.³⁸ Hence, they need not be uncritically collapsed nor radically separated. The need for others, for their activities and their objects, a necessity which brings individuals outside of themselves into actuality, is exploited under capitalist conditions inasmuch as it matters only in contributing to the imperatives of money-mediated exchange and the accumulation of money as an end in itself. Such social relations give rise to what Adorno once identified as “bourgeois coldness,” the logic of indifference,

³⁸ I take this point from Adorno’s reading of Hegel on the irreducibility of mediation. “One can no more speak of mediation without something immediate, than, conversely” he writes, “one can find something immediate that is not mediated” (59). See Theodor W. Adorno, “The Experiential Content of Hegel’s Philosophy,” *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Nicholsen Weber (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993).

instrumentalization, and dehumanization—expressed through the universal equalization effected through exchange relations—incribed in bourgeois social order as part of its very essence.³⁹

Let us now consider the following passage, where Marx distinguishes between “human process” and “abstract relationship”:

The mediating process between men engaged in exchange is not a social or human process, not *human relationship*; it is the *abstract relationship* of private property to private property, and the expression of this *abstract* relationship is value, whose actual existence as value constitutes *money*.⁴⁰

One might be tempted to read this passage in a naïve empiricist manner—namely, that a more real human relation lies hidden beneath the encrustations of money-mediated exchange. But Marx abides by a dialectical conception of the relation between form and content, appearance and essence. The restless movement between the practical, human determinations of socioeconomic categories and their appearance must be unfolded so that their unity and difference can be made to appear. Thus, rather than merely counterposing something more real—a “human relationship”—to something false—money-mediated exchange—Marx’s usage of “social or human process” critiques the expression of human social activity as it *really exists in its alienated unfolding*. The distorted appearance itself expresses the social character of the relations in question, then, for human beings in effect do relate to each other and to the material conditions of their existence *through this alien mediator, money*. And indeed, the consequence of this process is that people treat themselves and each other as mere means or things subordinate to the variety of alienated ends distinctive of the capitalist economy. The social antagonisms

³⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 74.

⁴⁰ Marx, “Comments,” 213.

naturalized by the individualistic, reified anthropology of bourgeois thought are, in this way, indexed to the specific conditions and relations within which it becomes socially objective.

At the same time, the very opposition between a human social process and the abstraction of value as money involves a delineation of the living subjects of this process. The opposition must be understood, then, in terms of the antithesis between and restitution of genuinely universal ends and the *particular* (albeit *falsely universalized*) ends which monetary exchange and accumulation serve. Marx stresses the “human” and “social” aspect of the exchange relation as conditioned by money precisely because the alienated appearance of human activity as money obliterates its social character at the level of immediate appearances. In this regard, even Marx’s early critique of economic categories seeks to unfold those social determinations which disappear in the historical apotheosis of capitalist social relations. Only by *analytically and critically distinguishing* between the determinations of sociality as such while grasping their historically specific character can the critique of capitalist economic categories as forms of social alienation begin. Such a move is not merely theoretical, however, but practically oriented insofar as it specifies the social conditions of possibility of freedom and unfreedom alike. Sociality can, under historically specific constraints, not least of all those sustained by capital, become sources of unfreedom and domination.⁴¹

The existence of credit, for instance, as a further development of the abstraction intrinsic to money-mediated exchange, necessitates not only compulsion in the form of the debtor needing to repay the creditor on pain of material deprivation; it also reduces both the creditor and the debtor to being “the *mode of existence of capital* and interest.”⁴² The point here, of course, is not

⁴¹ For an illuminating analysis of the principle of historical specification essential to Marx’s critique of political economy, see Karl Korsch, *Karl Marx* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2017): 12-26.

⁴² Marx, “Comments,” 215.

to flatten the asymmetrical relation of domination and exploitation between creditor and debtor; surely the latter suffers the material and subjective repercussions of this relation in a way that renders their existence *contingent* upon the power of the creditor. Nevertheless, Marx identifies an inversion which is the very essence of capitalist money—the universal subordination of human purposes to the movement of *things*, a subordination which renders social relations and those embedded in them mere *bearers* of their alienated movement. This accounts for why Marx stresses the human significance of money-mediated exchange and credit as expressions of the negation of those “*essential bonds*,” of “*real community*,” of productive, social activity as the production of “nullity.”⁴³

Further, the identification of money-mediated exchange as not a “human process” implies that it serves not human ends, but the possession and accumulation of money for its own sake—in a word, an end which simultaneously is the result of the specific form of human social mediation and which also appears as independent, acquiring its own *subjective power*. This appearance is real; it gives expression to the alienated, indirect, and unconscious character of capitalist social bonds. Hence, the subordination of human ends to alienated end of obtaining money is described as not a human process not because it is not produced by the activity of human beings. Money-mediated exchange and the system of production it presupposes constitute forms of human self-mediation, but this self-mediation is critically assessed as inhuman because it subordinates human activity, potentially pursued in a consciously determined and direct manner to an external, alien, and indirect end which becomes self-perpetuating, a vicious circle.

In a sense, Marx’s demystification of economic categories always *grounds* these inversions in the historically determinate character of the activities from which they originate

⁴³ Marx, “Comments,” 217.

and which, in turn, reproduce them. This practically oriented critique thus *breaks with the fetishistic circularity of capitalist forms of appearance*.⁴⁴ The critique of money as the medium of capitalist exchange does not appeal to an arbitrarily postulated “ought,” then, but to the concrete relations between human beings and their immanent contradictions. That human relations should appear in the form of things endowed with an objective social power—herein lies a constitutive contradiction whose abolition the critique makes into a positive imperative. In effect, it is not only political economy in its theoretical elaborations that extinguishes social and historical mediations; the objectivity of the socioeconomic forms themselves sustains the illusion that the dominating power of objects under historically specific social relations is “nature,” that it stands apart from a definite form of social practice.

“The need for money is therefore the true need produced by the modern economic system,” Marx writes, “and it is the only need which the latter produces.”⁴⁵ From the inception of his critique of bourgeois political economy, Marx sought to identify the historical peculiarities of the capitalist mode of production. For it is only under capitalist conditions that money becomes a generalized social need, one symptomatic of the historical inversion of subject and object, where the specific material mediations between human activities function as independent social objects over and above their producers. Therefore, the claim that money constitutes the sole need generated by the capitalist mode of production should be understood in the sense that, under the compulsions of this socioeconomic system, money becomes the primary need to which all other needs must bend, and in and through which they become socially validated.

⁴⁴ In this respect, one could say that Marx’s critical perspective breaks with the vicious circularity of capital neither by means of the circular Hegelian image of self-knowledge returning to itself nor by the endless progression of the straight line, but by understanding this critical knowledge of history as a “spiral” that breaks from the given precisely by breaking the circle and reconstituting itself anew. Lenin grasps this process in his *Philosophical Notebooks* when he describes dialectical knowledge as a spiral. See V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 28 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 361.

⁴⁵ Marx, EPM, 116.

Under these conditions, human productive activity assumes an *abstract form*, since its end is not the *substantive unity of self-confirmation through the satisfaction of the needs of others*.⁴⁶ As Marx indicates, the need for abstract, one-sided possession “is the measure of how far needs can be satisfied.”⁴⁷ Yet another vital aspect of the abstraction of productive activity lies in the fact that relations between producers and their respective products are only *contingently or accidentally* established, and hence do not constitute genuinely “social production.”⁴⁸ Production is not *directly social*, then, for it is socially constituted in such a way that others appears as *inessential*, as mere means for the satisfaction of ends alien to the mutual complementarity of needs and activities. Moreover, what governs social relations between human beings under capitalist conditions is their own social activity in the form of an external, overpowering necessity which asserts itself in and through their activities and yet systematically suppresses the *very necessity of a rational and hence free social determination over the process itself*.

To be sure, the complementarity described above implies from the very beginning a conscious and practically determined relation to social life-activity itself, and this forms the material basis for rendering intelligible the inversions and contradictions of capitalist monetary exchange. For under this form of life, the necessity of sociality, of irreducible interdependence, is subjected to the necessities of the alienated mediations of the capitalist system. For Marx, the ontological necessity that human beings exist *outside of themselves as needy, interdependent social beings* does not by nature constitute a *negative limit or dominating constraint* on human freedom, though its negative form is reified by bourgeois theories which uncritically, and in the

⁴⁶ For a similar line of analysis, see Jan Kandiyali, “The Importance of Others: Marx on Unalienated Production,” *Ethics* 130, no. 4 (July 2020): 555-587. Kandiyali also foregrounds the essential condition of self-realization through providing the products and activities necessary for the self-realization of others. Nevertheless, because he focuses almost exclusively on the positive image of unalienated production, I believe he does not adequately grasp the process of abstraction and distortion I describe above.

⁴⁷ Marx, “Comments,” 225.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

interest of eternalizing the anthropology of capitalist society, define social necessity as *essentially* negative; rather, it only becomes a negative limit under conditions in which production, and the unfolding of social life generally, unfolds in accordance with heteronomous, alien needs—the needs of capital and its benefactors. The transformation of the conditions of social self-realization into conditions that systematically destroy human life and deform needs becomes the occasion for historical critique.

Nevertheless, a central problem—which Marx clearly grasps in these early writings—lies in the fact that this inversion cannot appear immediately, for a constitutive feature of the fetishistic and alienated social relations distinctive of the capitalist system consists of the tendency to foreclose normative considerations beyond the horizon of that which proves instrumental to capital accumulation and the property relations which sustain it. Thus, on the one hand, human beings in their social existence—divided by class antagonisms and capitalist property and monetary relations—become objects dominated by their own alienated social powers. And this, correspondingly, results in another paradoxical condition at the level of social consciousness: the very need of human beings for each other becomes an occasion for indignity and antagonism, “whereas the estranged language of human material values seems to be the well-justified assertion of human dignity that is self-confident and conscious of itself.”⁴⁹ The purpose of the exchange of human activities ought to be the mutual flourishing of those involved—the development and fulfillment of their faculties, senses, and powers as necessarily social, creative, self-constituting beings.⁵⁰ Capitalist society, however, forecloses such

⁴⁹ Marx, “Comments,” 227.

⁵⁰ In this regard, I am concerned here with what David Leopold calls “*expansive* non-volitional needs,” or, put another way, those needs constituting the *conditions* of human flourishing, of living “well” (227). See David Leopold, *The Young Karl Marx: German Philosophy, Modern Politics, and Human Flourishing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

development by transposing into an absolute end the forms of possession and domination constitutive of the capitalist system. By grasping productive activity (and the exchange of activities between human beings implied thereby) as a universal philosophical anthropological determination of social and historical life, it becomes possible to identify the specifically capitalist form of mediation as *one particular form of social life, actively reproduced and consequently subject to radical transformation.*

And this move proves all the more critical in light of the fact that the inversion under consideration also consists of an inversion of means and ends. As we noted above, the production process, and human social relations more generally, ought to have as their end the self-realization and freedom of those participating in them; under the fetishistic domination of capital, however, human beings become the objects and means of the very conditions which, in principle, ought to be subordinate to consciously determined social purposes.⁵¹ This historical inversion of means and ends entails a critique of this systematic irrationality, this peculiar kind of unfreedom which makes those who ought to be the conscious subjects of the production process into a mere means for the abstract compulsions of capital accumulation and the self-augmentation of money.

In his reading of the early Marx, Hans-Georg Backhaus perceptively notes that the critical standpoint of Marx's engagement with political economy indeed stems from "the anthropological standpoint that is able to reveal the real economy and the theoretical economy as a 'configuration of self-alienation', as an isomorphic ontotheology."⁵² For Backhaus, Marx's

⁵¹ This "in principle" statement derives not from some transcendently derived premise, but from those philosophical anthropological determinations which define the fundamental conditions of social and historical life in general.

⁵² Hans-Georg Backhaus, "Some Aspects of Marx's Concept of Critique in the Context of his Economic-Philosophical Theory," *Human Dignity: Social Autonomy and the Critique of Capitalism*, eds. Werner Bonefeld and Kosmas Psychopedis (Aldershot: Ashcroft, 2005): 13-30, 13.

critique entails a destruction of the quantitative, formalistic approach of bourgeois economic theory, turning us instead toward the qualitative, social determination of economic categories in which social relations appear, paradoxically, extinguished qua reified things, ostensibly self-standing, naturally given entities. The anthropological-critical standpoint, in a word, exposes what Backhaus calls the uncritical, ideological conflation of “*first* and *second* nature.”⁵³ The radical force of Marx’s dictum that to be radical is to get to the root of things and that the root of things is human beings themselves lies, therefore, in the determination of the economic object as a social and historically determinate object, the result of human practice in alienated form. Moreover, as Backhaus points out, the conflation between first and second nature leads to the naturalization of capitalist economic categories and relations, since they appear as opaque—in fact unchangeable—things, a social result and process which obscures its own concrete social conditions of possibility. We must add here that the ideological conflation between first and second nature stands diametrically opposed to the critical philosophical anthropology unfolded by Marx, since it articulates the *dialectical unity* of those universal determinations—for example, sociality and productive interdependency—and their historically specific, contradictory forms of expression.

⁵³ Backhaus, “Some Aspects of Marx’s Concept of Critique,” 20. For an account of the relation between the economic and the natural, see Scott Meikle, “Marx, the European Tradition, and the Philosophic Radicals,” *Karl Marx and Contemporary Philosophy*, eds. Andrew Chitty and Martin McIvor (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009): 55-75. I remain unconvinced, however, by Meikle’s effort to establish what seems to me a reified ontological separation between “unnatural abstractions” which have the effect of “masking and perverting the nature of things” (63). This claim can be held *so long* as one acknowledges that history is *mediated nature*, which means that it proves insufficient to establish an absolute identity of nature with itself, as implied in the ontological claim that distinguishes economic “abstractions” and “natural” things. As Korsch writes, “. . . in the strictly social research of Marxian materialism, that ‘pure’ nature which is presupposed to all human activity (the economic *natura naturans*) is replaced everywhere by a ‘nature’ mediated and modified through human social activity, and thus at the same time capable of a further change and modification by our own present and future activity, i.e., by nature as *material production* (or the economic *natura naturata*)” (Korsch 2017, 139).

This obfuscation therefore possesses an objective social basis: Production for the sake of exchange, that is, production untethered from the direct satisfaction of needs which becomes a compulsory form of “conditional exchange”—the preponderance of “things” in the grips of alienated social relations—upon which the very life and activity of each producer depends.⁵⁴ Consequently, the inversion Marx identifies in these early notes arises from the *particular form* of social mediation whereby each treats their own products in practice as a mere means to the obtain the products of others. Such a form of social mediation necessarily results in a situation where human labor is subordinated not to products of labor as such, but to the products of a particular social order in which the preponderance of things prevails. Still, it remains the case that Marx’s critical method depends upon unfolding the socio-ontological determinations effaced in the conflation between first and second nature, between the form of human activity as purposively oriented sociality and its historically specific, distorted expressions and actualization.

The humanistic materialism which forms the basis of the critique of political economy bows before no authority external or transcendental to the immanence of this historical development in its negative constraints and positive potentialities. To be sure, it sees in the hypostatization of any entity the self-alienation of social activity. In so doing, it carries out a *restoration* of the human, social content of all things and relations which appear as *ahistorical*, indeed dominating, forces; it thereby establishes the radical need to reconstitute those *universal* determinations—production, consumption, distribution, etc.—which, in their contradictory historical form, become negative constraints on self-determination with respect to the historically developed potentials and social needs of those involved. Only in this way can genuinely human

⁵⁴ On this point, see Andrew Chitty, “The Early Marx on Needs,” *Radical Philosophy* 64 (1993): 23-31.

emancipation be envisioned against and beyond the totalizing but altogether contradictory—and from the perspective of human need and self-determination irrational—imperatives of capital.

Put another way, Marx's philosophical anthropology restores the sensuous dimension of social practice to its rightful place as the *material* and not merely *conceptual* condition of possibility of mediation manifest in all its concrete instantiations, no matter how alienated or distorted. Precisely because, for Marx, social mediation is not immediately identical with its given form; precisely because such mediation must be reproduced in space and time by active human subjects who experience the pressing historical contradictions of their own social existence—this constitutes the essential practical ground and premise of Marx's critique of the capitalist mode of production and the ideological rationalizations which sustain it.⁵⁵ Suffice it to say at this point that a constitutive element of Marx's historical materialism pertains to the experiential moment in and through which the distortion and alienation of human activity is made palpable, brought to consciousness and rendered unnecessary from the perspective of the need to supersede these very constraints.

This last point intimates what we earlier called the restoration of the social, human content to what Backhaus calls the “isomorphic onto-theology” of capitalist socioeconomic relations and categories. A socially grounded process of self-reconstitution, involving the practical and conscious rearticulation of life-activity and the conditions which are *its own and yet wrong, antithetical to genuine social freedom*, functions as the philosophical anthropological core of Marx's critique of the alienated mediations of the capitalist system (in these notes,

⁵⁵ It should be noted that this also radically distinguishes Marx's theoretical project from those philosophical frameworks which locate alienation and fallenness, to use Heideggerian parlance, in some indeterminate ontological condition hypostatized into an ultimate, ahistorical reality. In truth, such frameworks uncritically reflect the helpless, abstract position of the contingent individual dominated by the concrete social conditions of their existence. If only for this reason, one should be suspicious of the efforts of a thinker like Michel Henry, who attempts to render Marx the ultimate philosopher of the primacy of the concrete individual. See, for instance, Michel Henry, *Marx: An Introduction*, trans. Kristien Justaert (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

money, value, exchange-value, etc.). This encounter with social necessity does not, however, uncritically strive for unity with the *prevailing form of activity* which, rather than sustaining universal human freedom, exists as a source of universal heteronomy, unfreedom, domination. On the contrary, such an encounter with social necessity itself points to the concomitant necessity of transforming those conditions which have become deadening, antithetical to freedom as self-mediation—in a word, to freedom as the *presupposition and result* of the open-ended historical dynamic between subject and object. This practically self-reflexive dialectic is, in the final analysis, the immanent basis for the judgment that present conditions must be overturned.

To be sure, for Marx, species-activity is simultaneously *universal* and *particular*. Its universal dimension is always manifest in sociality as an immanent determination of human activity, in the socially constituted directedness, purposiveness, and interdependency of production, which has as its end the satisfaction and development of human needs and powers; under capitalist conditions of production, however, this universality is manifest in a distorted, negative, contradictory manner. Indeed, when Marx describes exchange-value in these early notes, he already grasps the *separation*—the *diremption*—of the immediate existence of labor from its *socially determined end*. “The product is produced as *value*, as *exchange-value*, as an *equivalent*” writes Marx, “and no longer because of its direct, personal relation to the producer.”⁵⁶ Within these social relations, the activity of producers is subjected to a heteronomous, alien compulsion insofar as it abides by the needs of exchange-value and its palpable concretization as money. Ends are not determined in a *consciously* social manner, but through the indirect, *unconscious* social mediation established by things endowed with social

⁵⁶ Marx, “Comments,” 220.

power. Productive activity, in this sense, acquires the character of an activity which consolidates and reproduces the conditions of its own domination. To repeat an earlier point, it becomes an *abstract* activity, a mere means for the realization of the impersonal needs expressed in the movement of exchange-value. Hence, the inversion of means and ends involved in this dynamic entails an effective abstraction insofar as it renders human activity a mere means for the realization of its own ends; human activity is, under such conditions, a mere inhuman semblance of itself, *of what it could be were it not dominated by its own social objectifications, which are, in the final analysis, the results of its own alienated activity.*⁵⁷

That human activity, the immanent determination of which lies in its socially purposive character, should become a “semblance” of itself already necessarily implies the critical judgment that such an inversion, grounded as it is in social practice, can only be dissolved practically. The immanent self-reflexivity of sociality therefore goes beyond the claim that human beings are “conscious beings”; it also implies that social conditions are products of *social activity*, and that, in principle, they can and indeed ought to be radically transformed. This point is captured well by Allen Wood, who claims that alienation from the “human essence”—from social being—is not a matter of living up to an ideal mode of sociality *transcendentally* understood, but, rather, of a “failure” to recognize itself in its own “life-activity.”⁵⁸ The

⁵⁷ On this point, see Iring Fetscher, “Marx’s Concretization of the Concept of Freedom,” *Socialist Humanism: An International Symposium*, ed. Erich Fromm (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1966): 260-272. As Fetscher writes: “Specific products are not for me or you as people, but for you and me only insofar as we are commodity owners, money owners. They are also not created for us, but for our money, not for socially related men, but for the objectified embodiment of society: money” (269).

⁵⁸ Allen W. Wood, “Marx’s Critical Anthropology: Three Recent Interpretations,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 26, no. 1 (1972): 118-139, 128. I should mention that Wood’s overall argument contains some inconsistencies, even though I rely above on his incisive reading of the concept of alienation. On the one hand, Wood affirms that “Marx’s philosophical anthropology made possible an original and radical vision of the fundamental defectiveness of capitalist society” (Wood 1972, 130). On the other, he holds that this philosophical anthropology is insufficiently determinate, that it serves only to identify the mystifications and illusions of the capitalist mode of production but does not in and of itself provide compelling grounds for its historical abolition. For the irrationality of the capitalist mode of production, in Wood’s view, can only be made clear through “a detailed understanding of the actual process of production, its historical development, and its relation to the human needs and human nature which are its

irreducibility of human sociality as it unfolds historically provides, for Marx, the immanent rationality which forms the very basis of his critique of the inverted world of capital. Only because Marx's philosophical anthropology affirms, as these notes reveal, a direct and complementary relation between human beings in their social existence can he determine the relations mediated by the dominating preponderance of things as an irrational and inhuman social order, one ruled by abstractions, by social relations which serve particular ends at the expense of universality. It is not mediation as such that is in question, then, but the contradictory form that mediation assumes, that is, the way it becomes untethered from the needs and intentions of those involved.

Even at this point, then, the critique of the capitalist economic categories depends upon this critical oscillation, a dialectical tension, between the universality of productive, social activity as mutual complementarity and its historically specific, contradictory form. The two do not form ontologically discrete aspects of historical reality, however, for it is precisely the dialectical unity of their identity and difference which must be brought into view in order to identify those negative constraints which distort the insuperable material determinations of social interdependency. Hence, the complementarity of human productive activity—that is, the

essential products" (Wood 1972, 131). Wood correctly argues that Marx's critique of political economy undergoes decisive changes, since it cannot be denied that the object of critique becomes the crisis-ridden, contradictory logic of the capitalist mode of production as a global system. But this does not mean that Marx's emancipatory critique of the capitalist mode of production does not continue to presuppose certain philosophical anthropological determinations without which notions such as human needs and human nature would prove altogether unintelligible. If the critique were radically immanent, if it were not able to refer to sociality and needs in general, the very contradictions of the system could not be specified in terms of the concrete existence of those in its grip, since there would be no notion of human freedom, self-development, association—in short, no compelling reasons for the abolition of the system. Human beings would indeed be *mere* bearers of economic categories. Given Wood's framing of the problem, however, it is worth stressing that the philosophical anthropological determinations must always be indexed to their historical content, and hence to the object and historical possibilities to which they necessarily refer and through which alone they are *actualized*. The question is not *whether* human sociality is actualized, which, as Wood rightly points out, is presupposed, but also *how*, that is, *in what forms* this takes place. But these two aspects above constitute, as I have been arguing, an indissoluble unity. Hence, the theory requires no "external" or empty "ought" which would guide it; the philosophical anthropological determinations pertain to the immanent unfolding of historical processes as self-mediation.

determination that we always produce for others under any and all conditions, and that this always involves a definite form of activity—constitutes the immanent point of departure of the critique of political economy. *In this precise sense, Marx's philosophical anthropology invites us to determine those limits of socio-historical reality, which do not merely point to the brute reproduction of physiological life, but to the ever-shifting socio-historical relations which condition how and whether human beings relate to each other in a way most adequate to their social interdependency.* So conceived, Marx's philosophical anthropology evinces a dialectical treatment of those socio-ontological determinations without which a critical theory of society remains incomplete, for its object is not an uncritical, disinterested delineation of first principles or a taxonomy of philosophical categories, but a specification of those conditions which, in their contradictory development, point beyond themselves toward a condition more worthy of human beings. This process of becoming as the very form of social self-determination, as the movement of self-transformation, is a constitutive aspect of Marx's emancipatory materialism.⁵⁹

It bears repeating here that the affirmation of this universality provides Marx with a way to grasp not only the negativity of this process under the domination of capital, but also the positive potentialities implied in the contradictory development of the historical process.⁶⁰ What

⁵⁹ In this respect, Marx could never fully—perhaps despite himself—excise from his theory what Hegel called the speculative moment of thought, a moment that demands that thought not take the given world of facts as the ultimate court of appeal for the determination of truth, but that it strive to unleash those determinate tendencies in the object that point beyond it, toward its transformation. In an illustrative 1843 letter to Arnold Ruge, Marx calls the Germany of his day a “*dehumanized world*,” a world of base philistinism, because it embodies universal heteronomy, hence a vulgar acceptance of what human beings have been made into under backward relations of political and social unfreedom (137). “Where the monarchical principle has a majority behind it, human beings constitute the minority; where the monarchical principle arouses no doubts, there human beings do not exist at all,” he writes (138). Clearly, the claim here does not imply that this condition of heteronomy and dehumanization is not historically produced; it points only to human life becoming a semblance of itself so long as the dehumanizing status quo prevails, so long as there is no struggle to appropriate that freedom which is in principle theirs. See Karl Marx, “Letter's from the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*,” *Marx Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 3 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010): 133-141.

⁶⁰ A process which, in its totalizing imperatives, comes to encompass the world, albeit in an uneven manner constituted by colonialism, imperialism, and a differentially constituted division of global labor.

is more, Marx also recognizes the need to grasp social *self-mediation as a process materially embedded in nature*. This bears implications for how one understands Marx's philosophical anthropology, not least of all the meaning of concepts such as "development," "freedom," and "nature" itself, as we shall discover in the following chapter.

III. THE PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL MOMENT: MARX'S CRITIQUE OF ALIENATION AND THE MATERIALIST METACRITIQUE OF HEGEL

Introduction

Marx's theoretical accomplishment in the 1844 *Paris Manuscripts* (PM hereafter) consists not only in the elaboration of the notion of species-being and a sustained critique of economic categories, but also in a significant metacritique of Hegelian philosophy, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* especially.⁶¹ It is with the critique of the latter that we begin. Yet we shall not be concerned as much with whether Marx interprets Hegel correctly as with the productive ambivalence of this metacritical encounter. We shall have occasion in what follows to instead examine the creative tensions embodied in this metacritique, with the full awareness that not only other interpretive strands exist in understanding the Hegel-Marx relation, but, even more importantly, that the very terms of engagement with Hegel's philosophy vary, sometimes drastically so, across Marx's theoretical development.⁶² My intervention lies in fleshing out the novel conception of social labor and history that Marx develops through his early materialist metacritique of Hegel. Metacritique should be understood, in this context, as a mode of critique that grasps the historical limitations of a particular theory manifest in its conceptual workings for the elaboration of its own positive and critical—indeed emancipatory—aims.⁶³ This metacritical, immanent gesture in Marx depends upon the displacement of any philosophical approach which allots *priority* to ideality in the determination of human existence and thereby turns us toward the

⁶¹ Yet we cannot disregard, for hermeneutical purposes, that the very order and titles of the various "sections" of the *Paris Manuscripts* have been subject to much contestation and a fraught editorial history. For an overview of these issues, see Marcello Musto, "'The Young Marx' Myth in the Interpretations of the *Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*," *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory* 43, no. 2 (2015): 233-260.

⁶² Thus, it would be more appropriate to speak of Marx's engagement with Hegel as a kind of constellation, each point revealing a different moment, neither completely discontinuous nor identical, of Marx's evolving concerns.

⁶³ I borrow the term "metacritique" from the early Habermas's reading of the Hegel-Marx relationship in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971): 25-42. We shall return to Habermas's arguments later.

material determinations of human sociality, now inconceivable in the absence of a theorization of the historical embeddedness and irreducibly *practical* character of the social metabolic process in nature. Further, we shall see that this displacement unsettles the typical interpretations of Marx's account of the opposition between idealism and materialism in a way not incidental to the elaboration of his philosophical anthropology and his emancipatory theory of history.

Relatedly, this chapter shall also serve as an occasion to develop more fully a category of chief normative and explanatory significance mentioned in the preceding chapter, one that establishes a relation of practically grounded self-reflexivity between subject and object, namely, the category of self-mediation. For this purpose, I shall draw on István Mészáros's important treatment of this decisive category. For the category of self-mediation articulates not only the open-ended character of *self-determination on the part of social labor*, but also its dependency on the historical development of which it is both subject and object. Self-mediation allows us to trace the ongoing unfolding of human history in its contradictory form, and thus admits of no historically predetermined finalities, even as it does not surrender historical critique to the tides of an unmediated contingency. By this immanent measure of open-ended self-mediation as the objective basis of the critique of capital, even communism becomes a dynamic movement, a self-critical process through which the supersession of capitalist private property relations is made intelligible as the positive and historically necessary alternative to capital. "Communism is the necessary form and the dynamic principle of the immediate future," Marx writes, "but communism as such is not the goal of human development, the structure of human society."⁶⁴

That Marx's historical materialist approach has been interpreted as a prime example of crude determinism should not deter us from placing the previous statement in its properly

⁶⁴ Marx, EPM, 114.

dialectical context: The necessity of communism, both as a historical and as a moral necessity, stems from a commitment to *human social development as an end in itself*, and this in stark contrast to the capitalist mode of production with its irrational subordination of human needs and social development to its alienated and exploitative imperatives. With respect to the notion of dialectical determination noted above, the task Marx’s critique of political economy set for itself was, in fact, free human life from the grip of the contradictory social determinations of capital. An incomprehension of this dialectical account of the entwinement of necessity and normativity, however, has often led liberal critics, notably Karl R. Popper, to make the paradoxical charge that Marx’s historical materialism is possessed of both *historical determinism* and *moral relativism*.⁶⁵ How to explain this paradoxical charge?

The reasoning here on Popper’s part is rather straightforward, though not less unconvincing thereby. Since historical materialism as formulated by Marx is committed to the idea of inexorable historical laws, the former cannot but regard moral considerations as arbitrary illusions held by contending classes about their respective material circumstances. Thus, it suffices to issue predictions about the iron-clad course of history and moral claims seem to follow with equal inevitability: “Adopt the moral system held by those whose actions are most useful for bringing about the future!”⁶⁶ If this were the case, however, the normative claims of

⁶⁵ Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), esp. 405-416. For a critical overview of the *political* aspects of Popper’s attack on ‘historicism’, i.e., an unqualified defense of liberal pluralism and gradualism which is operative in its very methodological approach, see Herbert Marcuse, “Karl Popper and the Problem of Historical Laws,” *Studies in Critical Philosophy*, trans. Joris de Bres (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973): 191-208. What is striking about liberal critics is that they tend to share a common ideological horizon—a rejection of the possibility of meaningfully intervening into history on the basis of a conscious recognition of the irrational character of capitalist society. For a similar critique, see F. A. Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989). That Popper construes Marxism as implying a submission to ‘irrational’ forces whereas Hayek construes it as implying a ‘rationalist’ belief in the transparency of economic planning matters little here. Both seek to rule out of court any notion of substantive and meaningful socialist planning as a totalitarian incursion on the freedom of the individual, whether this individual is conceived as the enlightened defender of the pluralism of the “Open Society” (Popper) or the possessor of an inalienable “economic freedom” upon which any other freedoms depend (Hayek).

⁶⁶ Popper, *The Open Society*, 411.

historical materialism, which I see as inseparable from its philosophical anthropological framework, would suffer from being *strictly prudential* in character, narrowly bound to immediate concerns irrespective of whether they point in the direction of a more universal society which enables rather than disables, actualizes rather than deactualizes, human flourishing and needs.⁶⁷

Pace such critics, I would venture the claim that this seemingly perplexing statement regarding the necessity of communism intimates the philosophical anthropological core of historical materialism inasmuch as it holds fast to *what is the case* without relinquishing the critical claim that *what is the case* immanently contains the critical imperative that the prevailing social order *ought to be* dismantled in the interest of a genuinely human and hence universal form of social mediation, one commensurate with the historical negation of capital's contradictions and the *positive* moment of human self-realization necessitated thereby. This positive moment is not abstractly opposed or external to its negative capitalist form, however. It would be more accurate to say the unity of historical progress and destruction which reaches universally devastating proportions under the capitalist mode of production constitutes a historically specific form of *human historical development* in which potential progress and destruction, freedom and unfreedom, are entangled to such an extent that the former is distorted into its opposite, into an aggravation of social domination and destruction, both of human life and of nature. One would not be mistaken in saying, then, that this contradictory dialectic, for Marx, constitutes the very logic of alienation under the capitalist mode of production and marks it as a specific form of life. It is a humanly and hence historically constituted logic, albeit one

⁶⁷ That historical materialism depends upon a purely instrumental kind of moral reasoning is also the view put forward by Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*, 5th edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013): 139-148. That is, we need only bow before the power of historical necessity; normative judgements follow from identification with those historical forces which point in that direction.

that can be made intelligible as dehumanizing from the vantage point of the *negative limits* it places on a more substantive, universal realization of human needs and powers.

To speak of this *contradictory* development as “human,” however, does not amount to circumventing the fact that it reproduces itself through social and political inequality on a global scale, and that it therefore necessarily refers, even if not always immediately, to the *unequal and alienated relations of production* which obtain between human beings in the reproduction of their social existence. Only a humanly produced historical order, appealing to no metaphysical causes or transcendental concepts, could be regarded as dehumanizing and contradictory *on its own terms*, that is, in terms of whether it promotes the rich, many-sided development of social individuals as free, conscious, and corporeal beings. The critical judgment as to the unequal, alienated, and universally antagonistic character of capitalist social relations depends, then, upon grasping the totality of the historical process as mediated by the compulsions of capital accumulation as antithetical to genuinely human ends, ones no longer bound to the falsely universalized constraints of its uncontrolled, antagonistic, and alienated form of social mediation.

Correspondingly, the positive, affirmative moment consists of the historical task to recuperate and redirect history in a conscious manner, in the interest of rich social individuals and their development, which can only be carried out, in this account, by the proletariat on a global scale. The momentous character of this historical project develops in and through contradictions and particularities of historical struggle, which constitute partial but not inessential moments within the horizon of the necessarily universal task of socialist emancipation.⁶⁸ The dynamic which drives capital is assessed as an irrational, false, and

⁶⁸ This was well understood by many of the 20th century Third World anti-colonial revolutionaries. Amílcar Cabral, in the context of African liberation movements and Guinea-Bissau in particular, for example, affirms that cultural specificity and resistance is an integral *moment* of revolutionary struggle, but that this moment is ultimately embedded in “Constant and generalized raising of feelings of humanism, solidarity, respect and disinterested

contradictory form of human development, in other words, from the perspective of the further development of human needs and powers, including the *radical historical need* for the radical transformation of the alienated labor process itself and of social life as a whole.⁶⁹ It breaks, in this way, with the inhuman morality of abstract possession and egoism as the intrinsic nature of human beings, a view found in liberal political and economic theory, which abstracts from the conditions under which such features *become socially necessary* and falsely conflates what happens to be the case with what ought to be the case.

And here we must introduce a critical qualification: the philosophical anthropological dimension of the critique of political economy must be situated within a historical theory that shifts the very terms of the anthropological problem of human nature as traditionally conceived, that is, as a philosophical gesture to fix once and for all the unchanging nature of human beings. To cite Mészáros: “The ‘anthropological principle’, therefore, must be put in its proper place, within the general framework of a more comprehensive historical ontology.”⁷⁰ This assertion proves consistent with a claim made in Chapter II, namely, that Marx’s critical philosophical

devotion to the human being” (153). The internationalist form of anti-colonial struggle presupposed a commitment to universal humanism consistent with the commitment that global capitalism could only be overcome globally, involving a universal humanity as a presupposition and as a historical task. This was not merely a moral claim, however, but one based on the necessity of global struggle, if capital’s domination over the social metabolism was to be positively transcended. See Amílcar Cabral, “National Culture.” *Unity and Struggle: Speeches and Writings*, trans. Michael Wolfers (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979): 138-154. Similarly, Frantz Fanon, against readings that downplay his universal humanism, understood the latter not as an abstract moral imperative, but as the arduous process of a new national culture struggling for the historical aspirations of a people in the context of a global and ultimately universal struggle against colonialism and capitalism: “The consciousness of self is not the closing of a door to communication. Philosophic thought teaches us, on the contrary, that it is its guarantee. National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension” (247). See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963). For an analysis of Fanon’s conception of universal history which stresses its Hegelian ‘negativist’ aspect, see Karen Ng, “Hegel and Adorno on Negative Universal History: The Dialectics of Species-Life,” *Creolizing Hegel*, ed. Michael Monahan (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017): 113-133, esp. 127-129. For a rich analysis of the ongoing relevance of the contributions of this anti-colonial tradition and its relation to humanist arguments and premises, see Elizabeth Portella, “The Weapon of Theory Reconsidered: Anti-Colonial Marxism and the Post-Cold War Imaginary.” *Radical Philosophy Review* 25, no. 1 (2022).

⁶⁹ Agnès Heller speaks of such needs as “radical needs” in *The Theory of Need in Marx* (London: Verso, 2018), esp. 74-95. We shall return to the problem of radical needs in chapter 5.

⁷⁰ Mészáros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation*, 44.

anthropology persists an *essential moment* of the critique of capital; its ‘truth’ lies in being transcended and preserved, rendered intelligible and determinate through an investigation of the historical conditions in which it develops freely or is distorted (or both, as is the case under a society internally riven by the class relations and antagonisms which comprise capital). In this sense, a critical philosophical anthropology cannot be artificially severed from an account of the historically determinate conditions within which human beings develop the social relations and means of their self-development, that is, *how* and in *what* ways their inescapably social being finds expression.

The necessary determinations of human social reproduction, both natural and historical, must be grasped in their dialectical unity, in terms of the historical forms they assume. Yet neither term remains unmodified in this process, *even if it is the case that one can discern in the concrete appearances themselves abstract universal determinations constitutive of the metabolic interchange between human beings and nature universally*. Further, it must be said that it is not this dialectic between form and content *as such* that demands to be transcended historically, which would be unintelligible, implying as it does freedom beyond necessity and determination, a content without form—denying, in a word, the open-ended character of human history. It is, rather, the supersession of capital as a historically specific alienated form of social life inadequate to content—the further development of needs and powers in a way determined by quality and not the quantitative determinations of the self-valorization of value, as well as non-destructive relation to nature—that determines the practical horizon of the struggle to transcend the capitalist mode of production.

For this reason, Marx's critical theory contains, as Ernst Bloch's writes, "a model of humanism that conceives itself in action."⁷¹ This emancipatory humanism takes its bearings not from an abstract affirmation of a spiritual commonality, one that would overlook existing social divisions and contradictions, but from the fact that the very notion of humanity remains a semblance of itself, falls short of its universality or concept, as long as historical conditions persist in their alienated, antagonistic, and self-undermining form. The struggle against dehumanization, exploitation, and alienation constitutive of the rule of capital is a *struggle for humanity as a positive historical task*.⁷² To be sure, the *particular* interests which govern a mode of *universal*, albeit contradictory and irrational, *social intercourse* is precisely what demands a critical approach that proves able to ground the cause of a concretely universal form of human emancipation forged through particular struggles. If human flourishing and human freedom can be understood exclusively in social terms, as a matter of the social relations between human beings, then a philosophical anthropology can only be normatively compelling if it makes universal claims on the basis of particular problems, contradictions, and inversions grounded in a universally shared, albeit antagonistically constituted, human condition.

In view of these concerns, this chapter is divided into four parts. The first concerns Marx's metacritique of Hegelian philosophy. It underscores Hegel's positive contributions to Marx's philosophical anthropology as well as the limitations of Hegel's philosophy as articulated in Marx's metacritique, focusing particularly on *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Aesthetics*. I argue that the account of the mediation of natural life and historical life that we find in Hegel, a

⁷¹ Ernst Bloch, *On Karl Marx*, trans. John Maxwell (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 20.

⁷² See also István Mészáros, "Marx 'Philosopher'," *The History of Marxism: Marxism in Marx's Day*, Vol 1., ed. Eric Hobsbawm (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982): 103-136. As Mészáros writes, "he [Marx] insisted that the measure of emancipation must be the degree to which social praxis regains its universal dimension: a task he also called 'the realization of philosophy'" (107).

matter intimately linked to his critique of formalism and externally imposed abstractions, remains indispensable not only for grasping the conceptual parameters of Marx's philosophical anthropology, but for assessing the meaning of Marx's 'break' with Hegel through the elaboration of an emancipatory materialism grounded in a substantive vision of social freedom.

In the second section, I turn to the place of needs in Marx's philosophical anthropology in the context of the critical analysis of alienation. I argue that a crucial element of Marx's philosophical anthropology is an account of economic categories as irreducibly bound to an experiential dimension, one attuned to the subjective and corporeal aspects of the distortion of needs under the alienated conditions of capitalism. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx speaks of economic categories as forms of being (*Daseinformen*), but already as early as the *Paris Manuscripts*, his immanent critique begins with the categories and premises of political economy and proceeds to unfold their inner determinations, their genesis in the concrete content of social labor's self-alienation.⁷³ The critique of economic categories in Marx, I claim, gives rise to a markedly different account of social reality than the categories of political economy, which simultaneously veil and express the historical specificity of the capitalist mode of production. Against the presupposition of economic categories as inert or merely given facts, Marx unfolds the subjective-objective character of economic forms.

No matter how alienated and false—a critical judgment which can be issued from the perspective of human needs and the further self-development and substantive freedom of social individuals—economic categories remain forms of self-mediation. Relations between human beings mediated by the domination of things subsist, in the final analysis, as human social relations which appear as they really are, that is, as mediated by the *preponderance* of things. As

⁷³ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, (London: Penguin, 1973), 106

the reified forms of appearance of dynamic processes, the economic categories provide the immanent point of departure, but their reified immediacy is suspended through a specification of the underlying social relations which mediate between human beings and nature, relations which negate human needs, distort sociality, and destroy the natural conditions of social life. Hegel's critique of immediacy is here central to Marx's critique not only of the economic forms themselves, but of the systematic form of experienced social unfreedom and misery they sustain. Indeed, Marx's critique of the alienation of needs is contingent upon the historically peculiar way capital constrains human social reproduction to the narrow, *immediate* aim of its quantitative self-expansion, expressed as the lack of substantive control over the social and material conditions of existence.

In the third section, I further elaborate upon Marx's critical appropriation of the dialectic of negativity in Hegel's *Phenomenology* with reference to Marx's conception of social freedom. For Marx, freedom is not a metaphysical, transcendental property, but a socially grounded relation which unfolds through the dynamic unity of the productive powers of humanity and the social and natural conditions of production. The specification of this form of freedom involves a process of rational abstraction, which proves necessary for apprehending the historical character of the capitalist mode of production, defined, in one of its essential aspects, as the systematic separation of social labor from the objective conditions of its existence. This separation or process of dissociation is not a consequence of the intentions of individual capitalists, however, but a logical presupposition of the system which occurs on an expanding scale and in deeply uneven, differentiated ways.

Nevertheless, insofar as Marx identifies this logic of separation as an objective constraint on social freedom, indeed as its negation, there must be an alternative form of association which

would take as its point of departure the radical transformation of the property relations which characterize the capitalist mode of production. The indispensable condition of such social transformation is the reconstitution of the *telos* of production, distribution, and consumption on the part of the associated producers. A key aspect of the Marxian conception of freedom thus lies in the postulate that freedom depends upon substantive control over the very conditions which render freedom *socially concrete* or *concretely universal*.

In the fourth and final section, I turn toward an examination of the concept of species-being as an ontologically grounded account of self-mediation, a concrete universal which establishes a dialectical relation between universality and particularity. This concept lays the basis for a vision of social freedom which can mediate between the universal social determinations of human life and their distorted forms of appearances. This concept does not oppose a more real core or original human nature to the distorted appearances. Rather, it specifies that the universal determinations of social life can and do assume forms which prove antithetical to human development and social freedom.

Species-being, then, makes intelligible the distorted appearances as grounded in non-reciprocal, alienated social relations which subsist in an “external” manner to those involved, with the consequence that sociality appears in an *indirect form mediated by the alien objectivity of things*. Drawing on past and more recent reconstructions, I argue that this fraught concept allows us to critique capital as the alienated manifestation of universally developed human needs and powers, as possessed of a logic necessitating the systematic dissociation of social subject and social object. The dis-alienation of this social process cannot be accomplished by merely changing the form of distribution of products, however, but by a fundamental change in the form of production itself, one which sets itself conscious social aims no longer determined by capital as a self-propelling form of historical compulsion. Dis-alienation thus pertains to the reconstitution of the very *telos* of production—the metabolism between nature and humanity.

This *telos*, however, is grounded in the capacity for self-directed social activity, conceived as an immanent determination of human life-activity.

Marx, Hegel, and the Limits of Hegelian Philosophy

In the *Paris Manuscripts*, Marx laments the inability of the Young Hegelians to seriously contend with the problems raised by Hegel's philosophy. His metacritique seeks to take Hegelian philosophy more seriously, to examine the internal contradictions of its conceptual workings, to unfold what such contradictions make visible for a positive overcoming of its ideological bounds. Indeed, only in this way can a genuine advancement on this philosophy's own achievements be made. This explains Marx's charge that the Young Hegelians remain mired in the very philosophy they believe to have overcome; they lag behind it, since its moment of truth has not been fully grasped, just as the very limitations of its self-understanding and the historical conditions within which it arises remain unrecognized, in fact mystified. It is precisely for this reason that the Young Hegelians continue to divide the world into the truth meted out by philosophical criticism and the "stupidity of the world."⁷⁴ This point was to remain central, as evidenced by Marx's polemics against the preponderance of ideas in both more conservative and radical strands of Hegelianism, as well as the "True Socialists" in *The German Ideology*. Critique here retains its abstract spiritual form, while socio-historical reality continues to be conceived as simple, unmediated materiality, which need only bend in accordance with the strictures of a narrowly philosophical criticism. Implicitly, then, purportedly autonomous thought remains

⁷⁴ Marx, EPM, 143. See also Marx's famous Letter to Arnold Ruge, "Letter's from the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*," *Marx Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 3 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010): 141-145. It is true that Marx eventually abandons his early republican position that the political state embodies the demands of "reason" and universality, as indeed he mostly abandons the very formulation of the problem of historical emancipation in terms of "reason." Yet the issue articulated in this letter—namely, that to which critical philosophy turns its eye in order to comprehend the historical interests and struggles which press beyond the prevailing social order—persists in the form of an analysis of the labor process, the material basis of the contradictory social reproduction process as mediated by capital.

firmly ensconced as the absolute ground of critique, as its unquestioned, self-standing premise. The antinomy between subject and object, spirit and world, subject and substance, which Hegelian philosophy strenuously sought to grasp and overcome, therefore lives on, in Marx's view.⁷⁵ What is more, the determinate limits of Hegelian philosophy, and hence of the bourgeois society from which the latter emerged, continue to uncritically determine—or negatively limit—the horizon of a supposedly critical philosophy.

For this reason, we ought to dwell upon Marx's metacritique of Hegel, since it becomes clear that Marx does not perform an unproblematic inversion of what he understands as the culmination of Hegelian philosophy, that is, the *primacy of self-consciousness* as expressed in the fundamental thesis that “everything hangs on expressing the true not only as *substance*, but just as much as *subject*.”⁷⁶ As we shall see, Marx grasps the moment of truth in this claim by critically incorporating the principle of negativity which the unfolding of truth as both substance and subject and as mediation implies.⁷⁷ To be sure, against dogmatism and reified positivity of various stripes, Hegel sought to unfold the logic of matters themselves, entering into their immanent substance so as to demonstrate that the process of their actualization or self-negation as subject-objects involves an unfolding of their immanent rationality. A brief excursus on Hegel is therefore in order.

⁷⁵ On this question, see Rocío Zambrana, “Dialectics as Resistance: Hegel, Benjamin, Adorno,” *Hegel and Resistance*, eds. Rebecca Comay and Bart Zantvoort (London: Bloomsbury, 2018): 59-77. Zambrana stresses that Hegelian dialectics both articulates and resists the abstract, contradictory, and self-undermining notions of freedom at the heart of Western culture. For a classic and powerful discussion of the antinomies of bourgeois thought, see György Lukács, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971): 83-222, esp. 110-149.

⁷⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2018), 12.

⁷⁷ Zambrana emphasizes the irreducibility of mediation as constitutive of the movement of the actualization of any given object—the rationality of the object as self-movement or self-negation (43). A given object becomes self-determining not only in being irreducibly mediated by its other, but by grasping this mediation as constitutive of itself. Mediation, in other words, implies the coming-to-be (and the undoing) of the matter at hand, that is, its subjectivity as negativity.

According to Hegel, rationality is not an externally imposed ideal, but the process of self-development through which a subject becomes other than itself, comes into its—however provisional and historically transient—own in being mediated by its constitutive otherness. Further, it is the movement of “externalization” and “recollection” that constitutes, for Hegel, the process of the rational actualization of Spirit (*Geist*), as Zambrana argues.⁷⁸ In this way *Geist*, for Hegel, lifts itself, as it were, from the status of mere contingency and raises itself to the level of consciously grasped conceptual necessity. The key metatheoretical move on Hegel’s part consists of nothing less than elaborating a method which strives to articulate the unity of continuity and discontinuity of the manifold forms of self-understanding within which the present as *Geist* becomes intelligible to itself as not only *historical*, however, but also as *natural*.

In Chapter IV of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel famously deals with the structure and shape of self-consciousness and recognition as expressed in the famous claim regarding “I that is *we*, *we* that is *I*,” where self-consciousness appears to transcend both the world of the sensuous and “a super-sensible otherworldly beyond,” thereby assuming its place in the spiritual fullness of the historical present.⁷⁹ While this chapter tends to be read as an account of the normative character of relations of recognition as the sublation of mere nature, there is compelling evidence to suggest that natural life and work as ontological determinations of human beings retain an essential place. As Emmanuel Renault argues, what distinguishes Hegel’s conception of self-consciousness and recognition from the Fichtean conception of an absolute spontaneous consciousness that posits itself lies in the fact that “Hegel relies upon a theory of desire as *practical appropriation* of the external presuppositions of the life process.”⁸⁰ This notion of the

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

⁷⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 108.

⁸⁰ Emmanuel Renault, “Social Self,” 207.

subjective uptake or appropriation (*Aneignung*) of the objective conditions of existence, the unity of ‘first’ and ‘second’ nature, proves critical for the Marxian conception of the socially mediated metabolism with nature as the ontological *sine qua non* of social life as (at least potentially) free *self-mediation*. Indeed, for Hegel, only a content that finds substantive expression in the world of appearances—a phenomenal and practical expression—captures the fullness of *Geist*.⁸¹ Renault captures this point well when he argues that the transition from desire to recognition and then to work evolves into a new conception of freedom which includes both historical and natural conditions: “*bei sich sein* in otherness in general (or appropriation of the various presuppositions, intersubjective as well as material, institutional as well as natural, of freedom.”⁸² In Chapter II, I referred to the essential *complementarity* of productive activity, that is, the cooperative relations by means of which humans needs are satisfied and further developed, though in an alienated and unfree form which occurs through monetary mediation. Now this point can be deepened by acknowledging that Marx *requires* the Hegelian notion of the socio-historical objectification of essential powers in unity with the totality of natural conditions that make the actualization of social freedom possible.⁸³

Now, if, to use Horkheimer and Adorno’s striking formulation, “all reification is forgetting,” then a *critical recollection* of the *socially mediated and natural basis* of such reification constitutes the critical moment which can begin to apprehend the determinacy of the

⁸¹ See, on this point, Christopher Yeomans, “Hegel’s Expressivist Modal Realism,” *The Actual and the Possible: Modality and Metaphysics in Modern Philosophy*, ed. Mark Sinclair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 117-135. To quote Yeomans: “To put it bluntly and in non-Hegelian terms, modality presents the substantiality of things as grounded in things’ manifestation of what they are in relational contexts. That is, the substantiality of things is to be found not in their immunity to external influence but in their ability to utilize such influence as a resource for self-expression” (121).

⁸² Renault, “Social Self,” 211.

⁸³ For an interpretation that centers Hegel’s “normative essentialism,” see Heikki Ikäheimo, “Holism and Normative Essentialism in Hegel’s Social Ontology,” *Recognition and Social Ontology*, eds. Heikki Ikäheimo and Arto Laitinen (Leiden: Brill, 2011): 145-209.

matter at hand.⁸⁴ This does not mean that the phenomena of alienation and reification which characterize the capitalist mode of production are natural, only that the alienation of human and non-human nature constitutes a necessity for this specific form of life and that the appearance of this fact as natural is symptomatic of the kind of domination which prevails in the capitalist system.⁸⁵ What appears as immediately given is shown to be not only a result, but a result of historically specific practices and social relations within which the historically shifting boundaries between subject and object develop. Hegel's idealism thus stands opposed to the contemplative stance of philosophies which neglect the reciprocal determination of subject and object. To fully grasp the stakes of the claim that the true should be comprehended not only as substance but just as much as subject, then, involves discerning the non-absolute, reciprocally determining character of both subject and substance: "the living substance is the being that is in truth *subject*, or, what amounts to the same, it is in truth actual only insofar as it is the movement of self-positing, or, that it is the mediation of itself and its becoming-other-to-itself."⁸⁶

In other words, to see substance as living subject, as possessed of a logic, implies unfolding the objective world as historically and socially structured; it implies the ontologically active particularization of the universal in the various shapes and forms it assumes. A necessary homology exists between the form of spirit as such as self-mediating or self-productive and its manifold, dynamic, ever-changing shapes. The self-mediating logic of human activity entails a

⁸⁴ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 191.

⁸⁵ Despite having rejected the dialectics of nature, the early critical theorists' critique of instrumental reason hinged less upon a romanticization of nature against the background of a quasi-Weberian notion of rationalization, as some have argued, than upon a recognition of the damage wrought upon human and non-human nature by the capitalist mode of production. See, for example, Max Horkheimer, "The Revolt of Nature," *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Continuum, 1974): 92-127. "Instrumentalized subjective reason either eulogizes nature as pure vitality or disparages it as brute force," Horkheimer writes, echoing *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, "instead of treating it as a text to be interpreted by a philosophy that, if read rightly, will unfold a tale of infinite suffering" (126).

⁸⁶ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 12.

view of human sociality as immanently guided by the distinctiveness of the very *form* of its life-activity as directed, and consciously so, towards other human beings. The “I that is *We*, we that is I” which, for Hegel, defines an essential determination of spirit, is not simply a historical accomplishment.⁸⁷ The historical shapes themselves instantiate, stand as self-constituting instances, of the universality of this self-mediating logic.⁸⁸ The true, in this sense, is never totally internal to a subject nor metaphysically absolutized as a property of the objective world. A dialectical notion of truth strives to overcome these formalisms on account of their untruth, their determinate limits, which can only be made visible when their interdependence is brought to the fore.⁸⁹

The importance of Hegel’s critique of the limits of formalism cannot be overstressed, especially when we consider Marx’s critique of the limits of both contemplative materialism and idealism in his *Theses on Feuerbach*. Contemplative materialisms (including but not limited to that of Feuerbach) fail to register the subjective moment constitutive of the object, its mediated character; the object is not regarded as materialized or objectified subjective practice, but as an inert, unmediated thing—and this despite the emphasis of such materialisms on sensuousness and the immediacy of perception. Thus, for example, in Feuerbach’s sensualist materialism, the “head” or thought stands as the locus of free activity, whereas the “heart” or the body, is bound to the world of sensuousness and suffering.⁹⁰ Human activity, in Feuerbach’s rendering, remains

⁸⁷ For such a reading, see Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel’s Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), esp. 183-209.

⁸⁸ For a lucid critique of the notion of spirit as a historical accomplishment, specifically in Pippin’s reading, see Christoph Schuringa, “Hegel on Spirited Animals,” *Philosophy: The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy* 97, no. 381 (2022): 1-24.

⁸⁹ Adorno, *Hegel*, 6. “It is precisely through absolute idealism, which permits nothing to remain outside of the subject, now expanded to become infinite, but instead sweeps everything along with it into the current of immanence,” Adorno writes, “that the opposition between mere matter and a consciousness that bestows forms and meaning is extinguished.”

⁹⁰ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Fiery Brook: Selected Writings*, trans. Zavar Hanfi (London: Verso Books, 2012), 164. In his “Preliminary Theses on the Reform of Philosophy,” Feuerbach also writes the following: “When perceiving

split between the active moment of consciousness, defined in terms of freedom, and a suffering, corporeal moment, defined as a passive element. Hence, while Feuerbach sheds light on the perceived idealistic excesses of Hegelian philosophy—especially the relegation of human and non-human nature to the subsuming work of spirit—his sensualist anthropology to a large extent merely attempts to invert Hegel.

Idealism, on the other hand, recognizes subjective mediation yet “does not know real, sensuous activity as such.”⁹¹ Idealism, then, cannot adequately grasp nature nor history proper, only their speculative after-image; only in and through the mediation of the absolute concept can both human and natural history be comprehended as universality. Marx’s metacritique of Hegel proves radically different from Feuerbach’s sensualism, however, insofar as he stresses not sensuousness pure and simple, but determinate social forms as they mediate between human beings and between human beings and external nature. Indeed, he does not abide by the simplistic thesis that Hegel saw thought as otherworldly and disembodied speculation, radically separate from nature, a point also complicated by our engagement with Hegel above.

It would be more precise to say that Marx’s critique shows that Hegel ideologically distorts the objective contradictions of bourgeois society into ideal or conceptual ordeals to be allayed, in the final analysis, by conceptual comprehension. Objective forms of alienation, Marx argues, Hegel falsely construes as “an estrangement of *pure*, i.e., abstract, philosophical thinking.”⁹² Or, as Henri Lefebvre puts it, “Hegel opposes non-philosophical immediacy, then

through the senses, I am determined by the object; when thinking, it is I who determines the object; in thought I am *ego*, in perception, *non-ego*” (164). Despite the importance of his emphasis on the suffering, needy, and conditioned character of all natural ‘objective’ beings, Feuerbach ultimately has recourse to an ahistorical and dualistic view wherein the senses are passive (non-ego) and consciousness active (ego). Marx, in contrast, saw the senses and passions as bound not only to nature pure and simple, but to nature as mediated and transformed by historical human activity as expressed in an objectively social world, as objectified passions, senses, and needs.

⁹¹ Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 5. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 6.

⁹² Marx, EPM, 147.

accepts its immediate reality philosophically.”⁹³ Hegel, as we have seen, disrupts the uncritical approach to immediacy, since what appears as immediate, as self-identical and unmediated, is shown to be *dependent* on a totality of concrete determinations through which this “what” becomes itself in the first place—not only social and historical but also natural conditions. Nevertheless, the self-sufficiency of spirit as a philosophy of reconciliation appears to prevail. Spirit recollects and appropriates its moments, this “gallery of pictures,” and a renewed, seemingly transparent relation of spirit to itself emerges from this sublated existence.⁹⁴

In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, however, which have, surprisingly, received little systematic treatment as they bear on the Marxian conception of the specific form of human productive activity, Hegel repeatedly points to the dialectic of universality (spirit) and particularity (sensuous desire, inclination, the passions) operative in art and which he unfolds at various levels in the *Phenomenology*.⁹⁵ In art, Hegel observes, desire and nature are mediated, given form through what he calls “a power of mitigation,” or what amounts to the same, given an objective form of appearance which tears desire away from mere immediacy and transforms it thereby into an object to be contemplated, grasped freely.⁹⁶ Such *philosophical* contemplation, for Hegel, defines freedom, the movement of the self-mediation of spirit’s ongoing self-

⁹³ Henri Lefebvre, *Dialectical Materialism*, trans. John Sturrock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 53.

⁹⁴ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 466.

⁹⁵ This is not to say this affinity has gone altogether unnoticed, however. For a sharp albeit brief analysis of the affinities between Hegel and Marx’s respective concepts of work in the context of aesthetics, see Sean Sayers, “Creative Activity and Alienation in Hegel and Marx.” *Historical Materialism* 11, no. 1 (2003): 107-128. Lukács also perceived the importance of Hegel’s aesthetics for the Marxian conception of labor and practical activity, though he rightfully notes that key figures in classical Marxism (e.g., Bukharin, Georgi Plekhanov, Franz Mehring) largely ignored or downplayed this connection, with the notable exception of Engels. See Georg Lukács, “Hegel’s *Aesthetics*,” trans. David Taffel. *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 23, no. 2 (2002): 87-124. Echoing Marx’s assertion that idealism developed, however one-sidedly, the ‘active side’ of human life, Lukács notes the following: “The philosophical elaboration of this ‘active side’ also in the area of aesthetics is one of the most important achievements of classical German philosophy” (90). For a more recent Marxist critique of Hegelian aesthetics, see John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett, *Marx and the Earth: An Anti-Critique* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 50-56.

⁹⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Introduction to Aesthetics: Being the Introduction to The Berlin Aesthetics Lectures of the 1820s*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 48.

actualization. At this level, art allows for an experience of freedom—or, more precisely, a free relation to the object—because it allows human beings relate to themselves and to each other “in an ideal way,” that is, by staving off desire and the immediacy of life itself, while *preserving it as an essential moment of self-mediation*.⁹⁷ This point is aptly captured by Jay Bernstein, who suggests, in his interpretation of the passages in question, that the human being “is that kind of natural being that can have a life only by leading a life.”⁹⁸ In so doing, consciousness relates to its desirous, natural basis *freely*, universally, and changes itself in the process without, however, ever abandoning this natural desirous basis entirely, at least insofar as it enters, in a mediated manner, into the totality of the aesthetic experience itself.

At first blush, this might appear to be a tautological claim. After all, what does it mean to say that human beings as natural beings can live only by leading their lives? The key category here is the capacity to *lead a certain kind of life*—a life *in accordance with* freedom as the defining purposive relation between human beings and their natural and historical conditions of existence. *Human beings are the kinds of natural beings who cannot but lead their lives*. But this self-reflexive proposition—self-reflexive in the sense that it establishes the immanent purpose of the very activity it describes—contains within it one of the basic philosophical commitments of historical materialism: that human activity under all conditions pertains to a historically specific mode of self-mediation conditioned by existing socioeconomic, political, and cultural constraints. Every mode of social life is a form of self-mediation (or self-relation), then, however unequally and antagonistically constituted. The implication here is not that every form of social

⁹⁷ Ibid., 49. For a powerful reinterpretation of Hegel’s idealism vis-à-vis his concept of life, see Karen Ng, *Hegel’s Concept of Life: Self-Consciousness, Freedom, and Logic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁹⁸ Jay Bernstein, “‘Our Amphibian Problem’: Nature and History in Adorno’s Hegelian Critique of Hegel,” *Hegel on Philosophy in History*, eds. Rachel Zuckert and James Kreines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017): 193-212, 201.

life realizes freedom *qua* self-mediation to the same degree or that freedom is actualized *despite* existing historical and natural constraints, so that we are simply dealing with an essentialism content to see static uniformity and linear progress as the defining features of human history. On the contrary, the claim expresses the open-ended nature of the ongoing historical unfolding of subject and object in their unity and disunity.

Marx's often caustic approach to Hegel's philosophy tends to obscure his own indebtedness to this crucial Hegelian motif, particularly as it inflects his conception of productive activity as creative, sensuous, and self-transformative. For it becomes clear that to relate to oneself and to each other spiritually—or “in an ideal way,” as Hegel puts it—does not mean to do so as disembodied, purely ideal, and ahistorical beings, even if Marx, in this early critique, appears to take Feuerbach's lead in denouncing Hegel's process of abstraction. It is true that, in surrendering itself from itself, self-conscious spirit finds, for Hegel, “the highest freedom and the highest assurance of its knowing of itself.”⁹⁹ Lest this appear as an admission of the *absolute inessentiality* of nature, of its *merely* negative relation to spirit, Hegel proceeds to explain that nature “is its living, immediate coming-to-be,” the sensuous basis from which the subject exists as historically self-conscious and self-constituting.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, it is only in being free in its otherness—history and nature, as Renault argues—that freedom becomes concretely actualized.¹⁰¹

For it is in the philosophical contemplation of art, the struggle for existence is brought to a halt, foregrounding the violence inflicted by spirit upon nature, and a moment which suggests

⁹⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 466.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 466.

¹⁰¹ For another analysis of this point along similar lines, see Emmanuel Renault, “The Naturalist Side of Hegel's Pragmatism,” *Critical Horizons* 13, no. 2 (2012): 244-274. We find a similar analysis, though in a more Marxist key, in Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society*. 2nd ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976): 77-84.

the potential reconciliation between spirit and nature comes into view. In this sense, it is to the merit of Hegel—not despite but in and through the very limitations of his own thought—that he grasps the contradiction between subject and object, freedom and necessity, spirit and nature, as having been propelled in “modern culture” to “the peak of harshest contradiction.”¹⁰² Hegel perceives that these contradictions obtain in reality, they subsist as the very fabric within which the historical present moves. Such historically determinate contradictions do not pertain merely to the “pedantry” of philosophical projections, then, but express the contradictory character of historical reality itself. What is more, Hegel diagnoses this state of affairs as a form of *violence*.¹⁰³ The separation of universality from particularity, their abstraction and diremption from each other, inflicts violence on both spirit and nature, “since the spirit now upholds its right and dignity only by mishandling nature and denying its right, and so retaliates on nature the distress and violence which it has suffered from it itself.”¹⁰⁴ Spirit and nature are, in fact, ontologically entwined, but this entwinement is effaced by the manifold forms of alienation which structure bourgeois society, with the consequence that their irreducible dependence assumes a destructive and irrational form which Hegel conceives as violence.

This represents a critical proto-ecological and materialist insight from a thinker whose objective idealism has often found itself derided, as far as its ultimate tendencies go, as the negation of all sensuous and natural particularity.¹⁰⁵ And, while it is true that Hegel ultimately regards art and philosophy as the bearer of absolute spirit and hence as “higher” than the

¹⁰² Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 54.

¹⁰³ For a more sustained analysis of the logic of violence in Hegel, particularly with reference to the development of method in the *Science of Logic*, see Rocío Zambrana, “Logics of Power, Logics of Violence (According to Hegel),” *The New Centennial Review* 14, no. 2 (2014): 11-28.

¹⁰⁴ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 54.

¹⁰⁵ See, for instance, Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 2007). Of the desire for systematic thought distinctive of Kant, Fichte, and Hegel, Adorno writes: “The system is the belly turned mind, and rage is the mark of each and every idealism” (22).

immediacy of natural beauty, this position, as Lukács rightly notes, ought to be contextualized in light of Hegel's critical response to the romantic mysticisms of his time, which effectively obscured the concrete analysis of socio-historical development and which therefore proved unable to adequately account for the abstraction (or alienation) of spirit from nature.¹⁰⁶

Paradoxically enough, Hegel's non-romantic approach to nature, though not unburdened by the relegation of nature to a subordinate status, nonetheless already implied a *historical critique* of the narrow instrumentalization and alienation of nature in bourgeois society, its treatment as an object of exploitation within what Marx calls "a system of general utility."¹⁰⁷

In light of the above, it is the notion of historically objective contradictions expressed in the *disunited and antagonistic unity* of subject and object which Marx derives from Hegel and renders in more historically determinate terms through the critique of political economy. In the latter, both nature and history are *affirmatively* grasped in their unity and *negatively defined* in terms of the necessity of transcending the alienation distinctive of the capitalist mode of production. Marx's critique of contemplative materialism and idealism, the genesis of his own historically and practically oriented materialism, which takes its bearings from "practical-critical activity," should be conceived, then, as a novel synthesis which incorporates from Hegel not only the notion of the objectivity of contradictions, but an understanding of the latter as grounded in the historical antagonisms and inversions of the humanly produced historical present. The historically unprecedented violence and alienation suffered by human and non-human nature, and the real possibility of its overcoming, Marx specifies as a historically specific and necessary tendency of the capitalist mode of production, hence as a practical and not merely spiritual task.

¹⁰⁶ Georg Lukács, *The Young Hegel: Studies in the Relation Between Dialectics and Economics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1975), 544.

¹⁰⁷ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 100.

To be sure, this metacritique also grasps the antinomy between thought and being, spirit and nature, together with the Hegelian effort to supersede this antinomy, as itself the expression of a historically specific situation and its objective constraints, namely, the alienated mode of production constitutive of capital. In other words, the critique of political economy grounds these contradictions and inversions in determinate social relations which determine—however inhuman, antagonistic, and alien its dynamics—a specific form of *human historical development*.¹⁰⁸ The appearance of such development in the form of an *external thing* dirempted from the finite character of historical and humanly constituted practices and relations is specified as a false form of mediation not because it is unreal—recall the Hegelian claim that contradictions obtain in reality—but because it thwart or blocks the very movement of open-ended, free self-mediation.

Yet the movement of self-mediation also has a different character in Marx than in Hegel. To be sure, it is notable that one of the central axes of Marx's metacritique of Hegelian philosophy consists of the notion that "Hegel's standpoint is that of modern political economy."¹⁰⁹ The claim that Hegelian philosophy embodies the standpoint of political economy—and thus of capital—strikes us as far cry from the common wisdom that the materialist metacritique of Hegel partakes only of an inversion or philosophical refutation of idealism. For it is the mystifying transformation of objective contradictions into, in the last instance, *ideal*

¹⁰⁸ Drawing on his Hegelian inheritance, Marx regards *any* view which justifies itself by means of metaphysical or religious pretensions abstracted from concrete historical life as ideological reflexes of an alienated form of life. For an account of Marx's "irreligion," i.e., the derivation of all religious mystifications from their irreducibly socio-historical and thus humanly constituted social conditions, see Vanessa Wills, "Marx," *A Companion to Atheism and Philosophy*, ed. Graham Oppy (Hoboken: Wiley, 2019): 43-57. For an illuminating analysis of the Epicurean inheritance of Marx's materialist-humanism, from which he adopted, among other things, a critique of theological and supernatural (or 'idealist') forms of explanation, see John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), esp. 23-65.

¹⁰⁹ Marx, EPM, 150.

contradictions internal to forms of self-understanding that constitutes the primary object of Marx's critical intervention:

It is not the fact that the human being *objectifies himself inhumanly*, in opposition to himself, but the fact that he *objectifies himself in distinction* from and in *opposition* to abstract thinking that is the posited essence of the estrangement and the thing to be superseded.¹¹⁰

In Hegel—and herein lies the crux of Marx's critical intervention—the socially objective character of alienation constitutive of the capitalist form of social life appears in a distorted manner. Capitalist alienation, Marx maintains, suffers a form of violence in Hegel's hands. Hegel's historically oriented philosophical sensibility permitted him to grasp the phenomenon of alienation as a process of abstraction, as the emergence of an alienated social world which appears dirempted from the subjective realm of human practice. Nevertheless, as Lukács puts it in *The Young Hegel*, “On the subjective side, there is the mistaken identification of man and self-consciousness demonstrated and criticized by Marx; on the objective side, there is the equation of alienation and objectification in general.”¹¹¹ The “essence” of alienation, for Hegel, did not inhere in the specific form of social life determined by capital, but in the very nature of objectification as the process of consciousness becoming other than itself and then returning to itself as the identical subject-object.

Consequently, Hegel reduces historical objects—institutions, norms, social relations—to the process of self-consciousness coming to recognize the necessity of itself in these same objectifications. The alienation of human beings from the state, for example, Hegel conceived as the alienation of self-consciousness, as the abstract “opposition, within thought itself, between

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 148.

¹¹¹ Lukács, *Young Hegel*, 551.

abstract thinking and sensuous reality or real sensuousness.”¹¹² It bears repeating that Marx’s critical account of Hegelian philosophy is not merely a rejection of this or that thesis. Rather, it pertains to the *process of abstraction* constitutive of it—the derivation of reality from the concept, its aspirations to the contrary notwithstanding—and its social conditions of possibility. Marx identifies a problem in the very *form* of Hegelian dialectics, then.

Christoph Schuringa puts this point well in his reading of the “inversion” Marx identifies in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, and which applies also to the metacritique of Hegel in the *Paris Manuscripts*: “Opposition is denied in reality, dissolved by the unity that logic provides; but it reappears as internal to that unificatory logic itself.”¹¹³ In other words, Hegel presupposes precisely what needs to be explained; the opposition between extremes, antagonistic in reality—in this case between alienation as a historically specific form of objectification and objectification as such—cannot be accomplished by means of recourse to the reconciliatory power of the Idea.¹¹⁴ It becomes necessary to move beyond the view that material reality, in the last analysis, is the manifestation or form of appearance of the Idea towards a view in which self-mediating human beings make their history, in which universality is conceivable only with reference to the immanence of historical-natural development.

The object of this metacritique is therefore the form of a dialectical movement which elevates spirit as the fundamental origin of the “opposition” between objectification and “abstract thinking.”¹¹⁵ For in Hegel, as Chris Arthur writes, “spirit overcomes its estrangement from its world through knowing it as its own work, while preserving that world of estrangement in the

¹¹² Marx, *EPM*, 148.

¹¹³ Christoph Schuringa, “Marx’s Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” *Crisis & Critique* 8, no. 2 (2021): 346-367, 364.

¹¹⁴ Hegel, as already mentioned, endeavored to grasp the particularity of the matter at hand on its own terms, to unfold the richness of a determinate content from which dialectical thought must not shy away, refusing to view, as he writes, “determinateness (*horos*) with contempt.” See Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 8.

¹¹⁵ Marx, *EPM*, 148.

immediacy of its otherness.”¹¹⁶ Marx’s objection to Hegel therefore lies in the latter’s ultimately ‘contemplative stance’, to borrow a phrase from Lukács. Marx’s metacritique of Hegel, then, is precisely that he is *insufficiently immanent*, since the concrete determinations which necessarily distort objectification into a process of alienation and unfreedom are left fundamentally intact.

It is on this basis that Hegelian philosophy conceives of superseding alienation from the institutions which constitute bourgeois society as a matter of reconciling thought with the alienated object, since self-consciousness need only rediscover itself in these objectifications as essential moments of its own dialectical unfolding.¹¹⁷ Hence, the *spiritualization* of the world of bourgeois institutions, despite the critical intent contained in their recognition as products of historical practice and normative commitments, corresponds to the idealistic reduction of objective social being whereby historical temporality is suppressed.¹¹⁸ The Hegelian dialectic leaves intact the actual structures of domination, inversion, and alienation, glosses over the contradictions immanent to the social relations and institutions of capitalist society. Alienation or estrangement thereby becomes the mere appearance or manifestation of what amounts to a self-referential consciousness. In this way, historical specificity, the determinate character of the object, according to Marx, is obliterated, since Hegelian phenomenology regards the objective

¹¹⁶ Chris Arthur, “Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx and Negativity,” *Radical Philosophy* 35 (1983): 10-19, 14.

¹¹⁷ Although Hegel later detected key tendencies of disintegration in bourgeois society, Marx’s claim that Hegel, this thinker of the tremendous power of the negative, adopted an “uncritical positivism” and “the standpoint of political economy” in the end proved at least partly true. His later conception of civil society as an organic “system of needs,” together with his uncritical naturalization of the capitalist division of labor, incorporated from English political economy to fit Hegel’s reconciliatory scheme, inclined him to perceive the universal selfishness of individuals as “*a contribution to the needs of everyone else*” (233). Hegel’s account of this system of needs, which reproduced itself as a rational, harmonious whole structured by the (naturalized) inequality of different “estates,” turned out to be no more than a mystified image, an eternalization of capitalist society in the guise of its rational comprehension. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

¹¹⁷ Marx, EPM, 109.

¹¹⁸ For a critique of Hegel on this score, see István Mészáros, *The Challenge and Burden of Historical Time: Socialism in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008), 54-55.

world and “thinghood” itself as expressions or manifestations of a consciousness which is by necessity self-alienating.¹¹⁹

The historical conditions which make such a conflation possible remain in their essentials unquestioned by Hegel. The claim that Hegelian philosophy is characterized by a “*false* positivism” ought to be understood as a critique of a positivity that serves to reconcile human beings to alienated conditions which are not merely the products of self-consciousness, but of real historical circumstances, or “the estranged world of *human* objectification.”¹²⁰ The Hegelian image of freedom as reconciliation with the necessity of the actual is thus problematized by means of a critical perspective that refuses to subordinate *human historical development* to the false positivity of the reified institutions of capitalist society: the state, civil society, morality, religion, and the alienated socioeconomic forms of capitalist society. Earlier, we noted that the affirmation of direct relations between human beings—that is, relations *subject* to the conscious determination of those involved, rather than being *subjected* to the alienated movement of things—is a core feature of Marx’s critical philosophical anthropology. In this vein, the metacritique of Hegel establishes that those mediations within which Hegelian philosophy ultimately found itself at home constitute the abstract, alienated forms assumed by historical determinations which are then ideologically obscured, spiritualized, and given over to an eternalization of the capitalist present.¹²¹

This fact notwithstanding, we should bear in mind that Marx’s metacritique of Hegel does not amount to a rejection of Hegelian philosophy out of court, nor does it rule out a conception of the human being grounded in a materialist philosophical perspective. Rather,

¹¹⁹ Marx, EPM, 153.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹²¹ On this point, see Auguste Cornu, *The Origins of Marxian Thought* (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 1957): 28-34.

philosophy is cast in a different light when it recognizes its own limits, when it cannot, by its own internal conceptual force, discover the source and potential resolution of the contradictions inherent in social reality. For the dualisms and antinomies of philosophy, according to Marx, symptomatize “antitheses in the social condition.”¹²² The place of philosophy changes not because philosophy is obsolete, but because the contradictory conditions it symptomatizes require practical, and not merely contemplative, intervention. This break with an ultimately self-referential process of contemplation crystallizes Marx’s metacritique of Hegel. Social consciousness must be given its proper place within a conception of human beings as self-mediating natural-historical beings, which implies a general conception of human needs and powers.

Alienation and the Problem of Needs

Marx regards the social labor process in all its complexity as the locus of historical and anthropological intelligibility, of the development of needs and powers in unity with the historically specific constraints which negate and distort their full realization. The critical significance of this claim is already palpable in Marx’s early account of alienated labor, where he claims that private property is the expression and result, the necessary form of appearance, of alienated labor. This critical analysis of economic categories in their reified expression necessitates a consideration of the subjective and experiential determinations of alienated labor, especially as the latter bears on the historical formation of needs and even the senses.¹²³ The stakes of this claim are high, particularly when we consider that the economic process no longer refers to quantitative determinations alone—though it must be said Marx does not oppose

¹²² Marx, EPM, 109.

¹²³ Marx, EPM, 81.

material abundance *tout court*—but to the qualitative conditions of social life, hence to the conditions of human flourishing. This moves us from political economy to its radical critique, the aim of which lies in universal human emancipation as well as a changed relationship to nature no longer predicated on its domination.

The point of unfolding these experiential dimensions is not to deny the alienated objectivity of these socioeconomic forms, of the peculiar way real wealth, in the grips of capital, both appears and develops as an overpowering form of domination; rather, the point is to articulate their content, their necessary relation to the social conditions and processes from which they emerge. In this sense, the critical judgement of these conditions inheres in the conditions themselves, since the latter always give expression to the self-mediation of human being in their social relations, even when this occurs in a negative and irrational manner.¹²⁴ A transcendental perspective naturally lacks this grounding, appealing as it does to the realization of an impossible ideal, whereas a perspective which takes the ideological norms of the present at face value—here we can think of Marx’s later negative evaluations of the ‘utility’ principle in utilitarianism—cannot take sufficient distance or abstract from the given in order to adequately comprehend the material, social, and historical bases of its own normative claims.¹²⁵

Marx, it should be recalled, claims to begin through an immanent critique of the categories and premises of political economy, or with ‘*actual* economic fact’. Their abstract negation—a negation which fails to grasp the historically determinate social relations which

¹²⁴ See, on this point, Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*, 2nd Ed. (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1954): 273-295. “Objective facts come alive and enter an indictment of society. Economic realities exhibit their own inherent negativity” (284).

¹²⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital*. Vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), 758-759. Marx accuses Bentham of conflating the principle of utility, which Marx sees as the ideological expression of the petty bourgeoisie, with human nature in general. It is not case, however, that the principle of utility is opposed to a more real nature or that utility itself, under capitalist conditions, does not become incorporated into human needs and self-understanding; the point, rather, is that the open-ended process of self-mediation distinctive of human beings is obscured by *uncritically identifying human nature with the ideological needs of the present society*.

constitute political economy's central categories and the contradictions expressed thereby—would prove inadequate, since such a negation is introduced *extraneously* into the object of analysis. Marx's emphasis on practical, self-mediating relationships between human beings as the basis of alienation and unfreedom relies on breaking the vicious circle of capital's reified forms of appearance. The approach therefore sets into motion those reified categories which veil their own historically and humanly constituted conditions of possibility.¹²⁶ Moreover, it does so by *restoring* to these categories—these determinations of social being—their concrete content, always grounded in particular relations between human beings in the reproduction of their social existence and always embedded in a relationship to nature as their 'inorganic body'.¹²⁷ The critique of the violence of reified abstractions which we earlier encountered in Hegel is also present here, albeit now formulated through a critique of the abstraction and diremption of these socioeconomic forms from their sensuous, corporeal, and human basis.

Marx's critical account of the monetary mediation of needs demands a critique of the alienation of needs, then. For, according to Marx, nothing can, under the rule of capital, exist *for itself*, but *only in and through monetary mediation*. Money in capitalist society socially validates and invalidates needs. Their alienated form in capitalist society consists partly of the fact that their mediation occurs indirectly by means of this object which has "the power of appropriating

¹²⁶ See, for example, Marx's critique of the liberal ideals of "Freedom, Equality, Property, and Bentham" in the first volume of *Capital*, esp. 270-280. The point was not to denounce these ideals as illusory, as epiphenomena which *merely* veiled a more real process. Marx, following Hegel, did not view forms of appearance as inessential, as unreal. Forms stand in an internal, necessary relation to their essential content. They really exist as moments of the overall process. Taking a part for the whole, taking such ideals and the relations from which they emerge at face value without situating them within the system as a whole, however, gives rise to the rosy pictures of the capitalist mode of production present in liberal political and economic theory and in social reality itself. The real can become unreal when unmoored from the totality within which it stands as essential but partial moment.

¹²⁷ See Joseph Fracchia, "Beyond the Human-Nature Debate: Human Corporeal Organisation as the 'First Fact' of Historical Materialism," *Historical Materialism* 13, no. 1 (2005): 33-61, 43. Fracchia argues that the notion of the "corporeal organization" is essential to a historical materialist conception of the body as simultaneously having abilities and limitations. Such abilities allow for a creative way of negotiating these bodily limitations. See also his *Bodies and Artifacts: Historical Materialism and Corporeal Semiotics*. 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

all objects.”¹²⁸ The inverted world of capital distorts needs and powers into a mere semblance of the power of money. The range of the satisfaction of needs remains contingent upon not only the possession of money, however, but upon the position of individuals within the given relations of production. The power of satisfying needs is objectively constrained by the place of individuals within the capitalist division of labor. It is for this reason that Marx identifies alienated labor as kind of unfreedom, one characterized by the domination of needs external to it, namely, the needs of capital.¹²⁹ The alienation of needs can thus be said to have a twofold character. First, alienation from the product of labor (here not to be reductively conflated with the satisfaction of unmediated biological needs) and alienation from the need for the capacity for active self-mediation in which human beings can find themselves positively confirmed in their sociality and not negated.¹³⁰

Consequently, when Marx argues that human needs and powers become, through the power of monetary mediation, “abstract conceits and therefore imperfections,” sites of privation rather than self-development, this means that needs lose their effectivity, become representations of a social bond (money) which is in fact alien to their content.¹³¹ For example, if one wishes to learn to play an instrument—say, the violin—and one does not possess the money to purchase the instrument, let alone to receive lessons, one experiences this need as a kind of privation or negation. This specific need becomes unreal, abstract, separated from the one to whom the need belongs. Needs, in other words, mean nothing unless one has money to satisfy them. Marx

¹²⁸ Marx, EPM, 136.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 74.

¹³⁰ See Heller, *Theory of Need*, 42.

¹³¹ Marx, EPM, 139.

describes this situation in denunciatory terms as “the world upside-down,” reality in the grips of this abstract social power.¹³²

But this is not all. Money is the very form of appearance of social relations between people which appear in the form of relations between things—the exchange of products and activities upon which the life of each depends “here appears as something alien to them, autonomous, as a thing.”¹³³ This realm of real appearances, however, both presupposes and distorts the relations of compulsion which constitute the capitalist division of labor and the ongoing separation of the totality of social labor from the objective conditions of production.¹³⁴

It is necessary to stress here that Marx’s critical approach, from beginning to end, sought to pierce the fetishistic veil of economic categories understood as the expression of the capitalist mode of production as a specific form of social life. Nevertheless, if the goal were only to expose fetishism and ideology, Marx’s theoretical efforts would amount to no more than a negative gesture, perhaps even a theoretical debunking of political economy. The critique of economic categories, however, becomes *partisan*—expresses a determinate interest in human emancipation—only because the forms of compulsion, domination, and alienation it tracks emerge against the background of a normative framework which conceives of human self-mediation as the open-ended, free development of human needs and powers.

This, therefore, forms the basis for the intelligibility of the claim that human activity and the means of life itself, in their diremption, necessarily become their opposite “under the sway of inhuman power.”¹³⁵ Sociality, which in principle ought to be a site for a reciprocal and complementary form of mediation between human beings, is distorted into a site of mutual

¹³² Marx, EPM, 140.

¹³³ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 157.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 248.

¹³⁵ Marx, EPM, 125.

indifference, alienation, and dispossession. Nature, the ‘inorganic’ body of human beings (much like human needs themselves) also becomes a site for ruthless exploitation. The transcendence of private property and the alienated power of money liberates human needs and nature itself from their subordination to narrow utility and instrumentalism compelled by capitalist society.¹³⁶

As John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett maintain, the dialectical account of the coevolution (or reciprocal determination) of nature and society proves to be of decisive importance for the elaboration of Marx’s ecological materialism and, I would add, his philosophical anthropology.¹³⁷ Marx’s distinctive philosophical anthropological conception elaborates the material basis of human social life in its external, but not for this reason unmediated, conditions—that is, it unfolds the claim that this ‘inorganic’ body is a constitutive ontological condition of the corporeal and historical reproduction of social life and the satisfaction and the ongoing transformation of needs.¹³⁸ The philosophical anthropology

¹³⁶ Ibid., 107.

¹³⁷ John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett, “The Dialectic of Organic/Inorganic Relations: Marx and the Hegelian Philosophy of Nature,” *Organization & Environment* 13, no. 4 (2000): 403-425, esp. 408-415. For a more recent engagement with these issues, see Judith Butler, “The Inorganic Body in the Early Marx: A Limit Concept of Anthropocentrism,” *Radical Philosophy* 2, no. 6 (2019): 3-17. Though Butler, following Althusser, is wary of the need for recourse to a philosophical anthropology, she argues that a renewed consideration of the early Marx establishes the “persistence” of life as one key criterion for assessing the relationship of interdependency between human beings and nature: “No human body can live without the body of nature; it is and is not its own body, and its very survival depends on this doubling” (13). For another critique of the view of Marx as a speciesist for whom the domination of non-human life and nature was inevitable, see John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, “Marx and Alienated Speciesism,” *Monthly Review* 70, no. 7 (2018): 1-20. Foster and Clark convincingly argue that Marx in fact subjected to heavy criticism the Cartesian view of non-human animals as machines, seeing it as an expression of the “alienated mediation between human beings and nature.” For a critical engagement with the fashionable tendencies in anthropological and sociological theory to abandon any notion of human intentionality—that is, any notion of the human-nature metabolism—in ecological analysis due to its allegedly anthropocentric and Eurocentric premises, tendencies which can only obscure “the alienation of human intentions,” see Penny McCall Hallward, “The Anthropology of Human-Environment Relations: Materialism With and Without Marxism,” *Focaal—Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 82 (2018): 64-79.

¹³⁸ For an examination of the tension between philosophical anthropology and an “ontology of relations” in Marx’s thought, see Étienne Balibar, “Philosophical Anthropology or Ontology of Relations? Exploring the Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach,” *The Philosophy of Marx*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso Books, 2017): 123-158. Balibar insists that we should not too hastily conflate the problem of philosophical anthropology with that of humanism. As should be clear from the argument above, however, I do not share Balibar’s position that they can and ought to be separated. Marx’s critique of Feuerbach’s naïve naturalism problematizes the claim that the human essence is something entirely “innate,” precisely because it is only through the practical unfolding of historical life, of the totality of conditions which mediate social reproduction, that the specific character of the human essence can be

underlying the critique of political economy does not posit human beings as absolute subjects standing opposed to nature, but, rather, as simultaneously natural and historical beings standing in a relation of irreducible, if ever-changing, dependency on these natural conditions.¹³⁹

The respective critiques of bourgeois political economy and idealism, which we discussed above, take their bearings from the way such approaches obscure these simultaneously natural and socio-ontological determinations through an uncritical reflection of the alienated social forms of capitalist society.¹⁴⁰ To be sure, the historical appearance of sensuous needs, including the need for a rational and non-exploitative relationship to nature, as inessential reflects a symptom of the alienated imperatives of capitalist society, the fact that needs are externally determined by the quasi-independent movements of economic determinations. This phenomenon involves a real inversion grounded in a form of life in which qualitative determinations *really are* rendered secondary through the fetishistic, quantitative mediations distinctive of capitalist society.

Furthermore, the distortion involved in the reduction of workers to the satisfaction of immediately physical needs is not criticized from a perspective which regards these needs and functions as *essentially* dehumanizing, as innate obstacles to social freedom and self-realization. To put it another way, corporeal needs, those limitations distinctive of human beings, are not by nature dehumanizing, though the specific conditions under which these needs are met or unmet, can be specified as dehumanizing. Rather, the account of dehumanization in Marx's critique of political economy points to the historically peculiar *separation* whereby the worker can only

articulated. But such a move does not exclude philosophical anthropological and ontological claims of the kind I have highlighted.

¹³⁹ Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 283. Labor, Marx argues, "confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature."

¹⁴⁰ "Political economy conceals the estrangement," Marx writes, "inherent in the nature of labor by not considering the direct relationship between labor (worker) and production" (EPM 73).

exist as a ‘physical subject’ on the condition that they work unfreely *for* another and can only exist as a worker on the condition that they remain ‘physical subjects’ reduced to the reproduction of the given form of labor.¹⁴¹ It is this very socially necessary irrationality and separation—a consequence of the alienation of labor—between the reproduction of physical life and purposively oriented life-activity qua work that defines the dehumanization of the proletariat and not the *necessary facts* of physical life and work as such.

For Marx, like Feuerbach, partly defines human beings, like any other living being, as conditioned, limited, dependent upon a totality of objects *external* to them. Limitation does not preclude freedom but specifies its necessary material, corporeal, and social presuppositions. Similarly, freedom does not preclude limitation but *articulates a particular kind of relation* to these material, corporeal, social presuppositions. This relation is not only one of self-consciousness, but of the practical-conscious manner of relating to the natural and historical conditions of social labor’s self-mediation.¹⁴² Here we should recall that Marx, in his critique of the Gotha Programme, claimed that nature is as much the source of wealth as labor, and, further, that the ideological exaltation of labor apart from its relation to the conditions of production remained squarely within horizon of capitalist society.¹⁴³

In this vein, Joseph Fracchia, drawing on Marx and Engels’s statement in *The German Ideology* that point of departure of any rigorous historical materialist theory must be “the

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² On the issue of freedom and determination, see Joseph Ferraro, *Freedom and Determination in History According to Marx and Engels* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1992).

¹⁴³ Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 3. During the Nazi era, Walter Benjamin was also to observe that this ideological framework paved the way for the corrosion of the German working-class movement and the triumph of Fascism. Focusing narrowly on the improvement of labor *within* capitalist society and in the grips of a pernicious technological fetishism, this vulgar form of Marxism “recognizes progress only in the mastery of nature, not the retrogression of society” (259). Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968): 253-264, 259.

corporeal organization of human beings,” argues that the category of objectification (*Vergegenständlichung*) represents a decisive break with a form of philosophy which allotted primacy to the knowing subject in its relation to the known object.¹⁴⁴ According to Fracchia, the account of objectification given by Marx implies not only the production of objects, but also the practical transformation of existing conditions, both natural and social, “into human worlds made in the image of their own bodily form, capacities, and practices.”¹⁴⁵ Further, Marx’s descriptions of capitalist immiseration and exploitation are normatively rooted in this corporeal logic:

Marx’s exposure of the corporeal depths of capitalist immiseration, measured on the great variety of wounds that workers experience on their bodies under capitalist relations of production, points toward his vision of a future social order that would not only end immiseration, but also enable the polymorphous cultivation of human capacities.¹⁴⁶

Such corporeal objectification involves an account of the essence of human activity as a process of self-duplication or purposive expression, both at the level of consciousness and at the level of the practical transformation of nature as human history.¹⁴⁷ Marx’s philosophical anthropology insists that the objective character of human beings stems from the fact that their activity is confirmed in its immanent directedness or purposiveness towards the ‘external’ world of nature and nature as historically modified.

Purposive human activity, to repeat, does not exist independently of these ‘external’ conditions. The immanent determination of purposive human activity does not inhere exclusively in a self-positing subject, but simply is “the subjectivity of *objective* essential powers.”¹⁴⁸ The

¹⁴⁴ Joseph Fracchia, “Beyond the Human-Nature Debate: Human Corporeal Organisation as the ‘First Fact’ of Historical Materialism,” *Historical Materialism* 13, no. 1 (2005): 33-61, 43. See also his *Bodies and Artifacts: Historical Materialism and Corporeal Semiotics*. 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁴⁶ Joseph Fracchia, “The Capitalist Labour-Process and the Body in Pain: The Corporeal Depths of Marx’s Concept of Immiseration,” *Historical Materialism* 16, no. 4 (2008): 35-66, 64.

¹⁴⁷ Marx, EPM, 77.

¹⁴⁸ Marx, EPM, 336.

objectification of essential powers corresponds to the self-mediation of human beings in their specific form of social life, undermining any notion of a pure interiority or a purely external determination. Objectification specifies the very movement of productive activity as self-mediation as an ontological necessity of social life.

Moreover, fact that the end of productive activity assumes the form of an alien, dominating externality, for instance in the commodity as the product of alienated labor, means that the end determining the activity is not *internal* to the activity itself, not a free manifestation of social activity as *self-mediation*, but a distorted form of the latter. Self-mediation is a universal determination of the human social life which ontologically grounds not only the continuity between nature and human history, but also what Mészáros calls “the open-ended teleology of labor itself,” that is, this capacity through which “the human being...creates and develops itself through its purposeful productive activity.”¹⁴⁹

The abstract form human needs assume under the compulsions of capitalist social relations expresses a historical separation, then, a kind of *negative anthropology*, since life and labor, needs and activity, are semblances of themselves in their very abstraction from each other: “labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is *forced* labor.”¹⁵⁰ Alienated labor proves dehumanizing as a consequence of its peculiar social character as a *means to an alien end*, labor as “merely a *means* to satisfy needs external to it.”¹⁵¹ In this respect, one of the systematic distortions which develops under the capitalist mode of production is precisely the ongoing perpetuation, and on an increasing scale, of social labor’s alienation from this open-ended

¹⁴⁹ István Mészáros, “Dialectical Transformations: Teleology, History and Social Consciousness,” *Science & Society* 62, no. 3 (1998): 417-433, 420.

¹⁵⁰ Marx, EPM, 74. I take it that Erich Fromm means something similar when he suggests that the development of categories such as labor and capital “were not at all for Marx only economic categories; they were anthropological categories, imbued with a value judgment which is rooted in his humanistic position” (32). See Erich Fromm, *Marx’s Concept of Man* (London: Continuum, 2003).

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

teleology, that is, from the power to intervene into history in order to consciously reconstitute the social relations which at present determine the form of human development and needs.¹⁵²

One should note here that notions such as the “affluent society,” the so-called consumer society, and the array of theories which point to the integration of needs do not dispense with the critical import of Marx’s critique of the alienation of needs.¹⁵³ This is discernible not only in the all too glaring fact that capital reduces the majority of the world’s people to conditions of deprivation and misery, in abrogation of their most elementary needs, but also in the fact that this distortion should not be conceived in *narrowly quantitative terms*, but, rather, in relative terms as the ongoing gap between what is the case and what could be the case were the telos of production reconstituted on the basis of the particular needs of social individuals. As György Márkus argues, the end productive activity is not mere consumption quantitatively conceived, or even the satisfaction of bare biological needs, but the self-mediating production of human beings “wealthy in their needs, interests and abilities,” inconceivable without a fundamental change in social relations and social consciousness adequate to this task on a global scale.¹⁵⁴

And, as the economic categories articulate the disunited or alienated unity of subject and object, this process implies, as an essential aspect of its reproduction, *experienced* powerlessness, heteronomy, and social antagonism. The objective forms of alienation generate their own forms of self-understanding: suffering and powerlessness, the reification of consciousness, and the alienation of the senses and the deformation of material, psychic, intersubjective, and ecological bonds, as we are so acutely witnessing today. At the same time, social consciousness of this

¹⁵² For another persuasive discussion of the teleological character of Marx’s philosophical anthropology as fundamental to the critique of political economy, see Paul Walton and Andrew Gamble, *From Alienation to Surplus Value* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1972), esp. 1-50.

¹⁵³ See, for example, Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991). See also Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (London: Sage Publications, 1999).

¹⁵⁴ György Márkus, “Marxist Humanism,” *Science & Society* 30, no. 3 (1966): 275-287, 280.

systematic irrationality, one grounded in the *radical need* to forge a universal and differentiated alternative to capital, constitutes an indispensable condition in the struggle not only for humanity, but even for human survival itself. The aggravated contradictions of the capitalist mode of production, and the triumphalist identification of human history with the aims of capital, have only made this task even more necessary. It can thus be said that Marx's universalist vision of human emancipation remains indispensable for us today.

Marx's critique of the distortion and alienation of needs under the domination of capital attests, then, to the *disunity* that exists between the most basic of needs and their vital connection to social and productive activity as a consciously and purposively determined activity whose end ought to be the self-development of the "*rich human being* and *rich human need*." The critique articulates the objective constraints that capital imposes on social life as impediments to further human development. Again, this development is not reducible to the compulsion of economic growth and accumulation which characterizes capital. The rich human being and rich human need do not refer to the unlimited expansion of the productive forces for the sake of self-augmenting value, but to a radical change in the telos of production, which can only emerge through a practical and conscious struggle over the conditions of production on the part of those negated by the system. This implies the necessity of establishing a free relation between subject and object, that is, a progressive break with the socioeconomic relations which constrain the possibility of a higher, freer form of human sociality.

This form of human sociality would make social individuals 'rich' not because they possess more, but because the contradiction that exists between the given conditions of their immediate existence and their historically developed social powers, embodied in the productive forces and in their increasingly universal albeit distorted interdependence, no longer confronts

them in the form of a dominating necessity, as historical heteronomy, as unfreedom. The practical abolition of this contradiction, together with the need to establish mediations which would break its vicious circle in the direction of universal emancipation, is the very task of a socialist form of self-mediation, constitutive of a humanism that proves itself in action. What Michael A. Lebowitz calls ‘the socialist imperative’ depends upon a recognition that any socialist project, while powerless in *narrowly moral terms*, nevertheless requires “concepts that support social rationality over the rationality of the logic of capital”; that is, it requires a set of collectively articulated values which mediate between the subjective and objective levels of a revolutionary socialist project, values not only which aspire to but concretely embody, as part of their practical premises, “communal needs and purposes.”¹⁵⁵

Without restoring needs and powers as integral to the critique of the capitalist mode of production, however, the latter could not be identified as a dehumanizing, destructive, and necessarily contradictory social order.¹⁵⁶ However, such needs are not only immediately material, in the sense of ‘basic needs’, though we saw earlier that Marx’s critique of capitalism does in fact criticize the system for its inability to satisfy even such basic needs. To the degree that Marx’s diagnosis on this front remains valid even today, his critique of the alienation of needs under the capitalist mode of production remains valid.

At another level, Marx’s critique of the alienation of needs suggests another need inseparably tied to the problem of *historical necessity*, and which we can only briefly touch on here. Marx often refers to the barriers of the capitalist mode of production. He speaks of the

¹⁵⁵ Michael A. Lebowitz, *The Socialist Alternative: Real Human Development* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010), 154, 79; *The Socialist Imperative: From Gotha to Now* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2015), 70-71.

¹⁵⁶ For a sharp treatment of this issue, see Chris Byron, “Essence and Alienation: Marx’s Theory of Human Nature,” *Science & Society* 80, no. 3 (2016): 375-394. As Byron writes: “No matter what mode of production we find humans in, their human nature remains an *essential* component of their capabilities and needs; but its *expression* can be alienated, mitigated, or flourishing” (392).

relentless way that capital, as a totalizing system, necessarily attempts—however impossibly and chimerically—to supersede all human and natural, i.e., finite, barriers. In the third volume of *Capital*, for instance, Marx writes that “The *true barrier* to capitalist production is *capital itself*.”¹⁵⁷ Implicit in this claim is that the capitalist system can never be *total*, precisely because it reproduces itself in and through a contradictory dialectic of form and content, which is only to say a negation of its historical and material premises: the alienation and exploitation of labor in its diverse forms and the destruction of nature.¹⁵⁸ The alienated and increasingly destructive metabolism between society and nature, Marx writes, “compels its systematic restoration as a regulative law of social production, and in a form adequate to the full development of the human race.”¹⁵⁹ This provides us with a way to rethink, in emancipatory terms, the very meaning and contours of a genuinely human form of historical and ecological development, one adequate to the needs of human beings as self-mediating beings whose free development both can, and ought to be, the end or telos of production.

Here I would like to reiterate that my analysis of needs points to the subjective, experiential, and material articulation of these very barriers, of the contradictory character of the matter at hand as it is consciously lived and struggled against. It is crucial, however, to expand this analysis beyond the labor process itself toward an expanded account which includes the manifold struggles against the commodification of the conditions life as a whole; against crushing debt in the context of neo-colonial domination and dispossession; against growing inequality, immiseration, and precarity on a global scale; and against environmental destruction, which threatens human survival itself. Only in this way will the horizon of the socialist

¹⁵⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 3, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1981), 358.

¹⁵⁸ Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 637-638.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 638.

imperative acquire traction and concrete, because universal, human and ecological significance.¹⁶⁰

In this sense, we could say that Marx's philosophical anthropology gives us a way to rethink the normative parameters of dehumanization as a matter of objective social relations within which dehumanization and the spoliation of nature prove socially necessary, two aspects of the same social totality—not merely as an ideological reflex, then, but as a phenomenon embedded in the very structure of capitalist society as a form of life.¹⁶¹ The analysis of alienated needs in the critique of political economy demands that we reimagine precisely what it might mean to break from this dehumanizing horizon through solidarity, practical struggle, and the elaboration of mediations that express not only direct control over the technical and historical conditions of existence, but a conscious, creative, and substantive reconstitution of the *ends* of these same conditions. The alienation of needs points to nothing less than the radical need for the reconstitution of the inhuman and destructive ends of social life as conditioned by the irrationality of capital into substantively social ones.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ It remains difficult to see how this could possibly mean a wholesale break with philosophy towards natural science, as argued, for instance, by Kohei Saito in his otherwise insightful work, *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism: Capital, Nature, and the Unfinished Critique of Political Economy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2017), esp. 25-61.

¹⁶¹ For a recent engagement with the critique of humanism along these lines, see Karen Ng, "Humanism: A Defense," *Philosophical Topics* 49, no. 1 (2021): 145-164.

¹⁶² See Sebastian Gerhardt, "In and For Itself: Freedom. On the Historical Tendency of a Renewed Political Economy of Labour," *Beyond Marx: Theorising The Global Labour Relations of the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Marcel van der Linden and Karl Heinz Roth (Chicago: Haymarket, 2014): 319-343. As Gerhardt argues, "it is only from the explanation of conscious ends that a concept of how ends might be collectively determined can be developed, and such a concept of need would serve as the basis of a free planned economy" (332). This *positive* claim about the normative parameters of socialist transformation stands in direct contrast to the distorted condition Horkheimer describes in the following terms: "The complete transformation of the world into a world of means rather than of ends is itself the consequence of the historical development of the methods of production. As material production and social organization grow more complicated and reified, recognition of the means as such becomes increasingly difficult, since they assume the appearance of autonomous entities" (102). Horkheimer, "Revolt of Nature," 102.

Revisiting Marx's Account of 'The Dialectic of Negativity'

In one of the earliest reviews written upon the publication of the *Paris Manuscripts*, Herbert Marcuse stressed that they contain the *philosophical* basis of both the critique of political economy and philosophy as idealism. Such a philosophical basis allows for a critical exposition of the “devaluation of life, the perversion and loss of human reality” through which a revolutionary transformation of the contradictory unfolding of the “human essence” is conceivable.¹⁶³ The development of the notion of productive activity, including the activity of the senses, as *objectification*; as the self-confirmation of human beings in their sociality; as the ground of a “positive humanism”; and, finally, as the very basis of an emancipatory form of materialism, can only be understood against the background of the dialectic of negativity discerned in Hegel.

Marx critically appropriates and transforms this crucial moment of Hegelian philosophy, i.e., the subjective mediation of active, conscious, living human beings as the result of their very own activity:

The outstanding thing in Hegel's *Phenomenology* and its final outcome—that is, the dialectic of negativity as the moving and generating principle—is thus first that Hegel conceives the self-genesis of man as a process, conceives objectification as loss of the object, as alienation and as a transcendence of this alienation; that he thus grasps the essence of *labor* and comprehends objective man—true, because real man—as the outcome out man's *own* labor (EPM 149).

Marx takes from Hegel the dialectical conception of human beings as both the presupposition and result of their own social activity *qua* natural-historical beings.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, in Hegel we

¹⁶³ Herbert Marcuse, “The Foundations of Historical Materialism,” *Studies in Critical Philosophy*, trans. Joris de Bres (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973): 1-48, 8

¹⁶⁴ On this point, see Mehmet Tabak, *Dialectics of Human Nature in Marx's Philosophy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), esp. 1-25. As Tabak writes of human beings as the subject-object of the historical process, “the unity of dialectical opposites can exist only in a process of self-determination that is reciprocal and circular” (6).

already encounter this conception of human beings as self-mediating beings, even if in such a way as to allot, in the last instance, primacy to the self-consciousness of spirit's actuality.¹⁶⁵ The moment of truth contained in the dialectic of negativity lies precisely in its account of the externalization of human powers and needs, in the creation of an objective world as a process of coming-to-be which can be (and must be) subjected to conscious ends of social individuals. Further, self-genesis or self-mediation as the movement of negativity implies a conception of free activity as the overcoming of historically established limits, "the formation and cultivation of human creativity [...] beyond every fixed limitation, as an end in itself."¹⁶⁶ If something expresses its self-moving, negative principle in the very dynamic between inner and outer, subject and object, then its process of self-development, as far as freedom is concerned, can only consist in overcoming the historically specific limits to freedom which emerge in the course of its own self-unfolding. As I argued above, the struggle for needs remains crucial in this respect.

Though Marx reads the elevation of self-consciousness to an absolute in Hegel as a symptom of alienation and the division between manual and mental labor which reaches its apex in capitalist society (and we saw above that this is far more complicated matter than even Marx and many Marxist commentators acknowledge), the accomplishment of Hegel's dialectics lies in rupturing the pretension of an absolute isolated subject which confers form on matter, since matters have their own form, exhibit their own immanent rationality. The subject pushes beyond the limits of the dualism of subject and object not to subsume the object, but in order to acknowledge a gap—irreducible mediation—between subject and object as integral aspects of a differentiated totality.

¹⁶⁵ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 466.

¹⁶⁶ György Márkus, *Marxism and Anthropology: The Concept of 'Human Essence' in the Philosophy of Marx*, (Sydney: modern-Verlag, 2014), 86.

Adorno, for example, notes that Hegel, precisely in elaborating this dialectic of negativity, discovers the subjectivity of objects in a way that reveals traces of the “mystery” of social labor.¹⁶⁷ The notion of an object irreducible to the individual synthesis of the transcendental subject, he argues, bespeaks, however unconsciously, a socially constituted object. “As the unity of human subjects who reproduce the life of the species through their labor,” Adorno writes, “things come into within society objectively, independent of reflection, without regard to the specific qualities of those who labor or the products of labor.”¹⁶⁸ In this peculiar way, Hegel’s concept of spirit, interpreted as the alienated social synthesis of social labor in capitalist society, appears as the coercive principle of capitalist society’s power of integration, so much so that the “the strains and toils of the concept are not metaphorical.”¹⁶⁹ In its striving to articulate the rationality of the matter at hand, the concept touches upon and sublimates that moment of the alienated self-mediation of labor—and this even if it is ultimately given a reconciliatory hue in the form of the inexorable movement of spirit within which the material process of labor appears to melt away.

Recall that, in the section of the *Paris Manuscripts* dealing with estranged or alienated labor, Marx establishes, against the discourse of political economy, that private property is the form which alienated labor assumes, to the extent that it can be said that private property is the result rather than the primary cause of alienated labor. In this way, Marx’s approach *demystifies* the alienated economic forms of capitalist society: “*Political economy conceals the estrangement inherent in the nature of labor by not considering the direct relationship between the worker (labor) and production.*”¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ Adorno, *Hegel*, 18.

¹⁶⁸ Adorno, *Hegel*, 20.

¹⁶⁹ Adorno, *Hegel*, 21.

¹⁷⁰ Marx, EPM, 73.

To be sure, it proceeds to ground these alienated forms—commodity, private property, money—in the totality of the social process, hence in a dialectical presentation of the relations between human beings which appear extinguished in the apotheosized forms of political economy.¹⁷¹ This perspective, it is worth repeating, raises the question of the *quality* of social relations and the necessity of *substantive human development*. Against the socioeconomic determinations of the capitalist mode of production, the alienated imperatives of which push toward unlimited quantitative expansion, it is the development of human needs for their own sake that serves as the ultimate basis of socialist freedom. Real wealth is not measured in the abstract, quantitative terms of monetary value and private property, but in terms of the qualitative and many-sided richness of complementary and mutually enhancing social relations at the level of the labor process as in culture, consumption, and the whole range of historically unfolding human sensibilities and capacities, which Marx suggestively refers to as “the complete *emancipation* of all human senses and attributes.”¹⁷²

The transition from “having”—the abstract, alienated, and one-sided form of possession necessitated by capitalist private property—to “being”—the fullness of human flourishing as an end-in-itself, where neither human needs nor the external nature upon which all life depends count only as mere as bearers of monetary value—constitutes the normative horizon of Marx’s

¹⁷¹ Backhaus, “Some Aspects of Marx’s Concept of Critique,” 20-22.

¹⁷² Marx, EPM, 139. It is worth noting that Herbert Marcuse, in perhaps one of his most utopian moments, went so far as to speak of the potential integration of the aesthetic dimension in the historical struggle for a new society as a socially productive force—*gesellschaftliche Produktivkraft*—in *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 45. Such a radical proposal, however, ought not to be construed as mere daydreaming, but instead as a possibility immanent to the historical process were its accomplishments *redirected* and *reconstituted* in the interest of eliminating historically superfluous suffering, toil, and domination, including the domination non-human nature (28). We also find a parallel consideration of the aesthetic dimension—however limited by a fixation on modernist art—in Adorno’s effort to recuperate the mimetic element or impulse, a mediated relation of spontaneity and freedom with respect to the object which anticipates a reconciliation between subject and object. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Rob Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

vision of genuinely social human beings.¹⁷³ The philosophical anthropology we have discussed thus far does not abide by an uncritical productivism or an instrumentalist perspective content to reduce human beings to their labor, though it cannot be denied that social labor offers a fundamental form of human activity in the sense that, through it, human beings not only directly satisfy their needs, but also produce their historical form of life. Of self-mediation, then, it can be said that “It is life-engendering life.”¹⁷⁴ The sociality of the human life-form is defined by certain necessities which cannot be transcended, only modified in the course of the immanence of historical development. Social labor remains a transhistorical necessity—not only as the production of the means of life but of the process of self-transformation implied thereby—even if the *specific relation* which human beings have to the labor process varies historically (including even the potential reduction of labor time overall).

For this reason, one cannot but disagree with Jürgen Habermas’s reading of Marx’s metacritique of Hegel. According to Habermas, Marx erred in transforming social labor—which remains within the bounds of “instrumental action”—into the exclusive principle of “social synthesis,” or that which makes socio-historical development normatively intelligible¹⁷⁵. In so doing, Habermas writes, “the philosophical foundation of this materialism proves insufficient to establish an unconditional phenomenological self-reflection of knowledge and thus the positivist atrophy of epistemology.”¹⁷⁶ This claim, however, rests upon the unquestioned conflation of social labor with instrumental action, hence with activity which, by its very nature, appears to

¹⁷³ The tension between ‘having’ and ‘being’ in advanced capitalist societies is developed at length by Erich Fromm, *To Have or to Be?* 2nd Ed. (New York: Continuum, 2008).

¹⁷⁴ Marx, EPM, 76.

¹⁷⁵ Habermas is certainly not alone in this assessment. See also Hans Joas, *The Creativity of Action*, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Paul Keast (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), esp. 85-116.

¹⁷⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 42.

exclude self-reflexivity, a purposiveness characterized by a self-conscious process of positing of social aims.¹⁷⁷

Moreover, Habermas assumes that the adoption the perspective of social labor can be understood merely on epistemological grounds rather than on the simultaneously subjective and objective ontological process of self-mediation. Habermas, in this way, reifies the nature of the capitalist labor process. He cannot account for the historical conditions under which capital dominates labor and attempts, however impossibly, to make it a mere means toward the realization of its self-propelling ends, since he dehistoricizes the nature of the labor process under the rule of capital.¹⁷⁸ Habermas conceives the “economy” in neutral instrumentalist terms, with the result that the realm of political and civil institutions becomes the sole point anchoring the normativity of critical social theory. The ostensible insulation of the alienated social relations which form the basis of the capitalist economy from the normative and historical considerations, which represents a central object of the critique of political economy, Habermas accepts at face

¹⁷⁷ One finds this sort of criticism not only in Habermas’s overtly rationalistic critical theory, but also in those forms of post-Marxism which embrace the irrational as an antidote to the linear progressivist vision of political economy within which even its radical critique finds itself included. See, for instance, Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, trans. Mark Poster (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975). For Baudrillard, Marx’s theory merely mirrors the productivist logic of bourgeois political economy. And, in mirroring political economy’s conception of productive activity and the generation and satisfaction of needs, Baudrillard writes, “*Marxism assists the cunning of capital*” (31). In Baudrillard’s view, “Marxism only partially dislocated the myth of Nature and the idealist anthropology it supports” (56). Thus, whereas Habermas relegates productive activity to the sphere of a normatively insignificant instrumental activity, foreclosing in advance that social emancipation involves a revolutionary transformation of production, Baudrillard would turn us toward the irrational excess distinctive of projects which reject the very notion of revolutionary transformation as a processual phenomenon and instead attach themselves to a logic of perpetual revolt in a state of supposed “radical presentness” (164). In this view, the socialist reconstitution of production on the basis of human needs stands denounced as a fantasy of a Eurocentric Enlightenment prejudice and revolt is fetishized as *immediately present irrespective of historical content*.

¹⁷⁸ As Simon Clarke argues, “The possibility of a reconciliation of the instrumental rationality of the capitalist economy and the substantive rationality of civil society clearly rests on the radical separation of ‘labour’ and ‘social interaction’, of ‘instrumental’ and ‘communicative’ reason, of ‘objectivity’ and ‘subjectivity’, of ‘structure’ and ‘action’, which was the basis of the marginalist revolution in economics” (305). See Simon Clarke, *Marx, Marginalism and Modern Sociology: From Adam Smith to Max Weber*, 2nd Ed. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993). Clarke’s critique of Horkheimer and Adorno, as well as of Lukács, thus prove misguided, since they do not treat, as Habermas does, labor as mere instrumental activity in order to reconcile it with a normatively idealized realm of communication. Instead, they see both as belonging to an integral, albeit contradictory, totality which demands their substantive reconstitution.

value.¹⁷⁹ The need for the practical elaboration of a substantive freedom which would challenge this very separation is from the beginning foreclosed.

Habermas's analysis suffers from a failure to adequately distinguish between concrete labor and alienated labor, what Marx later called "abstract labor." In other words, the uncritical conflation between labor as such and abstract labor repeats the naturalistic error of classical political economy, which naturalized value producing abstract labor mediated by the exchange of commodities as labor in general. Paradoxically, Habermas's account suffers from an uncritical naturalism, one that cannot analytically distinguish between productive activity in general as self-mediation and its specifically capitalist, alienated form. To recapitulate a point I have stressed throughout, the fact that the social metabolism assumes distorted and dehumanizing form under capitalist conditions does not alter the claim that this ontological determination constitutes the ultimate basis of *all* social life, and that its radical transformation in the interest of universal emancipation and self-development, in accordance with the historically developed potentials acquired in the unfolding of the historical process, is a fundamental condition of universal emancipation and the socialist imperative.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹ See Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), esp. 332-403. Habermas's critical theory presupposes the *essential neutrality* of monetary mediation. The problem, for Habermas, is not the money-form as a socioeconomic form distinctive of capitalist society, but the inappropriate overstepping of its properly instrumental bounds. The critique of the contradictions expressed by the money-form—for example, the contradiction between use-value and exchange-value—completely disappears in the sociological thesis of the "internal colonization of the lifeworld." For this diagnosis requires that money be seen as only *contingently* overstepping its bounds, since Habermas assumes the power of money can ultimately be controlled and reigned in, as it were, by the communicative normativity embedded in the institutions of the lifeworld. The question as to whether the self-augmentation of money proceeds by a kind of historically specific form of necessity cannot emerge here. The crises of the present, not least of all as expressed in the uncontrolled preponderance of fictitious capital during the neoliberal era, have seriously undermined the adequacy of Habermas's paradigm of critical theory to our current predicaments. For a comprehensive analysis of the continuity between Habermas's early attempt to "reconstruct" historical materialism and his later theory of communicative action, not least of all his *completely uncritical* account of money and commodities as forms of social mediation, see Helmut Reichelt, "Jürgen Habermas' Reconstruction of Historical Materialism," *The Politics of Change: Globalization, Ideology and Critique*, eds. Werner Bonefeld and Kosmas Psychopedis (New York: Palgrave, 2000): 105-145.

¹⁸⁰ For a similar line of analysis, see Michael J. Thompson, "Philosophical Foundations for a Marxian Ethics," *Constructing Marxist Ethics: Critique, Normativity, Praxis*, ed. Michael J. Thompson (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014): 235-265.

One might be tempted to see this as a relatively straightforward, if not self-evident, proposition. In the *Grundrisse*, for instance, Marx holds that it is not the *unity* but instead the *separation* between human beings and the objective, inorganic conditions of their existence that demands critical and historical explanation.¹⁸¹ Yet it would be mistaken to assume that this “unity,” understood as the labor-mediated metabolism with nature, is merely trivial or “commonsensical” and therefore without normative and explanatory significance.¹⁸² To be sure, the historical processes of separation, alienation, and dispossession which characterize the capitalist mode of production remain all but unintelligible without grasping the full significance of this unity as self-mediation, as open-ended, never fully determined historical development. This notion of the unity of human beings with the objective conditions of existence, with nature as historically modified, remains crucial insofar as it makes intelligible the critical claim that this ineradicable unity takes on an alienated form under the rule of capital, that is, *this unity appears as the result of forces external to alienated labor as a form of social mediation*. This account of unity as self-mediation, then, specifies the practical, social origin of the very social forces and compulsions which appear autonomous vis-à-vis the alienated socioeconomic forms of capital. Of course, this does not mean that alienated labor *inevitably* arises from this transhistorical unity between human beings and the objective, inorganic conditions of their existence. The reconstruction of this process requires historical and logical explanation attentive to the social forms which mediate between human beings and these conditions. That is to say, it requires the

¹⁸¹ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 489.

¹⁸² A claim we find, for example, in Moishe Postone, “Rethinking Marx’s Critical Theory,” *History and Heteronomy: Critical Essays* (Tokyo: The University of Tokyo Center for Philosophy, 2009): 31-47. See also his *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). In the latter work, Postone argues that only a *radically historically immanent approach*, one that understands every category of Marx, including dialectics itself, as immanent to its historical context, avoids the essentialist claims of philosophical anthropology (161). For a critique of Postone, see David McNally, “The Dual Form of Labour in Capitalist Society and the Struggle over Meaning: Comments on Postone,” *Historical Materialism* 12, no. 3 (2004): 189-208.

dialectical reconstruction of a society in which the products of labor assume the form of commodities—bearers of value exchanged on the market for the entirely quantitative ends of self-augmenting money.

Nonetheless, in highlighting the unity of human beings with their objective conditions, Marx does not romantically oppose an original condition of ontological plenitude to the alienated and reified social relations distinctive of capitalist society in which sociality appears as the power of things such as commodities and money, and overall as the process of capital's self-valorization, suggesting a mere return to the former. For Marx, exchange value is a peculiar development of social interdependence mediated by market relations and "exchange value as the all-sided mediation."¹⁸³ True, the historical appearance of social relations mediated by exchange value and the movement of reified things signals the dissolution of a more integral unity of individual and community. Nevertheless, the historical negation of a form of social interdependency characterized by 'mutual indifference' and universal alienation gives rise to the real possibility of social individuals whose social existence no longer confronts them as an impersonal compulsion expressed in the movements of things endowed with reified powers; it makes a concretely universal appropriation of social powers and needs historically possible.¹⁸⁴ At the same time that individuals become increasingly interdependent, albeit in the most unequal and uneven ways given the organization of the capitalist division of labor globally, so this interdependency acquires, and increasingly so, a life of its own. The contradiction between the powerlessness of individuals, subsumed by the historical generalization of class relations and compelled by the impersonal movements of the market, and the many-sided sociality developed thereby makes historically and normatively necessary a new form of social life characterized by

¹⁸³ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 156.

¹⁸⁴ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 157-158.

Universally developed individuals, whose social relations, as their own communal [*gemeinschaftlich*] relations, are hence also subordinated to their own communal control, are no product of nature, but of history. The degree and the universality of the development of wealth where this individuality becomes possible supposes production on the basis of exchange values as a prior condition, whose universality produces not only the alienation of the individual from himself and from others, but also the universality and the comprehensiveness of his relations and capacities.¹⁸⁵

Marx's vision of concretely social or communal freedom yearns neither for a return to the past nor does it take the capitalist present as the *terminus ad quem* of human historical development.¹⁸⁶ These social conditions, rather, express a historically particular form of self-mediation, one whose contradictory universality necessitates an unreconciled humanity dominated and alienated by its own activity as much as it generates the necessity of its opposite, namely, a communal form characterized by consciously associated social individuals who develop their needs and powers in a way adequate to their need for each other and for reciprocal, non-antagonistic self-development.

To conclude my analysis of the philosophical anthropological aspects of the Marxian critique of political economy, I will now turn to the vexed concept of species-being. This concept, I shall argue, equips us with a method that grasps self-mediation as an ontological determination, one that avoids both the traps of a historicism which fails to acknowledge natural determinations and a naïve naturalism which downplays the historical forms assumed by this self-mediating process.

¹⁸⁵ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 162.

¹⁸⁶ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 163. Marx rightly argues that the "bourgeois viewpoint" can never overcome, but only move contradictorily within, the historically determinate antithesis between a romantic yearning for "original fullness" and the uncritical eternalization of capitalist society. Since Marx sought a determinate negation of the capitalist mode of production that would unleash its historically unprecedented capacity to satisfy human needs and powers, at present distorted by unequal and exploitative relations of production geared towards accumulation, the bourgeois viewpoint could not but appear, at best, as a pseudo-solution and, at worst, as a vehicle of ideological mystification.

The Marxian Concept of Self-Mediation: Ontology, Freedom, History

This final section turns to the concept of self-mediation in the *Paris Manuscripts*, especially as developed through the critical notion of species-being with which Marx's early philosophical critique of political economy is so often—both affirmatively and negatively—identified. A reconsideration of this conceptual constellation, in my view, allows us to grasp the central stakes of Marx's navigation of the interpenetration of nature and history in the context of his philosophical anthropology. Put differently, it allows us to grasp the ontological aspects of the critique of alienation not simply as a romantic detour on the way to a mature critique of political economy without normative assumptions, but as a fundamental component of a critical form of materialism with a commitment to human emancipation, one attuned to the corporeal and sensuous character of human social reproduction as expressed in the grammar of critical concepts such as the free development of needs, powers, and sociality. Though the problem tends to be framed according to whether the concept of species-being is essentialist and bound to 'romantic' assumptions of ontological wholeness and thus to be discarded, I want to examine two salient aspects of Marx's approach which continue to supply us with significant conceptual resources for the critique of the capitalist mode of production and which, as it turns out, undermine the previously mentioned objections.

First, the notion of species-being expresses the universality of species-being as social freedom; it expresses not merely that human beings are conscious beings, but that consciousness is always practically grounded consciousness of social existence in its historically specific character. Further, species-being need not connote the restoration of a natural order or unity¹⁸⁷, even if the concept demands, to use István Mészáros's words, "that a natural basis must be found

¹⁸⁷ Soren Mau, "Mute Compulsion: A Theory of the Economic Power of Capital," (University of Southern Denmark 2019), 82.

for all ideality.”¹⁸⁸ How to explain the apparent inconsistency between the rejection of the existence of an unchanging natural order and the claim that a natural basis for all ideality must be specified?

It is nothing other than a question of *determination*, since, for Marx (as for Hegel), freedom is not freedom from all determination, but a matter of determining the specific form of freedom distinctive of human activity in relation to the concrete conditions in which it unfolds and develops. Species-being, then, grasps and affirms the simultaneously determinate and indeterminate character of self-mediation as the constitutive form of human social freedom. In other terms: it is a concept that acknowledges the fundamental unity that exists between the determinations of corporeality and self-conscious, meaning self-transformative, activity, paradigmatically (but not limited to) the cooperative activity of social labor under historically specific conditions. Determination is a mediated category, since it specifies a set of conditions: historical, natural, and corporeal. It gives us a way to attend to both the fact that human beings have needs, while acknowledging their plasticity and mutability, their historical formation. Species-being as self-mediation tracks the *necessity* of human sociality as self-mediation, the other-directed character of *all human activities*, at the same time that it grounds the unfolding of history *out of and within nature*.¹⁸⁹

Species-being, then, grasps the reciprocal determination of form and content, subject and object, at the level of social life; it thereby renders intelligible the contradictions and inversions

¹⁸⁸ Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, 163.

¹⁸⁹ See Georg Lukács, *The Ontology of Social Being: Marx's Basic Ontological Principles*, Vol. 2, trans. Ferenc Jánossy (London: Merlin Press, 1978), 7. As Lukács was to write: “Social being cannot be conceived as independent from natural being and as its exclusive opposite, as a great number of bourgeois philosophers do with respect to the so-called ‘spiritual sphere’” (7). Many figures in classical Marxism had already grasped the irreducible unity of society and nature, not least of all its implications for a materialist and ecologically oriented critique of capitalist society, even if in rather positivistic terms. See, for instance, Nikolai Bukharin, *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology* (Mansfield Centre: Martino Publishing, 2013), esp. 104-129.

in their historical unity. In this respect, it tracks the *necessity of social objectification*—the active expression of social life in the externalization of human needs, passions, and powers—together with the specific, contradictory forms this social objectification assumes. Though it does not appear frequently in Marx’s later works, it does so in a transformed manner within the broader social ontology which subtends the mature critique of political economy. To relate to each other as human beings, Marx argues in the *Grundrisse*, means that human beings reach beyond their *particular needs* and acknowledge their need for the products (and, correspondingly, the activities) of other human beings—this, he argues, means “that their common species-being [*Gattungswesen*] is acknowledged by all.”¹⁹⁰ This abstraction is rationally distilled from all forms of social life; it is the *sine qua non* of all social production. At the same time, however, this abstraction only acquires practical validity through the universal exchange of activities and products, integrated through a now global division of labor.

This form of social interdependence, however, cannot be one-sidedly identified with historical progress, a linearly conceived expansion of human freedom and self-development. Rather, the emancipatory aim of the critique of political economy lies in bringing to consciousness the contradictory, indeed irrational, form of this historical development. In other words, the critique of political economy intervenes by clarifying the contradictions which mediate the gap between what is and what could be, between the irrational organization of the productive powers of social humanity, ‘fettered’ by exploitative and alienated social relations, and the necessity of the dis-alienation of this wealth so as to reconstitute the telos of the conditions of production towards human development as an end-in-itself.

¹⁹⁰ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 243.

Marx foregrounds and subjects to criticism this alienated, negative form of development and envisions its determinate negation as the suspension of the prevailing *relation* between natural necessity and the rule of alienated economic determinations over human life. Indeed, capital, in its drive to extract surplus value from living labor, compels “superfluous labour from the standpoint of mere use value, mere subsistence.”¹⁹¹ This generates a contradiction which points towards a qualitatively different form of human activity, hence beyond capital itself—that is, towards a rational determination of the conditions of production no longer governed by the compulsions of capital but by the need for a substantive rearticulation of the *vert form* collectively given to necessity, its scope and meaning, in the interest of allowing free time for other social activities not immediately bound to material necessity. The contradiction unfolded by Marx, then, inheres in the fact that capital’s ultimately irrational telos, geared exclusively towards its own self-expansion, generates a form of historical necessity which, paradoxically enough, only reinforces superfluous scarcity, immiseration, and toil. In this way, Marx’s vision of socialist freedom entails a realization of human freedom and human needs at a higher level, not only as a changed relation to the labor process, freed from the “*theft of alien labour time*,” but as a consciously determined allocation of the time spent by social individuals in production in order to progressively widen the free time available for cultivating their many-sided needs and capacities.¹⁹²

This vision of human development and freedom which is central to Marx’s philosophical anthropology proves incompatible with productivist forms of Marxism and the self-serving

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 325. See also Georg Lukács, *The Ontology of Social Being: Labour*, Vol. 3, trans. David Fernbach (London: Merlin Press, 1980), 135. Lukács, despite problematically downplaying the negative aspects of this process, maintains that the self-constitution of the human species through the labor process is the condition of possibility of human freedom, expressing a movement “from natural determinations by instincts to conscious self-control” (135).

¹⁹² Ibid., 706.

discourse of so-called ‘globalization’. Productivist Marxism, for its part, sees the unlimited development of the productive forces as the ultimate goal of historical development, often ignoring the contradictory and destructive character the productive forces assume in their alienated capitalist integument. The ideology of globalization, on the other hand, naturalizes global inequality by treating it as a mere ‘externality’ to the capitalist mode of production, a contingent rather than necessary moment of its overall reproduction.¹⁹³ It goes without saying that the benefits of *capitalist* ‘development’ for the ‘Third World’ could only ever further entrench and exacerbate the most glaring forms of capitalist domination, exploitation, and dispossession.

While it would be easy to accuse Marx of a certain ‘optimism’ regarding the development of the productive forces, one should remember that the only way such productive forces can be subordinated to consciously determined human ends is through a *wholesale transformation of capitalist social relations*.¹⁹⁴ Only on this basis could “the absolute movement of becoming” be concretely actualized in human history—that is, as form of development whose point of departure is not a return to the past nor an (abstractly) utopian future, but a real, because immanent, possibility opened up by the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production. The open-ended character of self-mediation as “becoming” thus proves imperative in the

¹⁹³ Little surprise, then, that the promulgators of the ideology of globalization must also shut their eyes to the glaring, ever-growing inequality and misery even within the dominant capitalist powers themselves.

¹⁹⁴ It is necessary stress that the meaning of productive forces as it appears throughout Marx’s corpus has, historically, been narrowed so as to mean technology pure and simple. In truth, however, Marx regarded the productive forces not as mere instruments, but as *objectified human passions*. For an account that stresses the indebtedness of this conception to certain strands of romantic expressivism, see Erik van Ree, “Productive Forces, the Passions and Natural Philosophy: Karl Marx, 1841-1846,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 25, no. 3 (2020): 274-294. If there is a notion of human development in Marx, it cannot be explained exclusively by reference to the inexorable development of the productive forces. It would not be incorrect to say that one finds this kind of productive force determinism, explained on the basis of the rationality of individuals (methodological individualism), in G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

actualization of a positive, substantive freedom to be practically elaborated through a socialist alternative.¹⁹⁵ The philosophical foundations of the critique of political economy cannot be reduced to a “negative ontology,” then, as argued famously by Alfred Schmidt.¹⁹⁶

Thus, Marx’s position strikes us as simultaneously more radical and more modest than the positions described above, for it says nothing less than that the productive forces developed in an alienated form—that is, subordinated to the aims of capital accumulation—*could potentially* serve human ends and needs through the historical intervention of the proletariat. The predictive claims about the necessity of this process ought not to serve as an occasion for obscuring the fact that Marx’s vision of history saw capitalist society as a specific form of social life governed by particular dynamics and, further, that only a recognition of the necessity of practical intervention could serve as the point of departure for radical social transformation, lest the contradictions end, as he puts it in *The Communist Manifesto*, in the “common ruin of the contending classes.”¹⁹⁷ That the contradictions of capital have been exacerbated to the point of making even this prognosis appear somewhat restrained only makes more urgent the elaboration of a genuinely human and ecologically sustainable mode of development.

¹⁹⁵ For a critique of the idea of universal self-development as it appears in Marx’s philosophical anthropology, see G.A. Cohen, “Reconsidering Historical Materialism,” *Nomos* 26 (1983): 227-251. According to Cohen, Marx’s philosophical anthropology is “false” and “one-sided” (233). Its stringent “materialism” stipulates a far too demanding ideal of free self-development and thus fails to recognize that individuals might very well be content to carry out a single task for the rest of their lives within any organization of labor. But the Marxian ideal of free self-development does not imply a *compulsion* to do everything; it more modestly holds that, under communism, the social powers and relations of individuals would no longer confront them in a hostile, quasi-independent manner, such that they find themselves compelled to carry out alienating, mutilating, and one-sided forms of work necessitated by class society. All the stranger, then, that Cohen maintains Marxism has historically ignored the need for stable identity formation in placing too much emphasis on activity, privileging becoming over being (235). It should be clear from the argument I have developed thus far that, for Marx, these two moments form an integral unity. In a word, the affirmation of free self-development as becoming does not imply the compulsory demand to develop in every conceivable direction, only that human development would not be constrained and distorted by the way capital renders workers (and capitalists) “personifications of economic categories.”

¹⁹⁶ See Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Verso, 2014), esp. 76-93.

¹⁹⁷ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: International Publishers, 1948), 9.

At a rather abstract diagnostic level, then, the category of species-being allows us to make intelligible capitalist society as a self-undermining and ultimately irrational form of self-mediation. It is not a 'regulative ideal', in the Kantian sense, however, for the category does not refer to a presupposition supplied by reason which can only ever be approximated and never practically actualized, given the difference between reason and a world of phenomena governed by natural laws and the need for the former to make rationally intelligible the latter.¹⁹⁸ To repeat, for Marx, the category of species-being pertains not primarily to the constitutive character of human consciousness, though this is preserved in the very dialectic between practical activity and social consciousness in their unity and difference. It pertains, instead, to the constitutive character of self-mediation as the immanent determination of human activity and history, expressed in the *internal* relation between the absolute conditions of human life and the historically shifting conditions which mediate these same conditions.

Second, the notion of species-being proves unintelligible in the absence of the category of concrete totality. That is to say, species-being articulates the concrete, self-mediating unity of the particular and the universal. Species-being as a concrete universal must be conceived, therefore, as a concept derived immanently from the form of activity distinctive of human beings as social beings.¹⁹⁹ Marx operates, one might say, with an expressivist account of the relation between the social individual and their social existence. This means that the life of the individual expresses the life of their society, just as society cannot reproduce itself without the actions of concrete

¹⁹⁸ See, for instance, Immanuel Kant, "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch," *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. H. S. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991): 93-115. Thus, for Kant, the ideal of perpetual peace requires that we posit a purposiveness in 'Nature' as it concerns the progressive direction of human history. Kant is clear that, while we cannot *empirically* verify the existence of such purposive designs, making history normatively intelligible requires that we "supply it mentally in order to conceive of its possibility by analogy with human artifices" (109). This explains why, in Kant's view, the matter at hand can only be determined as an idea, and not as something pertaining to the immanence of historical development, as is the case with Hegel and Marx.

¹⁹⁹ For a lucid interpretation of Marx's concept of species-being which emphasizes this form of mediation, see Paul Santilli, "Marx on Species-Being and Social Essence," *Studies in Soviet Thought* 13, no. 1/2 (1973): 76-88.

individuals, with the important qualifications that such actions take place under historical conditions not entirely of their own choosing. The existence of the individual never refers to the ideologically naturalized self-enclosed individual of liberalism, which complacently reifies the antagonisms between individuals and between classes as the very essence of its mystified vision of abstract 'freedom'. Human life is irreducibly social, for Marx, and its appearance as detached thought or atomistic individualism, or as domination and exploitation, is always an expression of a historically peculiar form of sociality, even if in direct negation of the latter.

Species-being constitutes a concrete universal insofar as it does not subordinate the concrete to the universal, but instead establishes their *free mediation* as integral to a substantive conception of social freedom. "The individual," Marx famously writes, "*is the social being*."²⁰⁰ The individual and their social conditions stand in a dialectical relation; the individual belongs to a social world, a totality, and can therefore experience itself consciously as *this* social being standing in *this* particular relationship to both the object of activity and the activity itself in its social character, not least of all under alienated conditions. It is not a relation of abstract immediacy, behavioristic response, or contemplative detachment, but a relation constituted in and through free, conscious mediation, one in which universal sociality does not confront the individuals involved in an alienated, antagonistic, and unfree manner. Such unfreedom, I have argued, acquires a universal character under the capitalist mode of production. As Andrew Chitty rightly argues, capital is an abstract universality; it expresses a form of social interdependence which necessarily unfolds in an alienated manner, that is, "in the fact that capital realises the

²⁰⁰ Marx, EPM, 103.

universality inherent in the human essence in an abstract way, in such a way as to counterpose the universal as something external to the particular.”²⁰¹

In the previous section, I touched on the social powerlessness of human beings before the socially constituted conditions of their existence as symptomatic of capitalist alienation. This reified ‘second nature’ which subordinates human and non-human needs to the imperatives of capital can be criticized from a conception of species-being which brings to consciousness its *historical nature*, as one historical instantiation, however falsely universal and totalizing, of human self-mediation, with its own specific limitations and contradictions.

In unfolding this concrete universal, we can subject to criticism the social conditions themselves as well as their ideological rationalizations. Enrique Dussel, in his reconstruction of the normative foundations of Marx’s critique of political economy, describes this as a *universal material criterion*, a designation with which I concur: “the one who acts humanly has as content in the act, always and necessarily, some meditation for the self-responsible production, reproduction, and development of the life of each human subject in a *community of life*, as the material fulfillment of the needs of his or her cultural corporeality (the first among them being the desire of the other human *subject*), having as ultimate referent all of humanity.”²⁰² As a concrete universal, therefore, the concept of species-being implies a normative social ontology able to critically diagnose the distortion of human needs and the constraints to substantive freedom necessitated by social relations mediated by the domination of things, as in the case of money, which becomes, under capitalism, the ultimate means and end of social life.

²⁰¹ Andrew Chitty, “Species-Being and Capital,” *Karl Marx and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Chitty and Martin McIvor (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009): 123-142, 137.

²⁰² Enrique Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation: In the Age of Globalization and Exclusion*, trans. Eduardo Mendieta et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 95. For an account that specifies an ethics of human flourishing in Marx’s critique of capitalism and his conception of communism, see Karsten J. Struhl, “Marx and Human Nature: The Historical, the Trans-Historical, and Human Flourishing,” *Science & Society* 80, no. 1 (2016): 78-104.

In this sense, capitalist alienation can be understood as a process which necessitates the dis-articulation of subject and object, that is, as the systematic frustration of social life as self-mediation not only through the division of humanity into antagonistic classes, but also through what Marx, in the *Grundrisse*, describes “as sacrifice of the human end-in-itself to an entirely external end.”²⁰³ Here it is important to note, however, that this critical judgment is *immanent* to the process of self-mediation; it is not a *moralistic* critique, since its normative basis lies in the objectivity of the historical process, the unfolding of human needs and powers, even when this occurs in an alienated form, as it necessarily must under the alienated rule of capital.²⁰⁴ Tracking both the necessity of this historical process and the necessity of its abolition animates the vision of human emancipation at the core of Marx’s emancipatory critique of political economy.

The critique of alienation, then, grasps this historical process by means of which the production of abstract wealth as value becomes the overarching *telos* of production, rather than the production of wealth existing as a subordinate albeit essential moment of the production of human beings as species-beings rich in need. This does not mean a simple return to use-value, as I argue above, but to use-value on the basis of the transformation of contradictory conditions which allow for its reconstitution here and now in the interest of the further realization of human needs and a qualitative change in the scope of social freedom.²⁰⁵ Hence, the emancipatory, historically determinate critique of the capitalist mode of production envisions social labor’s re-appropriation of the real wealth developed on the basis of that very mode of production, a

²⁰³ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 488.

²⁰⁴ For an examination of the vexed problem of morality in Marxism, particularly with respect to morality itself as ideology, see Charles W. Mills, “Marxism, ‘Ideology’ and Moral Objectivism,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 24, no. 3 (1994): 373-393. Mills argues—and I largely agree—that the critique of morality as ideology is not a rejection of moral claims as such, only of their exaggerated significance in projects of social and political transformation. For a similar line of analysis, see Raymond Geuss, “The Moral Legacy of Marxism,” *Analyse & Kritik* 1, no. 2 (2015): 51-70.

²⁰⁵ See Iring Fetscher, “Karl Marx on Human Nature: A Reevaluation,” *Social Research* 40, no. 3 (1973): 443-467, 458.

rational, because collectively determined, historical transition away from the uncontrolled form of economic growth and its constitutive alienated social relations, “one in which increased human productive abilities exist in a limitless runaway form over which people have little control.”²⁰⁶ For this reason, it cannot be said that the philosophical anthropology from which the critique of political economy derives its normative force rests upon romantic premises which remain purely “speculative” and ahistorical as has been claimed, among others, by Ernest Mandel.²⁰⁷ It is an essential moment of the “determinate negation” of capitalist society.

I am arguing, then, that Marx’s philosophical anthropology is premised on certain positive postulates about the very nature of human freedom as self-mediation. Carol C. Gould captures this point well: “On reconstruction, one may say that, for Marx, freedom as agency requires the availability of means or conditions in order for choices to be effective.”²⁰⁸ This

²⁰⁶ Moishe Postone, “Critique and Historical Transformation,” *Historical Materialism* 12, no. 3 (2004): 53-72, 65.

²⁰⁷ See Ernest Mandel, *The Formation of the Economic Thought of Karl Marx* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971). In Mandel’s view, and I cannot but agree with him here, “the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* do not form a mature economic work” (35). But I question Mandel’s assessment that the concept of species-being ultimately locates alienation not in capitalist social relations but in human nature itself and that the “anthropological conception of alienation...remains largely philosophical and speculative” (161). As I have been arguing, it is not possible to demarcate a neat division between an anthropological and a historical conception of alienation; they form a dialectical unity, and the Marxian conception of the metabolic exchange between humanity and nature as a transhistorical determination in and through which historical specificity emerges must be brought into view for the fullest apprehension of the stakes and scope of Marx’s critical theoretical project. For Marx, the labor process is in effect a process of *historical anthropogenesis*, the self-making of the species, even if this occurs in a contradictory form that ought to be superseded. In a word, a distinction must be made here between *deriving* alienation from a speculative conception of human nature and providing the *normative* and *ontological* ground in and through which the critique of political economy becomes intelligible as a materialist project in the first place. For an analysis of the fate of species-being in the context of concerns about the “posthuman” and the destructive aspects of technology as developed by capital, see Nick Dyer-Witherford. “1844/2004/2044: The Return of Species-Being,” *Historical Materialism* 12, no. 4 (2004): 3-25. A point of contention, however. Dyer-Witherford is correct when he asserts that the problem of alienation which the concept of species-being renders intelligible “is not an issue of estrangement from a normative, natural condition, but, rather, of who controls and limits the processes of ceaseless species self-development” (7). My worry here lies in the implicit conflation between the “natural” and the “normative,” because it implies that a normative judgement about alienation implies an appeal to immediate nature, perhaps even a return to a more originary condition, when, in fact, the normative force of the concept of species-being touches upon nature mediated through self-mediating activity and the historical possibilities implied thereby (and, in any case, a normative judgement is already implicit in the claim about who disposes over the conditions of production or “self-development”).

²⁰⁸ Carol C. Gould, “Marx After Marxism,” *Artifacts, Representations and Social Practice: Essays for Marx Wartofsky*, ed. Carol C. Gould and Robert S. Cohen (Dordrecht: Springer Science + Business Media, 1994): 377-396, 386.

notion of *substantive freedom*, of equality in terms of access to and control over the social and material conditions of human flourishing, proves essential to the concept of species-being. It is implicit in the critique of alienation, as well as the critique of abstract labor, that is, “labour separated from all means and objects of labour, from its entire objectivity” and “as total exclusion of objective wealth.”²⁰⁹ The critique of value in the mature critique of political economy, of the diverse forms of dispossession and separation which characterize capital’s self-expansion, presupposes a philosophical anthropology that normatively affirms the need to reconstitute the conscious unity between social labor and the objective conditions of its existence as the very condition of substantive social freedom.²¹⁰

Third, the concept of species-being is a relational concept. Self-mediation thus implies, as mentioned earlier, that human beings live through an irreducible dependency on external nature as their “inorganic body.”²¹¹ Marx’s philosophical anthropology contains a critical ecological insight: namely, that the capitalist mode of production undermines the very conditions of human

²⁰⁹ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 295, 296.

²¹⁰ For an opposing perspective, see Allen W. Wood, “The Marxian Critique of Justice,” *Marx, Justice, and History*, eds. Marshall Cohen, Thomas Nagel, and Thomas Scanlon (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980): 3-41. While Wood focuses specifically on Marx’s rejection of transhistorical conceptions of justice specifically, his claims remain relevant for our discussion here, for on a methodological level he construes Marx as committed to normative functionalism, a perspective which is not, however, to be confused with relativism. The reason for this lies in the fact that the Marxian position claims not that, since all views are relative, it is simply not possible to adjudicate between one claim and another. Rather, a claim to justice must be seen as functional, hence *adequate* or fitting, to its historical context, meaning that it is a necessary outgrowth of a given, historically transient mode of production (18). Wood goes so far as to extend this point to the notion of freedom itself. Indeed, no such notion exists; the valuation of human happiness and “the development of human powers and capacities” need not presuppose any moral philosophy, even those that foreground questions of human freedom (40). As I have argued throughout, however, even if it is not possible to claim Marx as a moral philosopher in the traditional sense of the word—that is, as participating in the philosophical tendency to separate norms from the material life-process of society—the *immanent criterion of self-mediation constitutes the objective socio-ontological locus of historical intelligibility. The critique of political economy is critical not only because it criticizes the false positivism of bourgeois economy and the inverted world of capital’s social forms, but because it grasps the human, historically constituted determinations of these same problems.* Human historicity implies that such determining constraints, however much they lie beyond the power of any single individual to change, are, in the final analysis, *self-given*, though it must be specified that such self-given constraints are not, as in the Kantian account, self-given laws in line with reason. Rather, they are self-given according to the historically specific constraints of a given mode or form of producing and reproducing human life in its ineliminable interchange with natural processes.

²¹¹ Marx, *EPM*, 76.

flourishing in subordinating this “inorganic body” of human beings to the imperatives of capital accumulation, irrespective of the destructive consequences.²¹² Capitalist alienation involves a lack of social control not only over the historically developed conditions of existence, then, but equally over the necessary metabolism with nature itself with which any future society must contend.²¹³

Marx’s philosophical anthropology articulates this specific unity of determination and indetermination: what *is* the case for a given form of social life is not identical with what human beings in their sociality *are* insofar as the historical unfolding of such sociality is dynamic and appears as immutable under conditions of alienation. Thus, Marx’s critical philosophical anthropology neither denies the existence of fundamental corporeal needs nor reduces human beings to them; instead, it develops as an immanent determination of human activity a specific manner of relating to such needs as historical needs in their open-ended, manifold development.

It bears repeating here that the distortion of this self-development constitutes one of the objects of the critique of political economy, not least of all in terms of division of labor whereby labor is dominated by capital and its personifications. The very need for meaningful activity, for conscious, rational determination of the labor process and the objective conditions of social

²¹² This, of course, is precisely the object of critical investigation in contemporary Marxist ecological analysis. See, for example, Paul Burkett, *Marx and Nature: A Red and Green Perspective* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2014); John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, *The Robbery of Nature: Capitalism and the Ecological Rift* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020). These investigations do not only demonstrate the centrality of ecology in Marx’s critique of political economy; they also advance on Marx’s ecological critique, which, given the limitations of Marx’s own historical moment, could not but be incomplete. Moreover, such studies present a compelling challenge to critiques of historical materialism which charge it with uncritically reproducing the instrumentalization and domination of nature. For an example of this charge, see Stanley Aronowitz, *The Crisis in Historical Materialism: Class, Politics and Culture in Marxist Theory* (South Hadley: Praeger, 1981), esp. 45-71.

²¹³ I take the category of social control from István Mészáros, “The Necessity of Social Control,” *The Necessity of Social Control* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2015). Already in this 1971 Deutscher Memorial Lecture, Mészáros points to the alienated imperatives of capital as responsible for waste and pollution and for the degradation of nature more generally (49). Mészáros also links the gravity of the present ecological crisis to the “activation of capital’s absolute limits.” These limits are characterized as absolute, since not only can they not be overcome by the system in structural crisis; they also point to the fact that the system of capital accumulation reaches a point where it imperils the conditions of organized human life.

existence more broadly, is therefore inseparable from the critique of the antagonistically structured division of labor.²¹⁴ The critique of the division of labor maintains that that the social relations between people are mediated by the preponderance of their relation of ownership over things—money and capital—which gives them the power to dispose not only over the conditions of production, but over the activities of others. Or, in what amounts to the same, it is the very *form of production* of production and social life which stands as the object of critique.

Of course, the ontological aspects of the mediation of nature and history also raises questions about the precise character of this mediation, indeed whether one can appeal to it at all. Cornel West, for example, takes a historicist approach and argues that the quest for philosophical foundations, with which he associates Engels and the later Lukács, is supplanted in Marx by the “perennial activity of solving problems, responding to dilemmas, or overcoming quagmires.”²¹⁵ The contingent character of normative conceptions as conceived by Marx requires that “the problem should be viewed as the many manifestations of *discrepancy between the rhetoric of universal interests and the reality of particular class interests* within the limits circumscribed by particular systems of production and the boundaries of the concomitant social and political institutions and cultural ways of life.”²¹⁶

Norman Geras, on the other hand, contends that Marx’s theory of human nature, defined by material production and an account of “basic human needs,” is the normative foundation of the critique of capitalist society.²¹⁷ On this basis, Geras concludes that Marx’s critical description of the misery and alienation produced by capitalism “evokes needs that human beings do not

²¹⁴ Karsten J. Struhl, “Marx and Human Nature: The Historical, the Trans-Historical, and Human Flourishing,” *Science & Society* 80, no. 1 (2016): 78-104. As Struhl writes, A society rich in needs “is also a society in which ultimately there is no longer a division of labor, which means not only the abolition of class division, but also the end of the division between mental and manual labor, of the allocation of work by gender, race, and ethnicity” (90).

²¹⁵ Cornel West, *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1991), 65.

²¹⁶ West, *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought*, 92.

²¹⁷ Norman Geras, *Marx and Human Nature: The Refutation of a Legend*, (London: Verso, 2016), 70.

owe to ‘their given social connection’ but merely to their natural constitution as human beings, even if they do not owe it to the former that these needs are not more amply satisfied.’²¹⁸

Historicist objections to normative foundations, especially those that would ground normative claims in an ontology or philosophical anthropology, often assume that one must *either* adopt an uncritical (essentialist and ahistorical) naturalism or the perspective of radical contingency grounded entirely in the specific predicaments of the present. West, for example, appeals to a contradiction between falsely universalized interests and the particularity of class interests which prevails in the given system of production. Yet it is difficult to see how one can, on the one hand, adopt radical historicism (the rejection of any foundations whatsoever) and still maintain that this contradiction between the universal and the particular is, or at least ought to be, compelling on normative grounds. The limitation of West’s approach lies in the reduction of normative considerations, particularly as concerns the dialectical articulation of universality and particularity, to a purely discursive register.

For the position that universalism is reducible to the contestation of ideological rhetoric alone presupposes that the contestation of a falsely universalized society, for instance, need not involve the elaboration of concrete universal forged in struggle against not only the particularity of class interests, but against a global system characterized by universal interdependency shaped by the needs and imperatives of capital. That is to say, the contestation of a falsely universalized state of affairs, whether as a consequence of the reification of its very social forms or in its more openly apologetic ideological rationalizations, necessarily implies that *this specific form of universality is deficient and can be superseded by a concrete universal articulated on the basis of universally shared interests and needs, not despite but through particular struggles which*

²¹⁸ Geras, *Marx and Human Nature*, 72.

elaborate a socialist alternative. This would involve articulating a concrete, partisan universal that would prove adequate to the false one it contests, which cannot succeed in partial or merely local terms, but only as a concerted effort requiring global human solidarity. It is true that Marx sees the *particular* sufferings of the proletariat as indicative of the universal wrongs which prevail in capitalist society.

On the other hand, the naturalist perspective, typified by Geras, does not fully grasp the historically determinate character of human needs. For his point of departure is the claim that human beings must satisfy basic needs grounded in “an intrinsic human make-up.”²¹⁹ It is true, as I have stressed throughout, that Marx’s philosophical anthropology depends in large part upon acknowledging the corporeal limitations of human beings as social beings. Nevertheless, if struggles define themselves *solely* in terms of basic needs, and if Marxist theory adopts this perspective, there is no reason to assume that these struggles point beyond capital. To be sure, this is not a necessary consequence of Geras’s argument, but a risk of overemphasizing ‘basic needs’ unmoored from the historical conditions which make intelligible the radical need for a rearticulation of the very relationship to material needs which defines the dialectic of necessity and freedom, of the *absolute conditions* of human life and how such conditions are to be collectively organized in accordance with human needs and the potential of expanding free time for activities not *immediately* bound to the material reproduction of human life.

On the whole, then, we cannot but express agreement with Geras’s claim that historicisms which reject any substantive philosophical anthropological notions prove *incompatible* with historical materialist critique and prove, in the final analysis, self-defeating inasmuch as they fail to grasp what Fracchia appropriately calls the “corporeal depths” of Marx’s

²¹⁹ Geras, *Marx and Human Nature*, 110.

critique of political economy.²²⁰ As Geras suggests, the Marxian claim about human beings as self-mediating, self-transformative natural-historical beings “does not commit one to the view that *everything* about it changes or that it has *no* enduring features.”²²¹ It would not be incorrect to say that this fundamental point, not always explicitly spelled out but nevertheless presupposed, is the socio-ontological basis of Marx’s materialism as far as human history as self-mediation is concerned. The opposite view—of human beings unbounded from nature by virtue of their rationality, as leaving nature entirely behind as a result of historical and technological developments—evinces a “flagrant idealism.”²²² Further, such positions tend to uncritically reflect the alienation of nature and history, the ongoing damage and violence visited upon the former by the latter. To be sure, they cannot but reflect a form of life whose principal imperative is a blind, structurally unconscious drive to accumulate.

Such flagrant idealism is to be found not primarily in an incorrect philosophical view, in other words, but finds its practical and historical basis in the very *domination of human and non-human nature, of inner and outer nature, under the rule of capital*. As Horkheimer once pointed out, “Each subject not only has to take part in the subjugation of external nature, human and nonhuman, but in order to do so must subjugate nature in himself.”²²³ The classic argument presented in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Horkheimer and Adorno ought to be seen, then, as a further development of the philosophical critique of political economy which takes seriously the subjective and material consequences of the total inversion of means and ends which represents a central pathology of capitalist domination. Material entities, including the natural world upon which human social life depends, are treated as mere functions or bearers of capitalist

²²⁰ Fracchia, “The Capitalist Labour-Process,” 64.

²²¹ Geras, *Marx and Human Nature*, 90.

²²² Geras, *Marx and Human Nature*, 90.

²²³ Horkheimer, “Revolt,” 93.

imperatives—thus arises the socially necessary appearance that nature as such can be fully subjugated and mastered. And in this relentless need to subjugate the totality of nature—at least as far as the latter enters the capitalist production process—is contained a logic of self-alienation and self-abnegation, a socially constituted delusion of absolute self-sufficiency and absolute sovereignty that denies the claims, indeed the limits, of both external and human nature.

In the context of his powerful discussion of the phenomenon he identifies as ‘the revolt of nature’, Horkheimer recognizes that the domination of nature, human and non-human, does not mean the repression of an unmediated inner nature which erupts in the form of irrationalism (the catastrophe of Fascism, as a pseudo-revolt invoking the liberation of nature which merely aggravates this domination, looms large here). Against this reactionary, irrationalist perspective, Horkheimer maintains that the domination of external nature—our ‘inorganic body’, in Marx’s terms, as well as other human beings—is an historical product, a form of irrational ‘self-preservation’ which only reproduces on an ever-expanding scale a historically unnecessary (or false) necessity.²²⁴ Critical theory tracks the ambivalence of this process, for cannot be determined a priori which historical interests point in the direction of the abolition of this historically unnecessary necessity. The appeal to nature can serve emancipatory or oppressive ends, and the task of social critique is to ally itself with those that express a historically determinate interest in emancipation.

To reiterate, I am not suggesting that the satisfaction of basic needs has no place in the struggle against the capitalist mode of production, only that their one-sided emphasis can obscure historically developed *radical needs* and possibilities the realization of which pushes beyond the

²²⁴ As Horkheimer writes in “The Revolt of Nature”: “The complete transformation of the world into a world of means rather than of ends is itself the consequence of the historical development of the methods of production” (102).

negative structural constraints of the capitalist system. It should not be forgotten that the emphasis on the radical transformation of capitalist social relations moves beyond the horizon of distributive struggles and indicates the necessity of changing the very *telos of production* in accordance with the social needs of the associated producers for a new mode of free association. This view holds that the social conditions of production as a totality must be transformed in a way that is adequate to the needs of all in their specificity.

Thus, even if the struggle for basic needs must play a part in socialist struggle, it must be vitally linked to the struggle for a change in the overall telos of production, now dominated by the self-augmentation of value, to a new telos which centers human needs and ecological sustainability. That is, it must advance a struggle for substantive freedom and equality which fundamentally transforms the form of the production process in its capitalist form: from a lack of control characterized by a form of control as a self-relation, or, in what amounts to same, as free self-mediation. The labor process would then become a process *internally directed* by the subjects involved, rather than externally constituted by the compulsions of capital and the interests of its personifications. The order of causality, determined by the valorization process which structures the labor process under the capitalist mode of production, thus undergoes a qualitative shift from alienated social relations, determined heteronomously, to free social relations, determined by those who struggle for a qualitatively different socialist future in accordance with consciously determined social ends and needs.²²⁵ This represents the positive

²²⁵ While opposing *abstract bourgeois humanism*, the theorist of *operaismo*, Raniero Panzieri, writes the following, very much in the spirit of my argument here: “The ‘complete development’ of man and of his physical and intellectual capabilities (which so many ‘humanist’ critics of ‘industrial society’ like to invoke) appears as a mystification if it is represented as an ‘enjoyment of free time’, as an abstract ‘versatility’, etc., independently of man’s relation to the process of production and the worker’s reappropriation of the product and of the content of work in a society of free associated producers” (65). Raniero Panzieri, “The Capitalist Use of Machinery: Marx Versus the ‘Objectivists,’” trans. Quentin Hoare. *Outlines of a Critique of Technology*, ed. Phil Slater (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1980): 44-68. This alone distinguishes Marx’s humanism as one that ‘conceives itself in action’, to reiterate to Bloch’s words.

emancipatory commitment guiding the materialist critique of capitalist society, its structural determinations and forms of consciousness, in Marx.

Indeed, in the appendix to *Capital*, “The Results of the Immediate Process of Production,” Marx describes the valorization process in terms of a *non-reciprocal or asymmetrical determination* of subject and object. Under capitalist conditions, the means of production confront social labor as the property of the capitalist or capital personified.²²⁶ In the labor process itself, the worker still transforms the means of production into a specific product, into use values. From the side of the valorization process, however, “it is not the worker who makes use of the means of production, but the means of production that make use of the worker.”²²⁷ The inversion at work here is real in the sense that “Living labor for its part ceases to be anything more than a means by which to increase, and thereby capitalize, already existing values.”²²⁸ This relation specifies a structural feature of the valorization process of capital as a form of social domination and unfreedom which must be *constantly renewed and reproduced*. The emphasis on the social conditions through which the capitalist system reproduces itself is not a crude functionalism, however, but a critical account of the activities of human beings who can, and indeed often do, set limits to “the tyranny of capital’s dehumanizing time imperative.”²²⁹ This dehumanizing time imperative, enforced through the law of value, distorts human self-mediation (and subordinates nature, our ‘inorganic body’) to the narrow aims of capital’s “false infinity,” its abstraction from the finite human beings whose social activity sustains and reproduces it.²³⁰

²²⁶ Marx, *Capital*, 988.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 988.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 988.

²²⁹ Mészáros, *The Challenge and Burden of Historical Time*, 47.

²³⁰ For a brilliant analysis of capital as a false infinity, see David McNally, “Beyond the False Infinity of Capital: Dialectics and Self-Mediation in Marx’s Theory of Freedom,” *New Dialectics and Political Economy*, ed. Robert Albritton and John Simoulidis (New York: Palgrave, 2003): 1-23. See also Chris Arthur, “The Infinity of Capital,”

For what ought, in principle, to be the means for the realization of living labor, become, in their capitalist integument, the power of self-augmentation through exploitation, through the appropriation of alien labor. Capital simply is this alien power which not only “maintains” old values in its hold over the means of production, but ever-increasingly adds to itself by means of the worker who generates value as something opposed to herself.²³¹ Material production in its capitalist form involves an inversion which obtains in reality, i.e., “the inversion of subject into object and *vice versa*.”²³² This form of unfreedom and alienation is more palpable for the worker, Marx argues, since capital appropriates their labor without equivalent; the more social labor posits value opposite itself in the form of abstract value, the more capital’s power of domination over social labor grows. The truth of capital, or at least one of its many truths, is precisely this form of unfreedom which turns essential self-mediation into its opposite.

A critical judgement thus inheres in the very description of this process as unfreedom, as inversion of subject into object and vice versa, as socially necessary irrationality. It is present in the self-conscious and embodied experience of the workers themselves in the labor process dominated by the valorization process. The labor process under the capitalist mode of production expresses the contradictory unity of the labor process as an ontological and “creative” determination of the metabolism between human beings and nature and its historically specific and alienated form under the domination capital.²³³ The barrier to the capitalist mode of

The New Dialectic and Marx’s Capital (Leiden: Brill, 2004): 137-152. Using psychoanalytic terms, Arthur describes the drive of capital’s to be limitless as “reminiscent of compulsive neurotic behaviour, for example of repeated washing of the hands” (142).

²³¹ Ibid., 988.

²³² Ibid., 990.

²³³ Amy Wendling writes that, in parting ways with a “productivist metaphysic,” “The concern of Marx’s later work will be to ground liberation not in labor, but in freedom from labor” (44). See Amy Wendling, *Karl Marx on Technology and Alienation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). The reading I develop troubles Wendling’s interpretation insofar as I reconstruct Marx’s philosophical anthropology and its normative commitments as grounded in the self-mediating activity of *social labor under any and all modes of social cooperation*.

production is capital itself, then, insofar as it expresses this *irreconcilably contradictory unity* as its very essence, its immanent logic. Diane Elson, in her reading of Marx's value theory, thus rightly concludes that the critique of political economy unfolds "the *limits* to the tendency to reduce individuals to bearers of value forms."²³⁴ Furthermore, such limits, she contends, are to be found in the peculiar domination of the concrete by the abstract, both at the level of "subjective, conscious, particular aspects of labour" in concrete labor and in the "collective aspect of labour in the concept of social labour," in particular by being translated into the form of monetary mediation, which we analyzed in Chapter II.²³⁵

The notion of rational abstraction, a transhistorical determination common to all forms of social life, such as production in general, therefore contains a critical aspect, since it brings into focus these conscious and subjective factors without which the critique of political economy would remain a merely descriptive gesture.²³⁶ Because such rational abstractions characterize *all modes of production and therefore none in particular*, to use Maurice Godelier's formulation, they make intelligible those elements unique to specific forms of social life which in fact determine the specific developments in the self-mediation.²³⁷ The transhistorical and the historically specific determinations must be both separated and reintegrated, distanced and unified, unfolded in their dialectical movement, "so that in their unity – which arises already from the identity of subject, humanity, and the object, nature – their essential difference is not

²³⁴ Diane Elson, "The Value Theory of Labour," *Value: The Representation of Labour in Capitalism*, ed. Diane Elson (London: Verso, 2015): 115-180, 174.

²³⁵ Elson, "The Value Theory of Labour," 174. See also Douglas Moggach, "Perfectionism, Alienation and Freedom: From the German Idealists to Marx," *Reassessing Marx's Social and Political Philosophy: Freedom, Recognition and Human Flourishing*, ed. Jan Kandiyali (New York: Routledge, 2018): 19-42. "Yet in this very centrality lies the transformative potential of the proletariat. Capitalism's defining trait, the separation of workers from the means of production, also marks its limit, its determinate negation, the conditions and agency of its possible overthrow" (32).

²³⁶ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 85.

²³⁷ Maurice Godelier, *The Mental and the Material: Thought, Economy and Society*, trans. Martin Thom (Verso: London 1986), 131.

forgotten.”²³⁸ Here we see that the unity and difference of the transhistorical and the historically specific is a consequence of the process self-mediation distinctive of human history. Put in different terms, if human beings were not the kinds of creatures who engage in free self-mediation through their productive activity, there would be no objective basis for the ability to distinguish between the absolute conditions of human social reproduction and their historically specific alienated forms under the rule of capital. Human productive activity as self-mediation is such that it forms a part of nature, indeed depends upon it, while at the same time unfolding as diverse forms of historical development irreducible to natural causality.²³⁹ Despite its totalizing character as an alien, abstract universality, the capitalist mode of production can be historically particularized as *one particular form of life*, not ontologized as the first nature we encounter in its ideological eternalization.

As Karen Ng argues, the philosophical anthropology operative in Marx concerns the *form of life-activity* itself and must be understood through “the dialectics of life and self-consciousness.”²⁴⁰ By establishing a parallelism between the Hegelian Idea and the Marxian notion of species-being, Ng holds that the very form of the activity of species-being is such that life itself can become an object for itself in the direction of “further determination.”²⁴¹ The self-reflexive form of human life-activity, articulated in the dialectical unity of life and self-consciousness, unfolds as the historical labor process itself. Species-being thus refers not to a static, unchanging human essence, but to a form of life the dynamism and potentials of which are

²³⁸ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 85.

²³⁹ For a similar line of analysis, see Adrian Johnston, *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism*, Vol. 2 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2019), esp. 85-95. “Therefore, in the spirit of Hegelian *Aufhebung*, Marx cancels all absolute separations and polarizations of nature and humanity, natural and human histories, while simultaneously and nonetheless preserving specific distinctions between these dimensions” (91).

²⁴⁰ Karen Ng, “Ideology Critique from Hegel and Marx to Critical Theory,” *Constellations* 22, no. 3 (2015): 395, 393-404.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 397.

always indexed to specific historical conditions, not least of all those contradictions and inversions which beset the capitalist mode of production. Hence, Ng reads Marx's philosophical anthropology as *negativist* in orientation, since it establishes a formal anthropological basis for issuing critical judgments about the "distortions, inversions, pathologies, illusions, paradoxes, contradictions and crises that arise in a historically specific form of life defined by the capitalist mode of production."²⁴²

Significantly, Ng also designates three conditions discernible in both Hegel and Marx which pertain to the very limits of human life-activity as self-conscious, expressive of the dialectical and *self-mediating* relationship between life and self-consciousness which we have already touched upon in the foregoing discussion: 1.) Embodiment; 2.) The irreducible relation of this embodiment to external nature; and 3.) Sociality.²⁴³ What Ng's account makes clear is also the need to articulate a constellation of concepts which can effectively "bridge" or mediate between life and self-consciousness. Doing so, she argues, would better equip us to grasp struggles unfolding not only at the level of the labor process, but over other domains of social life in light of the contradictions of capital: against neo-colonial domination and extractivism, the attack on social reproduction and reproductive autonomy, ecological destruction, and housing, to name but a few.

Earlier, I highlighted Marx's *positive conception of substantive freedom*. I suggested that, for Marx, freedom remains an abstraction in the absence of collective, substantive control over the conditions, both social and natural, through which alone freedom can be actualized, and this by giving due attention the natural-historical character of social human beings. Here it becomes necessary to adduce, however, that the task of a critical philosophical anthropology is

²⁴² Ibid., 397-398.

²⁴³ Ibid., 402.

simultaneously *negative* and *positive*. In this sense, the critique of political economy, within which philosophical anthropology features as a key moment, also commits itself to a historically determinate alternative to capital—that of the associated producers who consciously determine telos of production in the interest of free, non-antagonistic social development. This, of course, is not antithetical to the necessity of social and political struggle, unless we presume that social struggles have a common anthropological basis mediated by social relations of domination, alienation, and exploitation.

The reconstruction of this normative horizon, I believe, remains for us a historical necessity not because the alternative—socialism—is historically guaranteed, but because it offers us a way of situating the totality of struggles not only against but positively beyond capital. The construction of a socialist alternative, then, brings to the fore, as its guiding practical principle, that the devastations of capital make historically necessary a society in which the freedom of each is the condition of the freedom of all, a society of socially conscious, communal association. In other words, “it is concerned with setting the *parameters* and of the *direction* in which...the consciously self-controlled life-activity of the social individuals could be integrated into a both productively viable and humanly fulfilling whole.”²⁴⁴ It is to the guiding principles of the socialist horizon, its necessary parameters and direction, that we shall turn in the following chapter.

²⁴⁴ István Mészáros, *Beyond Capital: Towards a Theory of Transition* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1995), 751.

IV. RADICAL NEEDS AND THE SOCIALIST VALUE OF AUTONOMY: ON THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF POST-LUKÁCSIAN CRITICAL THEORY

Authentic Marxist thought has a style: the style of the intensification and broadening of life.

—Henri Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity*

It is to say that every contradiction is a conflict of value as well as a conflict of interest; that inside every "need" there is an affect, or "want", on its way to becoming an "ought" (and *vice versa*); that every class struggle is at the same time a struggle over values; and that the project of Socialism is guaranteed *BY NOTHING*—certainly not by "Science," or by Marxism-Leninism—but can find its own guarantees only by *reason* and through an open *choice of values*.

—E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*

The Waning of Historical Commitment

If we began with an investigation of the philosophical dimensions of Marx's critique of political economy, it should by now be clear that this is not a disinterested theoretical gesture. On the contrary, a clarification of these philosophical aspects of the critique of political economy, I have insisted, remains an ever-pressing historical and theoretical imperative for reimagining the meaning of a *socialist alternative* to capital as the indissociable unity of an *objectively discernible historical need and a value-laden commitment*. We ought to be clear about our substantive values. This is especially so when the accelerating contradictions of global capitalism in the neoliberal era and the concomitant ideological and practical erosion of a robust socialist imaginary—a horizon of shared historical commitments grounded in a vision of substantive freedom and planned self-determination—point to the urgency of such an alternative, which cannot but be *universal* in scope and oriented toward a qualitatively different social metabolism on a scale adequate to the problems to be confronted.

We must also concede that, because Marx's critique of political economy principally sought to comprehend the logical tendencies of the capitalist mode of production and not to provide a systematic exposition of its central normative parameters, their further theoretical elucidation persists as a valuable undertaking, representing a crucial moment of socialist transformation and the theoretical clarification of its emancipatory objectives. What are the grounds of the values which must orient that class which constitutes itself as the protagonist adequate to socialist transformation, whose task it is to carry out a substantive *socialization* of property and political power, that is, creatively elaborating social relations whose guiding principle is self-directed forms of free association? How are we to situate these values with respect to philosophical anthropology as a form of natural-historical critique? If social being as an socio-ontological *condition* is the objective ground of our critique of the capitalist mode of production, this is the case because the collective coordination of social life, not least of all with respect to social labor, supplies us with an immanently grounded principle constitutive of human life whose content is subject to conscious historical modification, to *ongoing concretization* and hence the practical realization of the human potentialities which point beyond our current alienated form of life. It is this essential openness, this anticipative projection of history consciously and freely made, that defines our philosophical perspective here.

The necessity of socialist transformation, then, lies not in some hypostatized conception of human nature that would abstractly hover over historical developments. Rather, this necessity concerns the material and ontological determinations constitutive of human existence, its natural and social conditions, which stand as the self-mediating basis of historical change and the very sites of emancipatory struggle. Here it is imperative to challenge the problematic conflation between the ahistorical and the transhistorical and between particularity and universality which

besets a great deal of contemporary critical and philosophical discourse. The ahistorical implies something unmoving and in principle unchangeable. It implies a pure and timeless principle untouched by historical circumstances through which one can either criticize—or, alternatively, eternalize—the present historical order. The transhistorical, on the other hand, pertains to those features distinctive of human life which can be characterized as *mediated immediacies*, or as specific determinations—social labor, for instance—which manifest a distinctive form of *dynamic self-relation*, what, following Marx and Mészáros, I have been calling *freedom as self-mediation*. The ahistorical presupposes something which does not manifest a logic of *self-development* and which retains an invariable, static self-identity *despite* processes of change, not least of all active self-change. Ahistorical postulates assume an array of forms, from unrealizable ‘regulative ideals’, in the Kantian sense of the term, to metaphysical justifications grounded in some otherworldly, spiritual reality. Of course, ahistorical postulates may also take less lofty, cruder forms, as in biological determinism, for instance, or even the transparently apologetic notion that individualistic self-interest in its capitalist form is ingrained into human “rationality” as such.

In contrast, the transhistorical, in the critical—and, if I may be permitted, dialectical—meaning of the term, turns our attention to those determinations which make human life *intelligible universally* yet do not remain insulated from substantive historical alteration, including their qualitative broadening in an emancipatory direction. They constitute unchosen, in a sense unwilled, hence necessary determinations without which human life could be neither properly described nor critically scrutinized, let alone subject to practical transformation. Our materialist perspective commits us to the view that the limited and conditioned human beings are naturally and socially has a great deal of evaluative significance when determining the nature of

the conditions which make freedom possible and intelligible (reasonable by human standards), or, on the contrary, impossible and unintelligible (unreasonable by human standards).²⁴⁵ In this way, the objective necessity of socialism is grounded in those needs, capacities, and aptitudes the emergence of which is already prefigured in capitalist conditions themselves and which, if actualized, would concretize a new form of self-mediation. The necessity of a socialist alternative is not, in this sense, an “external” necessity, but an immanent one.

We must bear in mind, however, that the historical specification of these needs, capacities, and aptitudes does not require us to abandon the view that they ultimately materially refer to *facts* which are possessed of philosophical anthropological significance. For instance, the need for free time, the expansion of which is negatively constrained by capitalist social relations, remains unintelligible without the simultaneously necessary and appropriate social conditions and relations needed for its consolidation. Naturally, it is not possible for finite, conditioned human beings—bound socially as they are to each other and to external nature—to extricate themselves from the realm of material necessity. The view that material determinations and limits are inessential and to be denied is a byproduct of the fetishistic form of economic growth and alienated form of development distinctive of capital. We are not dealing here merely with one of the ideological legitimations of capital, however, but with one of its constitutive historical premises beyond which lies qualitative human development which consciously makes its own necessary, material conditions into freely appropriated conditions.

Thus, it is impossible to institute a society guided by free time when the imperatives of capitalist society necessitate the imposition of labor as alienated labor, that is, labor determined

²⁴⁵ A close affinity obtains between the argument I propose here and the account advanced by Jeff Noonan, “Self-Restraint, Human Freedom and the Conditions of Socialist Democracy,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 25, no. 4 (2014): 85-101.

not by genuinely social individuals, but by a system whose structurally embedded determinations necessitate the predominance of abstract wealth measured in and represented by monetary—hence exclusively quantitative—terms. This, in the broadest terms, constitutes the radical thesis underlying Marx’s conception of universal human development and human freedom, a society of associated producers who *rationally* organize—or substantively socialize—the ineradicable realm of necessity, in accordance with their qualitative need for fulfilling activity and self-actualization. The much-maligned notion of ‘overcoming’ the realm of necessity in some finalistic, harmonious freedom to be achieved through communism is, in this regard, alien to the Marxian vision of the dialectical relation which obtains between the realm of necessity and the realm of freedom.²⁴⁶

For it is neither a matter of freedom absolutely overcoming necessity nor of necessity absolutely binding human life to some dogmatically conceived ahistorical constraints. Rather, their dynamic *relation* expresses the shifting boundaries between the two moments as constitutive of human history in its concrete specificity.²⁴⁷ *The nature of human freedom is such that the boundaries between necessity and freedom are subject to conscious change in*

²⁴⁶ See, for example, the critique Cornelius Castoriadis directs at Marx’s allegedly “rationalist” and deterministic conception of history in *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Malden: Polity Press, 2005), 9-70.

²⁴⁷ As Karel Kosík maintains, to posit freedom as a property absolutely detached from necessity, from labor, tends to conceal the historical division between manual and mental labor, fetishizing the autonomy of “spiritual” production and failing to grasp “that labor is a human doing which *transcends* the realm of necessity *and forms within it* real prerequisites of human *freedom*, even without leaving it” (125). Karel Kosík, *Dialectics of the Concrete: A Study on Problems of Man and World* (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1976). For a similar perspective, see Bruno Gulli, *Labor of Fire: The Ontology of Labor Between Economy and Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005): 61-74. To cite Gulli directly: “Marx distinguishes...between *productive labor* as a category of capital, and the *productive power of labor* as the ontological foundation, which is enhanced by liberated time” (66). Stated otherwise, productive labor coincides with the value form of labor, compulsory productivity in the interest of extracting surplus value, whereas the productive power of labor lies in its self-mediating character, in its capacity to reconstitute both itself and its conditions of existence mediated by conscious ends and social needs. Such a transformation would allow for the flourishing of those modes of activity which, according to capital’s narrow imperatives, prove “unproductive”; the relation or boundary between “necessity” and “freedom,” between labor and free time, would thereby be *qualitatively* altered. This, and not the chimerical notion of “abolishing labor,” constitutes one of the central axes of socialist freedom.

accordance with existing historical and social potentialities, most importantly the need for the all-round development of social individuals. Thus, the realm of immediate necessity recedes with the universal socialization and interdependence of production and exchange, replacing, though never absolutely, this necessity with historically constituted, and therefore alterable, necessity. The realm of freedom wherein human powers and needs can fully develop as ends in themselves—of historical temporality as the condition for free self-development—is therefore only possible *on the basis of the planned and autonomous coordination* of the realm of labor or material production—in short, the realm of freedom does not lie beyond production and labor as such, but beyond their determination in a blind and socially unconscious manner, as they must be under the capitalist mode of production.²⁴⁸

Of course, the fact that historically constituted necessity results in the recession of immediate necessity does not mean that the former will be overcome automatically and in the absence of conscious intervention over the allocation of society's overall disposal of time. The whole point of the normative critique of the capitalist mode of production, as I understand it, is precisely that it *must be* transcended because this form of social existence necessarily subordinates human history and external nature to its own crudely material, albeit historically constituted, constraints, to an "external" end from which the capitalist class benefits but which, in the final analysis, drags all of humanity along its destructive path. In other words, it constrains the movement of free self-mediation, confining the latter to historical premises over which individuals are overwhelmingly powerless and which, in their own distorted manner, perpetuate immediate material necessity in alienating human life from its own social potentialities for self-

²⁴⁸ See also Emmanuel Renault, "Work and Domination in Marx," *Critical Horizons* 15, no. 2 (2014): 179-193, esp. 190-92. See also Sean Sayers, "Freedom and the 'Realm of Necessity,'" *Marx and Alienation: Essays on Hegelian Themes Marx and Alienation: Essays on Hegelian Themes* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 65-77.

determination. This negative historical condition epitomizes the inverted, fetishized, topsy-turvy world of capital: things endowed with social power dominate social mediation, whereas social mediation and the metabolism with nature are subject to the crude, quantitative materialism of capital, subjected to the objective power of alienated economic forms.

Thus, while on one level we can speak of a definite conception of the kinds of beings that human beings are *qua* natural-historical beings in Marx's thought, on another it cannot be said that the emancipatory content of a genuinely "humanized" and universal society properly exists, for it remains to be actualized in practice. In his great study, *Natural Law and Human Dignity*, Ernst Bloch touches on this very point when he argues that, for Marxism, "the *humanum* has the function of a historical goal, not the function of an a priori principle of deduction."²⁴⁹ Under the capitalist mode of production, Bloch suggests, humanity lags behind, so to speak, its own immanent concept. A discord exists between the universalization of human relations mediated by the dominating predominance of things and the potentiality of a free universalization whose content is *prefigured* but which, to repeat, must be *practically actualized*. We shall see later that this concept of immanent development—unfolding as a contradiction between existence and essence, between actuality and potentiality—represents the one of the distinct meta-theoretical contributions of post-Lukácsian toward circumscribing normative concepts integral to an emancipatory socialist project.

We can therefore say that the purpose of the critique of political economy lies in bringing to light the contradictory, alienated mediations which constrain the actualization of a genuinely socialized humanity, one whose own *historical becoming* must be consciously appropriated and given a free, self-mediating form, as opposed to remaining bound to those historically

²⁴⁹ Ernst Bloch, *Natural Law and Human Dignity*, trans. Dennis J. Schmidt (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987), 192.

determinate, contradictory *external constraints* distinctive of capital, which subordinate the purposive nature of human activity and the metabolism with nature to an objective, socially constituted power which reproduces itself as domination ‘behind their backs’, and with increasingly devastating consequences, made glaringly evident in the current planetary ecological crisis and new forms of proletarianization and immiseration. For this reason, we are still confronted with the weighty question as to the meaning and form of a new *social autonomy*—or, better yet, a *socialized autonomy*—that would prove able to transcend this historical situation.

Yet another reason that would more than warrant the endeavor of clarifying the normative dimension of historical materialism vis-à-vis its distinctive philosophical anthropology lies in what some have identified, perhaps not wholly inaccurately, as “a genuine contradiction in belief in Marxist theorizing”: namely, the contradiction between normative commitments as integral moments of historical critique, on the one hand, and their seemingly peremptory rejection, on the other.²⁵⁰ Axel Honneth and Hans Joas arrive at a rather similar position, even if on different and less sympathetic grounds, in their assessment of the philosophical anthropology which subtends historical materialism and the critique of political economy. In their view, it is precisely the conscious abstraction of Marx’s critique of political economy from an anthropological conception of needs—a move necessitated by the attempt to expose the narrow, fetishistic instrumentalism of the capitalist mode of production—which contributed to “the lack of a concept of human needs with substantive content.”²⁵¹ Marxist theory

²⁵⁰ Norman Geras, *Discourses of Extremity: Radical Ethics and Post-Marxist Extravagances* (London: Verso, 1990), 5.

²⁵¹ Axel Honneth and Hans Joas, *Social Action and Human Nature*, trans. Raymond Meyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 4, 18-25. According to these theorists, then, Marx’s early anthropological concepts are effectively displaced in *Capital*, since the critical exposition in the latter depends upon a distinctively Hegelian logic abstracted from any “subjectivity,” i.e., the logic of “self-valorizing value.”

is found to be normatively wanting, since the comprehension of the economic structure of capitalist society, with its self-destructive historical tendencies, appears to render normative considerations extraneous.²⁵²

These issues reach even farther back in time, however, and it is here that we discover their more immediate practical ramifications. To be sure, already within the socialist movement itself, contentions arose between those committed to a revolutionary critique of the capitalist mode of production, insisting that the necessity of its contradictions and crises-ridden nature alone warranted revolutionary change, and those who ventured to introduce the perceived missing ‘ethical’ ideals, often drawn from Kantian and neo-Kantian philosophy, into their explicitly reformist, gradualist, and anti-revolutionary political programs.²⁵³ Here we must lay stress, however, on the fact that the neo-Kantian moment proved to be retrograde from the very beginning. For in Kant, as Stathis Kouvelakis notes in his brilliant treatment of the ambivalent stance of German philosophy towards the French Revolution, the notion of ethical life “poses the relationship between morality and politics as the external action of morality *on* politics (through the mediation of right), and, ultimately, as the subordination of one to the other.”²⁵⁴ According

²⁵² Whether this critical assessment fully reflects—and I am skeptical that it does—the history of Marxist theorizations of human needs, let alone the real ways this problem has featured in actually existing socialist experiments past and present, is another question altogether.

²⁵³ For a historical and theoretical survey of these contentions, one (rightly) critical of the previously mentioned reformist positions, see Henryk Grossman, “Fifty Years of Struggle Over Marxism: 1883-1932,” *Henryk Grossman Works: Essays and Letters on Economic Theory*, Vol. 1, ed. Rick Kuhn (Leiden: Brill, 2018): 332-388. The classic argument for adopting a “legislative” road to socialism, of course, is to be found in Eduard Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism: A Criticism and Affirmation* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963). In this work, Bernstein urges a return to Kant to combat not only what he regards as the developmental determinism of Hegelian dialectic (to which Marx, he maintains, remained regrettably beholden) but also a materialism which expresses “contempt for the ideal” (223). For a critical evaluation of Bernstein’s position on this matter, see István Mészáros, *The Power of Ideology* (London: Zed Books, 2005): 297-310.

²⁵⁴ Stathis Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution From Kant to Marx*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2003), 16. The matter at hand is not uncomplicated. As Kouvelakis observes, Kant’s philosophy embraced the wave of “enthusiasm” unleashed by the French Revolution as a sign of the “natural” moral progression of “mankind’s” striving for freedom. At the same time, Kant was anxious about this prospect, believing such enthusiasm and its consequences must ultimately be limited by respect for and deference to the prevailing institutions.

the Kantian view, therefore, morality affects political practice only by asserting its transcendental primacy over a political reality with which it can, in principle, never fully accord, with the result that the public extension of enlightenment becomes an abstract regulative principle implying a gradualist notion of the possibility of historical transformation.²⁵⁵ The retrogressive nature of neo-Kantian, reformist socialism did much the same, though in very different conditions which were, for obvious reasons, unavailable to Kant: The existence of a mass movement that placed the real possibility of socialist revolution—and surely not as an abstract regulative principle—on the historical agenda.

Still, as Lucien Goldmann once noted, both “orthodox” Marxists theorists and their ethically oriented reformist counterparts often shared an unacknowledged premise with the predominant bourgeois thought of the time: the separation and irreconcilability of statements of fact and judgments of value.²⁵⁶ It should also be noted that the separation between statements of fact and judgements of value also proves to be of decisive importance for the conception of society in both classical political economy and contemporary economics, with their tendency to construe the economic sphere as an entity guided by an individualistic means-end rationality

²⁵⁵ For an interesting, more recent attempt to establish some basic compatibilities between Marx and Kant, see Lea Ypi, “On Revolution in Kant and Marx,” *Political Theory* 42, no. 3 (2014): 262-287. I am not convinced, however, that this synthesis is possible, or at the very least as seamless as it might first appear. In the first place, it must be said that, even if a basic affinity between Kant and Marx exists with respect to their conceptions of historical progress as the resolution of historical conflicts, the *grounds of explanation* and *evaluation* for such resolution radically diverge for the reasons outlined above. Furthermore, for Marx, progress in human history is not discernible “through repeated attempts to realize the principles of right” (279). It becomes discernible, rather, to the degree to which human self-mediation becomes for itself a matter of conscious authorship, that is, to the degree to which the material life-process of society can be emancipated from the rule of dominating forces and relations which operate “behind the backs” of those involved. What is more, for Marx historical development is the unfolding of the human essence, even if this occurs in contradictory form, so that it strikes one as rather inadequate to say that what drives human beings toward historical progress is “not of a natural but of a moral, historically reflexive kind” (280).

²⁵⁶ Lucien Goldmann, “Is There a Marxist Sociology?” trans. Ian Birchall, *Radical Philosophy* 1, no. 16 (1972): 16-22. Thus, it is not entirely accurate to claim, as Alex Callinicos does, that, apart from the odd case of the Austro-Marxists, Marxism “has always denied that there is a gap between fact and value” (107). See Alex Callinicos, *Marxism and Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983). For an opposing perspective which, in my opinion, tends to overstate/overcorrect the division between “Scientific Marxism” and “Critical Marxism,” see Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Two Marxisms: Contradictions and Anomalies in the Development of Theory* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1980): 69-71.

devoid of normative and historical content, rather than as a mediated totality comprised of both objective social relations and specific normative commitments.²⁵⁷

Let us consider, however, that tendency described above is by no means univocal. Indeed, I would argue that the arguments advanced in this chapter suggest a deep affinity with the critical “ethical naturalism” elaborated by Roy Bhaskar, that exemplary, yet curiously underappreciated, dialectician. For Bhaskar, we need not bow to that conceptual interdiction established by bourgeois thought, and which runs from David Hume to G. E. Moore, which disallows not simply the derivation of the “ought” from the “is,” but in fact restricts any dynamic movement between them as relevant for the determination of critical judgements. And this interdiction has the effect of conflating the existing system of normative commitments with the given or existing moralities, since such theories hold there can be no dynamic “*transition from fact to value.*”²⁵⁸ To be more precise, there can be no such transition because the perspectives in question systematically deny that there are any *ontologically relevant facts* constitutive of human existence which would *critically, and in an emancipatory manner, motivate this dialectical movement toward self-determination.* As Bhaskar writes:

Sociality necessarily implies solidarity, with or in self-emancipation and an orientation to the totalizing depth praxis to universal human emancipation which will usher in the good society, oriented to concretely singularized universal human autonomy.²⁵⁹

For this critical ethical naturalism, then, the identification of a social ill or negative/alienated constraint necessitates “a *positive generalization of the concept of freedom*, so that this includes not only rights, democracies and equities...but also needs and possibilities or

²⁵⁷ For a sweeping analysis of the ideological function of these presuppositions not only in economic theory, but also in sociology, see Simon Clarke, *Marx, Marginalism and Modern Sociology*.

²⁵⁸ Roy Bhaskar, *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* (London: Routledge, 2008), 197.

²⁵⁹ Bhaskar, *Dialectic*, 267.

potentialities for development.”²⁶⁰ That is to say, this positive generalization of the concept of freedom as self-determination or social autonomy demands that we reformulate an emancipatory theory with socialist intent in conformity with principles grounded in a shared humanity, in what Bhaskar speaks of as *desire* or *need*, not least of all its *privation* under conditions of domination and alienation. Accordingly, this movement from desire to freedom (to use Bhaskar’s expression) and from privative experience (atomism, reification, alienation, suffering) to positive self-mediation (collective self-emancipation as immanent social freedom, social consciousness of the determinate sources of domination and privation) articulates the core normative logic of the critique of political economy as we understand it.²⁶¹

For it is this argument alone that allows us to agree with Hans-Georg Backhaus’s view that, contrary to the capital apologetics characteristic of bourgeois economic and social theory, an “anthropologico-economic dialectic” makes intelligible the capitalist mode of production as a “negative teleology” through the “destruction...of the ‘metamorphosis’ of a profane universal into the subject.”²⁶² This is no condition of “self-incurred immaturity” involving an inadequate realization of reasonable criticism, as imagined by Kant and those who posit abstractly moral solutions to historical contradictions, but, rather, an ultimately self-imposed historical situation

²⁶⁰ Bhaskar, *Dialectic*, 259. Though commonly criticized in contemporary critical theory, many are returning to naturalist positions. See, for example, Federica Gregoratto et al., “Critical Naturalism: A Manifesto,” *Krisis: A Journal for Contemporary Philosophy* 42, no. 1 (2022): 108-124.

²⁶¹ On this point, see Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation*, 55-69, 92-107, 218-234, 281-290. The requirements of a full comparison between the respective ethical arguments of Bhaskar and Dussel is beyond the scope of this chapter. Suffice it to say, however, that they both strive to develop a form of materially grounded critical judgement—a material rationality, even—attentive to what Dussel calls “the material moment of ethics” and Bhaskar designates as an ethical naturalist “dialectic of desire for freedom.”

²⁶² Hans-Georg Backhaus, “Between Philosophy and Social Science: Marxian Social Economy as Critical Theory,” *Open Marxism*, Vol. 1, eds. Werner Bonefeld, Richard Gunn, Kosmas Psychopedis (London: Pluto Press, 1992), 54-92, 85.

dependent on determinate social relations and normative commitments between human beings in their metabolism with nature.²⁶³

We should bear in mind, then, that these antinomies which express the separation between facts and values require historical and political, and not merely conceptual, comprehension. When socialist struggle seems to have waned, to have suffered losses and historical setbacks, disorientation ensues; normative and practical commitments must be reconstructed, perhaps even *remembered* and rescued from their all too premature relegation to the status of obsolete beliefs of a bygone age. It is incumbent on any critical theory worthy of the name to elaborate these values in the time of their waning, to counter their objective invalidation by what Mészáros aptly calls the capital system’s “counter-value,” made apparent in the distortion which objectively enforces the *negative values* sustaining the overall process of societal reproduction.²⁶⁴ Hence, we need not only a critique of cynical incredulity and self-aggrandizing pluralisms and agnosticisms amenable to the ideological needs of the prevailing socioeconomic order but, even more importantly, a critique of the prevailing ‘counter-value’ compelled by the irrational, fundamentally anti-social, irrational nature of the capitalist system, a horizon of emancipation which proves able to *positively circumscribe* and consciously commit itself to the humanity of the alternative.

To be sure, materialist concepts, as Marcuse once reminded us, “contain an accusation and an imperative”: a critique of the manifest irrationality and destructiveness of the present social order through a confrontation with the tendencies and potentials—both negative and

²⁶³ See Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006): 17-23.

²⁶⁴ Mészáros, *The Challenge and Burden of Historical Time*, 47-48.

positive—to which it gives rise.²⁶⁵ Materialist concepts, then, articulate the integral unity of historical description and critical historical judgement. Accordingly, these concepts equally require an elucidation of the social forces that would consciously direct the historical process toward a qualitatively different social order beyond the negative determinations described above. In this respect, the vexed question as to *who* controls the direction of the process of production—and in accordance with what kinds of consciously adopted ends and values—remains an urgent question for socialist struggle and theory.

Moreover, it is abidingly clear that we fail to find a satisfactory response to such problems in critical perspectives that beg the question, or deny its relevance altogether, by construing any concern with normativity as a regressive “Rousseauist” (or otherwise “romantic”) deviation which historical materialism, with its unremitting emphasis on historical immanence, overcame once and for all, as argued by G. M. Tamás.²⁶⁶ Thus Tamás provides an interpretation of Marx’s claim that, under the domination of capital, the worker becomes a mere subsumed “moment” of capital in such unnecessarily dualistic and reductive terms as the following: “If the worker is a feature of capital,” he writes, “the worker can change capitalism into something else only if he or she changes himself or herself, in an extra-moral sense.”²⁶⁷

Surely, one can agree with the sensible claim that moral persuasion unmoored from the struggle to elaborate practical socialist mediations and norms does not in and of itself amount to socialism.²⁶⁸ Yet to argue that emancipation from the rule of capital is entirely “extra-moral”

²⁶⁵ Herbert Marcuse, “The Concept of Essence,” *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 8.

²⁶⁶ G.M. Tamás, “Telling the Truth About Class.” *Socialist Register* 42 (2006): 1-41.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁶⁸ On this point, see Ellen Meiksins Wood’s classic discussion in *The Retreat from Class: A New ‘True’ Socialism* (London: Verso, 1998), esp. 167-179. I largely agree with Wood’s political conclusions and believe that they remain of the greatest relevance today: *any* socialist movement which seeks to bypass the problem of class relations and the primary role of the working class in realizing human emancipation must assume that moral persuasion alone, detached from the class struggle, lays the basis for a socialist alternative. Against this view, it is the class struggle

would amount to no less than abandoning the conception of socialism as a qualitatively new form of social mediation which gains its historical and moral validity not from a mechanically conceived historical necessity or instrumentalism, but from the necessity of social transformation in its indissociable unity with the human and universal value commitments which must orient the consolidation of the alternative.²⁶⁹ For, in the final analysis, it is precisely this concrete unity between the movement of universal needs—a movement stirred, let us say, by a passionate enthusiasm for freely determined self-development and social reciprocity, in accordance with the need for the active participation of social individuals—and the contradictory conditions themselves—uncontrolled, alienated, non-reciprocal—which forms the basis of socialist revolution as a *real possibility*.²⁷⁰

In proposing, therefore, that workers can change capitalism into “something else” *only* if their own process of self-change occurs in an “extra-moral sense,” Tamás’s argument only replicates the antinomy between objectivity and values expressive of alienated capitalist conditions—foremost the division of labor and the necessary split between consciousness and social practice it sustains. Impatience towards abstract moralizations should not lead us to summarily reject as an inessential distraction—or even as a real impediment—the concrete unity

that gives life and content to the effort to liberate both the proletariat and ultimately humanity from the rule of capital.

²⁶⁹ Unfortunately, Marxists have all too often banished these questions from legitimate inquiry in pejorative terms as mere “romanticism,” a view evident in Tamás’s peculiar claim that *all* historical socialism heretofore has been moralistic, Rousseauist, and ultimately reformist in nature. For a more careful consideration of the role of romanticism in Marx’s critique of political economy, one attuned to its critical appropriation, see Michael Löwy, “The Romantic and the Marxist Critique of Modern Civilization.” *Theory and Society* 16, no. 6 (1987): 891-904.

²⁷⁰ The requirement of meaningful, substantive (because parting with the formalism of capitalist democracy) individual participation in social/communal life has been forcefully expressed by Ernesto “Che” Guevara, *Man and Socialism in Cuba* (Havana: Guairas, 1967): 21-26. Weighed down by the burden of the capitalist past—the atomization and the structure of self-interest governing individual life, reification, and underdevelopment in the context of imperialist and neo-colonial domination—a revolutionary socialist project must not only struggle against these pathologies, but also positively strive to create new human beings in unity with a new material base—in a word, new value-commitments and new forms of social mediation embodying such commitments (22).

which must be achieved between the transformation of material circumstances and the process of self-transformation.

Even as astute a reader of Marx's critique of political economy as Simon Clarke resorts to a spurious separation between a "philosophical critique" and a "historical critique" of capitalism.²⁷¹ For Clarke, a philosophical critique by necessity seems to presuppose an *ahistorical* conception of human nature and therefore remains beholden to the kind of "essentialist anthropology" one finds in Feuerbach.²⁷² While Clarke correctly regards the theory of alienated labor as core of the essential continuity of the Marxian critique of political economy, one that historically specifies a society whose form of social mediation is characterized by a "a real inversion" wherein socially constituted powers appear as *intrinsic and immediate properties of things themselves*, rather than as *results* of social relations mediated by the universal exchange of commodities, his position becomes incoherent in that it cannot intelligibly identify why this objective inversion *ought to be* transcended. Despite his awareness that Marx sought to *go beyond* the ideological naturalism of bourgeois political economy, for which social properties appeared as natural emanations or direct consequences of physical things, he seems to cede any general (transhistorical) claims about human nature to the status of bourgeois philosophical mystification. That human nature as socially grounded self-mediation and as the ongoing metabolic exchange with "external" nature as our "inorganic" body is the *mediated ground* of the critical judgements we form about capitalist society these critics would reject as an "external" and thus transcendental form of critique.

Consequently, the attempt to distinguish the Marxian critique of political economy from both the naturalization of economic categories we find in classical political economy and from

²⁷¹ Clarke, *Marx, Marginalism and Modern Sociology*, 76.

²⁷² Clarke, *Marx, Marginalism and Modern Sociology*, 66.

the historicist critique which explicitly acknowledges the historical nature of economic categories falls short of its self-stated aims. To be sure, in his effort to deflate the substantive philosophical claims of historical materialism, Clarke loses sight of the fact that the critical historical judgement concerning the need to transcend the alienated social forms of capitalist society requires a definite philosophical anthropological conception of human beings as self-mediating beings of nature. Clarke, however, frames the issue of human nature by positing an unbridgeable chasm between a critique of the historical specificity of alienated social forms and any critical claims grounded in philosophical anthropology, with their presumed “abstract moralism.”²⁷³

The problem with these perspectives is that they adopt unnecessarily narrow conceptions of normativity. A normative critique, they suppose, *must* embrace existing norms at face value and can, at best, strive to make the prevailing historical order coincide with its own norms. This, after all, seems to be the target of Tamás’s and Clarke’s critiques of philosophical “romanticism” and “philosophical critique,” respectively. To an extent, they are not wrong, for the whole point of the critique of bourgeois notions of justice is not that capitalist society violates, for example, the norm of equal exchange, but that equal exchange is a real form of appearance which makes possible the exploitative content of alienated capitalist production in its integrity.

Thus, capitalist production does not at all “violate” the law of equal exchange, but materially presupposes it, since the equal exchange between capital and labor entitles capital to impose work on that peculiar commodity, labor-power, in the form of the expenditure of living labor in the process of production. Equal exchange, along with its ideological legitimation as formal, abstract equality, cannot be arbitrarily dissociated from the overall process of capitalist

²⁷³ Clarke, *Marx, Marginalism and Modern Sociology*, 77.

production, then. To do so results in reformist claims about labor deserving its “fair share” of the product of labor (in the form of higher wages, greater participation of workers in firms, or whatever) without interrogating the substantive conditions which are in fact *fully just* and legitimate according to the conditions of capitalist exploitation.

Hence, the standard that must guide us is *substantive social production and consumption*, that is, production and consumption determined not by anti-social, abstract wealth as unlimited accumulation and the domination of social relations dominated by the socially constituted power of things but wealth understood as vital needs determined by a conscious recognition of the interdependent nature of universal production and consumption. And this requires the transcendence of the conditions which make social labor the *object* of production, so that social labor can assume its proper place as the conscious social subject of production, as the subject whose means and conditions of existence no longer serve an alien, objective social power, but become transformed in accordance with internal, *socially autonomous, self-given ends and purposes*. *The realm of material necessity, of the securing of immediate material needs, requires conscious social authorship over its strictures, in order to expand thereby the realm of social freedom through meaningful, and this can only mean self-authorized, activity.*

But this very point, so crucial to the meaning of socialist emancipation, finds itself obscured by those who fail to make compelling distinctions between what they call “moralism” and a normatively oriented critique which takes its bearings from the objective determinations which refer to the kinds of creatures that human beings *qua* natural-historical beings. This latter conception, I maintain, is not an arbitrary philosophical adornment to be added to or subtracted from the critique of political economy. Rather, the philosophical anthropological—or humanist—moment of historical materialism is internally affixed to the critique in question, forming its

ground as a mediated immediacy, as a material presupposition which must be indexed to its historically specific process of unfolding.²⁷⁴

To fully confront the structural crisis of an irrational system whose compulsory form of accumulation and practically entrenched counter-values militate not only against a socialist alternative, but also, increasingly, against the organized survival of human life, it should be more than clear that moral persuasion cannot wish these problems away. Who, after all, argues that the correct values alone guarantee socialist transformation? At the same time, no genuinely radical response to the rational (i.e., socially necessary) irrationality of the capitalist mode of production can proceed without the practical assumption of and commitment to critical values as social freedom and autonomy, emancipation, the development of needs, ecological sustainability,

²⁷⁴ My argument also runs counter, therefore, to that of William Clare Roberts, *Marx's Inferno* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017): 231, 247-49. In his “republican” interpretation, Roberts reads Marx as preoccupied with *non-domination* rather than any notion of *positive freedom*, understood as self-determination or autonomy. Naturally, however, the issue at stake concerns far more than the interpretation of Marx. Indeed, it concerns the very parameters of an alternative to capital, its intelligibility. However interesting Roberts’ analysis in bringing to light certain neglected aspects of Marx’s political vision, it proves in the end rather unconvincing, relying as it does on an array of largely unjustified, lopsided oppositions—notably, between domination and heteronomy, association and self-determination, prudential realism and morality. Take, for instance, the symptomatic critique of G. A. Cohen, where Roberts takes Cohen to task for attempting to subordinate the “subjective conditions” of socialism to morality, whereas Marx’s political considerations were of an entirely “prudential” nature, contingent upon the demands of a given situation. Thus, Roberts would have us believe, the self-emancipation of the proletariat can be grasped “on the basis of prudential considerations alone” (244). In contrast to such prudential claims, Roberts maintains that the notion of self-determination/autonomy, which many have seen as the essential to the critique of alienation, *must*, for reasons largely unexplained, regard “any limitation of human mastery as a barrier to the pursuit of human flourishing” (248). Prudential considerations would seem to have the function of setting limits on a perfectionist conception of freedom which has run riot and envisions any “limitation” whatsoever as a negative constraint to be superseded. But this need not be the case. We can commit ourselves to a substantive vision of freedom grounded in the distinct nature of human activity without thereby embarking upon the illusory task of construing all limitations as negative fetters *simpliciter*. The question for us thus becomes: *What kinds of ends will more fully actualize the social, cooperative nature of human beings?* Or better: Why should we prefer the conscious association of social individuals as the most appropriate form of social mediation if not because it is more conducive to reciprocal human enhancement than the coercive and impersonal nature of market mechanisms and the despotic subordination of labor to the rule of capital and its personifications? And this, it seems to me, proves inseparable from normative concepts we have been discussing throughout this dissertation. It is, in short, not possible to separate our commitment to the substantive historical and moral vision of a society of associated producers from a vision that sees self-determined social relations and ends as exhibiting a higher, indeed freer, mode of *humanization*, since such a society would be better suited for satisfying and further developing needs and concrete wealth. If capitalism constitutes a “barrier to human development,” as Roberts correctly recognizes, this must be the case not merely on prudential grounds, but because it can be specified as antithetical to humanly determined ends.

solidarity—in a word, those concepts which become intelligible in light of a dis-alienated form of human self-mediation, of a concrete, to-be-achieved universality blocked by a humanity antagonistically divided against itself, with all of the dangers and historic challenges this implies for the future.

As for the ideological constellation of our time, the collapse of ‘actually existing socialism’ and the consolidation of neoliberal ideology gave way to triumphalist apologetics for the capitalist system in the form of the crudest theories of historical closure, whether in liberal or conservative garbs, not least in the ideological delegitimization of concepts as significant as conscious socialist planning. Whether openly acknowledged or not, the presupposition of these positions is the eternalization of capital—that history is, and must always remain, identical with the aims of capital, regardless of planetary ecological limits and the denial of the most basic human needs.

As for theorizing on the left, diagnoses announcing the demise of grand narratives; criticisms intended to undermine the very intelligibility of history; theories of radical democracy celebrating perpetual agonism and contingency; an uncritical attitude toward liberal pluralism; and even an embrace of consensus politics came to replace the historical commitment to a universal and substantive socialist alternative, surprisingly even among those who retained their commitment to the social and political implications of a Marxist critique of political economy.²⁷⁵ For the purposes of avoiding the reductive claim that we are simply dealing with a case of ideological manipulation, however, it is vital that we understand these tendencies as symptomatic of larger historical patterns which express the antinomies of even those theoretical interventions with critical intent in the neoliberal era and the “counter-values” which sustain their assumptions.

²⁷⁵ See, for instance, Harry Cleaver, “Socialism,” *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*, ed. Wolfgang Sachs (London: Zed Books, 2010): 260-278.

The Ineffectiveness of the Democratic Wager

Certainly one encounters in the critical literature on neoliberalism an awareness of the ideological and practical deadlocks of global capitalism. Wendy Brown, to take one notable example, has eloquently describes the perils of the “neoliberal economization of the political,”²⁷⁶ the prevailing identification of ‘democracy’ with the standards of capitalist market efficiency and the rationalized management of political problems which, in her view, threatens to alter “the meaning of democracy *tout court*.”²⁷⁷ Nevertheless, rarely does this move beyond a merely formal account of democracy as a process of radical contestation and collective political judgement that would reanimate what neoliberalism, according to this critique, so effectively delegitimizes and erodes—the ideal of *homo politicus* and the erstwhile democratic conditions which once enabled it. It is worth quoting at length here the opening paragraph of the concluding chapter of Brown’s *Undoing the Demos*, since it proves symptomatic of the tendency to retreat from drawing even the outlines of a future movement that could transcend capital, the source of the pathological neoliberal “rationality” Brown scrutinizes:

My critique of neoliberalization does not resolve into a call to rehabilitate liberal democracy, nor, on the other hand, does it specify what kind of democracy might be crafted from neoliberal regimes to resist them. Rather, the purpose has been to chart how neoliberal rationality’s ascendance imperils the ideal, imaginary, and political project of democracy. The primary focus has been on the grammar and terms of this rationality and on the mechanisms of its dissemination and interpellative power. Of course, these are buttressed by concrete policies that dismantle social infrastructure, privatize public goods, deregulate commerce, destroy social solidarities, and responsabilize subjects. However, even if many neoliberal economic policies were abandoned or augmented, this would not abate the undermining of democracy through the normative economization of political life and usurpation of *homo politicus* by *homo oeconomicus*.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁶ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 208

²⁷⁷ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 44.

²⁷⁸ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 201.

Brown situates her intervention at the level of critical diagnosis; she seeks to trace the “grammar” of the policies—political, legal, economic—which have eroded and emptied of content the concept of democracy. Yet the agnosticism of Brown’s commitment to democracy becomes clear when she maintains that her aim is precisely neither to revivify liberal democracy nor to specify what *kind* of democracy would be adequate to confront the crises of the capitalist present. Her account of democracy proves averse to *content*, in other words, for it takes issue with the prevailing socioeconomic order even as it abstains from the postulation of a necessary historical alternative.²⁷⁹

For Brown, therefore, it is not the separation of substantive decision-making on the part of the global proletariat from social and economic processes under the rule of capital that constitutes the central issue, but, curiously, *economization as such*, abstractly conceived as a free-floating ‘rationality’ which might even remain intact *in spite of* its replacement with a socialist order in line with the needs of human beings and ecological sustainability. Brown’s formalistic account of economization (a necessity for any society) mirrors the abstemiousness of her view as to the content of democracy as a political category. The diagnosis that capitalist production is compelled—and necessarily so—by endless expansion and the perpetuation of alienating and exploitative relations of production at odds with human development and that this *must* generate crises is, in short, cast aside in favor of a denunciation of economic rationality *tout court*, with democracy understood as a *reigning in* of this very rationality’s deleterious effects.

In this view, the central issue becomes *neoliberalism* as a regime of economic rationality untethered from the structural necessities which govern the process of *capital accumulation*. The aim of socialism as a historical project of reconstituting the process of substantive decision-

²⁷⁹ For a more sustained critique of theories of radical democracy, see Larry Alan Busk, *Democracy in Spite of the Demos: From Arendt to the Frankfurt School* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020).

making over social and economic life—over the relations of production which mediate between human beings and nature—finds itself replaced with indeterminate notions of democracy, *homo politicus*, and *resistance* in their opposition to an account of economization free of any determinate historical content apart from the assumed validity of once lively bourgeois democratic institutions.

This brief critical excursus on Brown’s analysis of neoliberalism and democracy should not be seen as a rejection of its many insights. To be sure, Brown lucidly captures the very phenomenon identified earlier, i.e., that even amid growing claims that another world is possible, there persists “this capitulation to being playthings of powers that escaped from the bottle in which humans generated them.”²⁸⁰ It is crucial that we make good on this insight by highlighting that the very values of meaningful decision-making, emancipation, and self-determination necessitate a commitment to a socialist project which would not rest content to revive an abstract democratic ethos, but would provide the social and normative foundations for the concrete realization of a new historical order on the basis of the self-emancipation of the global proletariat.

Such values call for new forms of self-mediation, at the level of social consciousness and concrete mediations on a global scale. For neoliberalism has surely not delegitimized democracy in the indeterminate manner conceived by Brown and so many others. The crucial point is, rather, this: Neoliberal capitalist conditions have only reinforced the discomfiting fact that the rule of capital is compatible with any form of democracy (or with no democracy at all, for that matter) which fails to contend with the urgent task of transitioning away from the alienated determinations of capital itself—accumulation as an uncontrolled and irrational form of

²⁸⁰ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 222.

economic growth grounded in the systematic separation of social labor, both through ongoing exploitation and expropriation, from the objective conditions of its realization. Moreover, the fact that bourgeois democracy in fact presupposes the separation of politics from socioeconomic life is left unquestioned, with the result that it becomes a quantitative problem of more or less democracy, not a problem pertaining to the genuine antithesis between the *substantive socialist content of democracy and the content of democracy ruled by the dictates of capital*.

And lest this be seen as a narrowly theoretical intervention, one need only observe that the delegitimization of socialism—its substantive normative commitments and values, its distinct conception of universal human development and emancipation—has not been a bloodless and uncalculated affair, but, as Vincent Bevins highlights in great detail, the very opposite: concerted campaigns of extermination and persecution of leftist movements around the globe in the interest of violently imposing the aims of capital and its personifications.²⁸¹ I am not arguing here that the delegitimization of socialism is entirely a matter of political calculation or ideological disenchantment alone. One could make a compelling case that the very social forms and imperatives distinctive of capital prove, in the long run, to be far more powerful obstacles to the articulation of radical socialist politics. Yet, if critical philosophy is to contribute to our efforts to move beyond these impasses, it must be able to reconstruct a normative horizon of universal human emancipation objectively grounded in the ongoing self-mediation of the human species. We must be clear about our substantive values.

Post-Lukácsian Meta-Theoretical Reconstructions

Accordingly, the value commitments—let us say, the normative imaginary—of a socialist alternative cannot be left to an unqualified faith in inexorable historical laws or to an abstractly

²⁸¹ Vincent Bevins, *The Jakarta Method: Washington's Anticommunist Crusade and the Mass Murder Program that Shaped Our World* (Public Affairs: New York, 2020).

conceived contingency and indeterminacy characteristic of much contemporary critical social theory, which evinces skepticism towards the very postulation of historically feasible, necessary, and universally oriented alternatives. To be sure, the socialist alternative is grounded in the strong philosophical and historical commitment that human beings can intervene into the historical process; that conscious and creative planning of social and economic life must place questions as to the quality of human development and needs at the forefront; that a rational, because consciously determined and self-given, organization of humanity's productive relations remains the necessary condition of transcending the human and ecological devastations of the capitalist mode of production; and, finally, that this can only be elaborated on the basis of the recognition of a universal interest grounded in the struggles and emancipatory project of social labor to reconstitute the very telos of humanity's self-mediating metabolism with nature. The overarching question is thus: What forms of self-mediation and values can be made into the basis for a future society, emancipated from the constraints and compulsions of capital?

It is in view of the previous considerations that we can begin to appreciate the stakes of philosophical anthropology as it bears on the problem of socialist transformation. For now it must be shown that the philosophical anthropological premises of historical materialism require specification by means of a critical dialectic between actuality and potentiality—that is, they must be rendered historically determinate and concrete in a *modal* frame of reference. This dialectic, I have argued, proves integral to Marx's philosophical anthropology as well as to the vision of socialist emancipation constitutive of the *historically determinate critique of political economy*. Marx makes important contributions to this end, but we must equally contend with further developments within historical materialism that give new life to the dialectical unity of

nature and history through which the project of socialist freedom becomes intelligible as the humanization of social relations.

For the purposes of clarifying this distinctive modal account of the dialectic of actuality and potentiality as it bears on the problem of socialist emancipation, I shall turn to the mode of Marxist theorizing associated with the György Lukács, which adopted as its point of departure the early account of reification and the later effort to elaborate a social ontology grounded in the “teleological” or purposively driven character of social labor and human activity generally. As André Tsel writes, these post-Lukácsian theorists found themselves “convinced of the necessity of a distinctively philosophical or meta-theoretical clarification of Marx’s theory as a condition of its revival and of its heuristic capacity for analysing changes in capitalism and socialist society.”²⁸² This latter analysis proves especially significant in view of the fact that their critical approach did not, at least initially, entail the abandonment of socialism itself as the unity of a historical and normative project. The thematization of the compromised historical position of socialism and the critique of capitalist society is not renounced in favor of a critical theory which rests content only to *negatively* diagnose the wrongness and irrationality of the capitalist present.

To be sure, the wrongness and the irrationality of the capitalist mode of production can become intelligible only in view of the positive necessity of the alternative and the degree to which the alternative is itself made necessary through the free self-activity of the associated producers. The immanent critique of political economy, as I sought to demonstrate in the previous chapters, ought not be reduced to a merely negative critique. Indeed, the society of the associated producers—of conscious social individuals—who organize their social life

²⁸² André Tsel, “The Late Lukács and the Budapest School,” *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism*, eds. Jacques Bidet and Stathis Kouvelakis (Leiden: Brill, 2008): 163-173, 164. See also J. F. Dorahy, *The Budapest School: Beyond Marxism* (Leiden: Brill, 2019): 13-39.

autonomously and in accordance with their vital needs, their irreducible need for self-development and socially meaningful activity, remains the determinate negation of the capitalist mode of production insofar as it designates a way to transcend the contradictions of capitalist society. In the absence of this perspective, critique not only becomes unintelligible; it also abstains from its own necessary practical implications. We are not dealing here with a truncated “negative dialectic” whose standpoint must be, given the catastrophic nature and “consummate negativity” of the present order, that of an impossible “redemption,” as Adorno once put it.²⁸³ This negative perspective, which “vetoes any anthropology,” cannot serve as the basis of a positive critique of the present when the necessity of an alternative is so palpable.²⁸⁴ For despite its critical trappings, such a perspective can only make a fetish of the objective powers which constrain a class-divided humanity, so that critique, sundered from reality, can be identified with the impossibility of utopian longings in face of a reality which will not yield to its demands.

To sketch out this positive notion of social autonomy as free self-mediation, I shall turn to the philosophical anthropological account of needs in three figures that can be characterized as belonging to a post-Lukácsian theoretical constellation: Agnès Heller, György Márkus, and István Mészáros. Despite differences in emphasis, these thinkers share a conception of radical needs which stresses socially and historically developed needs and potentials as inseparable from the necessity of transforming the social relations constitutive of the capitalist social order. Equally, however, they do not lose sight of the transhistorical determinations requisite for issuing a critical historical judgement internal to historically specific conditions, a far more promising approach for a critical theory guided by a determinate interest in *socialist autonomy*. While this chapter reconstructs the notion of needs in these theories as a critical concept, then, it equally

²⁸³ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247.

²⁸⁴ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 124.

highlights their *positive* contributions toward a historically grounded account of socialist autonomy, itself conceived as a radical need emanating from the necessity of progressively transcending the devastating contradictions of contemporary global capitalism.

Three core concepts will be brought to bear in the ensuing discussion. First, Heller's account of radical needs. Second, Márkus's interpretation of the human essence. And third, Mészáros's theoretical clarification of the distinct nature of historical temporality in its human valence as natural-historical self-mediation. We shall not restrict ourselves to these concepts alone, but they shall serve as points of departure which aid in ascertaining the distinctive notion of freedom and human development integral to socialist emancipation. In the course of our discussion, it will, I hope, become clear that the significance of this theoretical constellation or set of critical affinities lies in the practical implications of a meta-theoretical reconstruction of Marxism the aim of which consists of recovering the repressed normative dimensions of the critique of political economy, necessitating a return to the complexities (and even the limitations) of the socio-ontological and philosophical anthropological concepts of classical historical materialism. And here I wish to borrow a phrase from Lebowitz: Socialism does not drop from the sky, for it only becomes intelligible as "a process of destroying the remnants of the old society (including the support for the logic of capital) and a process of building new, socialist human beings."²⁸⁵ To contribute to the forward-looking and humanist normative horizon comprising this latter process—it is to this task that the present chapter commits itself.

²⁸⁵ Michael A. Lebowitz, *Build It Now: Socialism for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2006), 65.

On the Emancipatory Potential of Radical Needs; or, the ‘Collective Ought in Being’ According to Heller

Heller’s 1976 book, *The Theory of Need in Marx*, propounds a compelling reconstruction of the category of need as it appears in the Marxian critique of political economy. In so doing, Heller also advances her own distinct notion of *radical needs*, a notion which she considers as an indispensable normative category within the critique of capitalist society. In their introduction to this critical work, Ken Coates and Stephen Bodington note the embarrassing absence of the theory of need in the ideologically predominant modes of economic thought. “The reason for this,” they write, “is that it is *assumed* right away at the outset that the market automatically indicates human needs.”²⁸⁶ This ideological assumption naturalizes both the logic of mutual indifference grounded in a society in which individuals relate to each other only accidentally as individual owners of property and commodities—as individuals whose social positions stem from their relations to the means of production—and the self-seeking, abstract individualism produced by these historically specific social relations.

In other words, this uncritical assumption, at a methodological level, takes a *mediated result* as its *unquestioned axiological premise*, ascribing the latter to “human nature” or some eternalized notion of “economic” rationality allegedly driving the behavior of individual owners of property. In this sense, the mystification at hand not only inhibits our comprehension of the structural dynamics of the capitalist mode of production which transcend individual actors; the mystification equally extends also to its distinctive, reified conception of human needs, human nature, and human freedom. It should go without saying that what passes as an impartial assumption in such cases obscures an array of contradictions which determine the fate of needs

²⁸⁶ Ken Coates and Stephen Bodington, “Introduction” to *The Theory of Need in Marx*, by Agnès Heller (London: Verso, 2018), 7.

under capitalist conditions. For if the capitalist market, the exchange of money and commodities, is *a priori* assumed to be the exclusive entity capable of satisfying and socially validating human needs and activities—equated not only with the given needs of self-seeking, atomized individuals, but with the distorted needs of a system for which the overriding priority is the quantitative self-augmentation of money—one need not have recourse to a properly *critical theory of need*.

If, however, what concerns us is not the uncritical naturalization of capitalist social forms, but their historical transcendence, we will need to stage a renewed encounter with both the contradictions which deform and constrain human needs and the positive philosophical vision of *need development* which gives emancipatory substance to the critique of political economy. This will require a normative critique of the ideological self-representations of capitalist social forms—their encrusted ideological legitimations—through which it becomes possible, in Jeff Noonan’s words, to show “that capitalist money value (which is what the aggregate terms actually measure) is alienated from the fundamental bases of natural life support and social life development upon which it ultimately depends.”²⁸⁷ We will need to contend, then, with stakes of the concept of *radical needs* as they bears on this form of alienation, for what concerns is the elaboration of a new rationality of needs.

Before we turn to our discussion of radical needs, however, let us dwell on Heller’s initial philosophical exposition of need. One of the merits of Heller’s account of need lies in the fact that she parts ways with both naïve naturalism and the arbitrariness of relativism.²⁸⁸ For Heller,

²⁸⁷ Jeff Noonan, “Use Value, Life Value, and the Future of Socialism.” *Rethinking Marxism* 23, no. 1 (2011): 117-134, 118.

²⁸⁸ For a similar point, see John Grumley, *Agnes Heller: A Moralism in the Vortex of History* (London: Pluto Press, 2004): 46-47. Heller, Grumley notes, is critical of both crude behaviorism which sees human nature as infinitely malleable, as well as those perspectives which deny altogether that human life admits of determinations which are transhistorically meaningful yet subject to historical modification—take, for example, “the irreducible need of human beings” for self-actualization.

the category of need, in its universal “philosophical” valence, implies an objectively grounded value-judgement whose critical force derives from a specific view internal to the ontology of human self-actualization. Indeed, in the Marxian meaning of the term, Heller suggests, need always refers to the need for *concrete human wealth*.²⁸⁹ The process of humanizing needs, in this sense, corresponds to the degree to which human beings *become for each other the highest object of need*.²⁹⁰ In contrast to the ideological strictures of political economy, which measures wealth exclusively as abstract monetary value and socially recognizes needs exclusively through this alienated mediation, concrete human wealth pertains to the socially transformative, free appropriation of the historically developed capacities and relations of the human species. The need for concrete wealth, then, is neither reducible to abstract material possession in its prevailing capitalist form nor to a transcendental ethical postulate brought in, as it were, from without. Instead, need pertains to the very need for an appropriate form of *human objectification*, for social relations which prove conducive to the qualitative development and expression of human need itself. Thus, the satisfaction and qualitative enrichment of human need is in every respect a matter of its *social actualization*. Consequently, it is not the seemingly self-evident character of use values alone that determines the degree and form of concrete wealth; the determination of use values acquires significance in and through the *humanly established ends which mediate their development*.

For this reason, the value judgement inscribed within the critique of capitalist society requires a definite conception of human beings in which their needs are not merely passive desires, but actively articulated—or freely actualized—as social capacities. That is precisely what grounds the “the need for objective activity,” Heller observes, as one of our vital and most

²⁸⁹ Heller, *The Theory of Need in Marx*, 38.

²⁹⁰ Heller, *The Theory of Need in Marx*, 46.

consequent of needs.²⁹¹ Concrete wealth thus pertains not to some autonomous technological development, often conflated with the thesis concerning the unlimited development of the productive forces, but to the degree to which human beings depend upon each other socially and the historically specific conditions and potentialities to which this same process of socialization gives rise.²⁹²

This last point requires further explanation. For objective activity, in the definition given above, surely does not designate a merely instrumental relation to the external world or between human beings themselves. At the same time, it must be said that this definition of objective activity does not entirely displace the problem of the relation between means and ends, but, rather, grasps the problem with reference to the social and material conditions of its proper actualization. Unlike, for example, the Kantian position for which values such as autonomy and dignity pertain to the subject's rational capacities which they universally share with all other human beings *qua* rational, value judgements, in our account, find their basis in the necessary conditions which make freedom intelligible as immanent social freedom, namely, freely determined, and hence not fetishistically instrumental and exploitative, relations to other human beings as well as to external nature.²⁹³ When Heller interprets needs in their philosophical sense

²⁹¹ Heller, *The Theory of Need in Marx*, 42.

²⁹² On this matter, see Lucy Jane Ward, *Freedom and Dissatisfaction in the Works of Agnes Heller: With and Against Marx* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016). As Ward writes: "Heller takes Marx's image of anthropological abundance and wealth and investigates the conditions of its realization once the forces of production as the independent variables of history are rendered increasingly problematic" (5).

²⁹³ I believe this distinction is crucial. One should remember that, for Kant, moral considerations issuing from the world of phenomena are merely "hypothetical," hence heteronomous, imperatives. They might have instrumental value; they might even contribute to human good in the sense of pleasure and happiness. Such imperatives, however, are not rational or categorical; they are not expressive of human freedom or autonomy. Form (free rationality) rules over content (the unfreedom distinctive of the "intelligible" world), but they remain fatefully unreconciled. The case we are making here shares with Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy this concern with the determination rational ends, but it does not locate their rationality exclusively in the powers of the transcendental subject, but in the immanent rationality of social objectification as a form of free self-actualization in relation to nature. This is a process in which fact and value evince a dialectical unity of identity and non-identity *qua* self-mediation. We shall see in our later discussion of Márkus that this dialectic becomes intelligible when we grasp the nature of human social activity as a process of self-overcoming, that is, in view of freedom as the principle of negativity.

as *activities*, then, she is pointing to the reciprocal, free determination of subject and object understood in their sociality. The need for objective activity, for socially autonomous activity in which one feels confirmed in and not alienated from one's constitutive otherness, circumscribes the socio-ontological condition necessary for conscious control over the conditions of social life. The human essence *is* the world of objectification, and Heller's interpretation of the human essence indeed stresses "the primacy of *historical self-formation*," always with reference to consciousness and sociality as essential moments.²⁹⁴

The need for objective activity, therefore, has as its very substance the need for relations to other human beings in and through whom we find ourselves freely expressed and confirmed, where we become for each other, *qua* human beings, the living, actual, positive conditions of mutual activity and self-development, in opposition to remaining negatively constrained by and alienated from the collective conditions which constitute social existence.²⁹⁵ In an earlier essay concerning the problem of revolution and everyday life, Heller had already begun to outline the stakes of the problem in highlighting that socialism could not be reduced to the economic "regulation of spare time" alone, as important as this matter was, but required consciously participative, concrete individuals whose own sociality would become an object of active concern and transformation, in order to arrive at what she calls a "philosophical determination of *life-conduct*."²⁹⁶ Only in this way can needs form the basis for free self-activity, in accordance with consciously appropriated communal and "species-oriented goals."²⁹⁷ The needs requisite for a new communal society must be actively created in the very process of reconstituting society, as

²⁹⁴ Grumley, *Agnes Heller*, 48.

²⁹⁵ For an analysis of Heller's humanist reinterpretation of Marxism which stresses this very point, see Simon Tormey, *Agnes Heller: Socialism, Autonomy and the Postmodern* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001): 51-75.

²⁹⁶ Agnes Heller, "The Marxist Theory of Revolution and the Revolution of Everyday Life," *Telos* 6 (1970): 212-223, 222.

²⁹⁷ Heller, "The Marxist Theory of Revolution and the Revolution of Everyday Life," 218.

the needs of *social individuals* whose universal conditions of existence can be progressively appropriated and converted into their own consciously recognized ends.²⁹⁸

This more “general philosophical” (or philosophical anthropological) view of needs proves crucial to Heller’s discussion of radical needs. It bears repeating here: radical needs are to be conceived neither as set of needs posited by biological immediacy nor by the existing system of alienated needs. The point is not to criticize the capitalist mode of production from the perspective of some unsatisfied “biological” needs, for such privation—the reduction of human need to guaranteeing mere survival—is itself an ongoing product of capitalist society. On the other hand, to criticize the system from the perspective of its own historically constituted system of needs would be equally inadmissible.²⁹⁹

For instance, the demand for higher wages does not *necessarily* tend in the direction of transcending capitalist society, even though the wage can be defined as a very real need for that class whose existence depends upon it. Under the capitalist system, the wage is the means which gives access (or not) to the means of subsistence necessary for satisfying material needs. From this it does not follow, however, that apportioning to workers a greater share of the value produced in the process of production fundamentally changes the alienated conditions of the labor process itself. The problem proves deeper insofar as we are dealing with the *substantive conditions* which determine not only the distribution of products, but also the character of the capitalist labor process in its entirety as an *alienated, unfree form of objectification*, as a form of

²⁹⁸ Compare this claim with the arguments of Michael A. Lebowitz, *The Contradictions of Real Socialism: The Conductor and the Conducted* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012). “Through the development of institutions that foster the development of human capacities,” Lebowitz writes, “we can be brought to the point where our activity and enjoyment are one, where the exercise of our capacity, our labor, is our real need” (187). This perspective stresses the necessary protagonism of social individuals at every level of social, political, and cultural life as the normative logic of socialist freedom, converging with Heller’s claims regarding objective activity as a vital need.

²⁹⁹ See also Honneth and Joas, *Social Action and Human Nature*, 100-102.

domination in which the conditions of labor are separated from labor itself in the form of the power of capital. Under these conditions, it is not social labor that purposively determines and plans production in accordance with its own social needs and autonomous ends. Capital's power of domination consists precisely of the fact that social labor can only find expression in its *essential activity* in an impoverished manner, in a manner which suppresses and frustrates the elaboration of qualitatively oriented, internally determined social needs and relations.

In contrast, according to Heller, radical needs are those which, insofar as they are “unsatisfiable within that society...are the motives of the practice which transcends that society.”³⁰⁰ Or, as Anthony Kammas writes, radical needs “are the ground out of which theory and praxis aimed at freedom arises.”³⁰¹ Radical needs are not separable from experienced material conditions of privation or suffering, but neither are they identical with it, since they impel the effort to transcend those very conditions in a process of creative action which is the actualization of social freedom.

It is not insignificant that Heller emphasizes the category of social totality, following the Hegelian-Marxist insights the early Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness*, as crucial to grasping these historically developed potentials and radical needs, for only social totality “makes it possible to locate the foundations of the collective Ought in Being.”³⁰² The category of social totality, in this sense, constitutes the objective basis for the determination of not only what is, but also what ought to be—that is, it articulates the dialectical relation, the dynamic movement, which obtains between actuality and potentiality, immanence and transcendence, as well as

³⁰⁰ Heller, *The Theory of Need in Marx*, 90.

³⁰¹ Anthony Kammas, “The Power of Radical Needs,” *Engaging Agnes Heller: A Critical Companion*, ed. Katie Terezakis (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009): 63-77, 65.

³⁰² Heller, *The Theory of Need in Marx*, 76. In her emphasis on totality, Heller is, of course, drawing on the legacy of Lukács, who, as early as 1923, established the category of totality as constituting central methodological difference between Marxism and bourgeois thought in his *History and Class Consciousness*.

“fact” and “value.”³⁰³ Against inert structuralist and functionalist explanations of social totality, a genuinely dialectical treatment makes requisite an account that can render intelligible the tensions and contradictions in their specifically human and social valence. Consequently, radical needs express a practically oriented social consciousness of the contradictions specific to the prevailing social totality insofar as these contradictions indicate a deficient form of human self-actualization. Indeed, the movement of radical needs does not rest content at the level of class consciousness, but instead propels the realization of those particular needs which converge with the actualization of the conditions of universal or radical needs—that is, with the reconstitution of the material life-process of society—and which are thus not “identical” with the immediate interests of the proletariat. Hence, while there is no *absolute difference* between immediate needs and radical needs, the latter acquire their specific character from the fact that they converge with a consciousness of the necessity for new social relations in which human beings can become conscious agents or authors of their collective conditions of existence.

In this way, grasping the capitalist mode of production as a social totality turns us towards the forms of unfreedom and domination constitutive of capital and the potentials for freedom and emancipation which unfold in a contradictory manner. The capitalist mode of production qua social totality demands a critical account that specifies the social relations and productive forces which, given their contradictory form of development, simultaneously make possible and systematically foreclose the possibility of a different form of organizing social production, one grounded in radical needs.

³⁰³ Antinomies which, it must be said, continue to beset philosophical discourse. For a brilliant criticism of the “antinomies of bourgeois thought,” see Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), esp. 110-149.

Indeed, radical needs are, according to Heller, “*inherent* aspects of the capitalist structure of need.”³⁰⁴ The claim that radical needs are “inherent” to the capitalist mode of production means that they are internal—immanent—to that form of organizing social life. It is also important to note that radical needs arise as thwarted potentials of the capitalist mode of production and hence do not of their own accord supersede the constraints of capital. Thus, in their actual existence, radical needs do not point beyond capitalism, while their practical “satisfaction” does.³⁰⁵ Radical needs therefore refer to those needs the realization of which points beyond the capitalist mode of production and its system of needs, *since their very possibility and curtailment stems from the structural constraints and determinations of the system as a totality*. And precisely because the realization of radical needs is frustrated by capitalist society, the practical recognition of this process of negation and its supersession constitutes a guiding principle of revolutionary praxis. Revolutionary praxis in accordance with the development of radical needs thereby takes the form of negating the constraints placed by capital on productive and social potentials in the direction of their positive unfolding for the purposes of universal, human self-development as the ultimate end of production.

On the problem of historical transition, Heller writes the following: “The necessity of the ‘transition’ is not in fact ‘guaranteed’ by any *natural law* but by the *radical needs*.”³⁰⁶ Properly speaking, then, it cannot be said that the constitutive contradictions of the capitalist mode of production automatically generate its collapse or its negation. Only a practical, conscious intervention in the interest of emancipating social labor, hence humanity, from the dominating

³⁰⁴ Heller, *The Theory of Need in Marx*, 76.

³⁰⁵ Heller, *The Theory of Need in Marx*, 77.

³⁰⁶ Heller, *The Theory of Need in Marx*, 84.

and alienated necessities of capital's distinctive form of economic growth/accumulation proves adequate to the task of substantive social transformation.

Heller's notion of radical needs, I claim, allows us to reframe the classical contradiction between the productive forces and the prevailing relations of production, a notion subjected to much criticism for its ostensibly "productivist," even "deterministic," implications.³⁰⁷ Far from implying a reductive productivism which sees the unlimited expansion of the productive forces as the central task of capitalism's historical transcendence, the contradiction between productive forces and relations of production points to a gap between what is the case and what could be the case, were the social relations constitutive of capital historically transcended. *This includes the need for a concretely universal form of social intercourse, one guided by social freedom and self-determination with respect to the prevailing social relations under which the productive forces are developed in a distorted, one-sided, and altogether contradictory manner.* The "development of the productive forces" ought not, in this sense, be conflated with the alienated technological development governed by capital's need for self-valorization or its fetishistic form of economic growth. The productive forces themselves must be *humanized in accordance with the self-given ends constitutive of the system of needs established by the associated producers.* This process of humanization as a radical need overcomes the fetishistic instrumentalism of capitalist social relations, within which human beings count for each other only as means to their individualistically oriented ends and in which nature as their 'inorganic body' is subjected to the abstract indifference of the imperative to accumulate.

Heller's theory of radical needs thus points to the radical need for a process of dis-alienation, of wresting the objective conditions of production from capital, of transforming the

³⁰⁷ For a classic account that embraces productive force determinism as the central strength of the Marxian theory of history, see Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, 134-174.

social relations which presently guide the former's development in an alienated, increasingly destructive form. Hence, Heller stresses that the capitalist mode of production "produces not only alienation but the consciousness of alienation, in other words, radical needs."³⁰⁸

Consciousness of alienation, of the negative constraints capital places upon human self-development, indicates the radical need for qualitative social transformation that would encompass not only the dis-alienation of the means of production, but of the division of labor, political power, and the necessarily suppressed potentialities of the capitalist mode of production: abolition of superfluous labor, the need for free time, and supersession of capitalist scarcity and privation. The movement of radical needs embodied in the struggle for socialism thus provides the basis for "a new morality, a new way of living."³⁰⁹

Michael A. Lebowitz, in an early review of Heller's book, suggests that she misunderstands the determinate significance of needs in the critique of political economy. Heller, he maintains, views struggles for immediate material gain as remaining bound to the possessive materialism of the capitalist mode of production and its alienated system of needs, while valorizing struggles which are radical only insofar as they point beyond material acquisition and toward qualitative needs and concerns.³¹⁰ The consequence is that Heller must construe the existing struggles of the working class for material gain as beholden to the premises of capitalist society, resulting in "a critique of all that exists as not truly human."³¹¹ Lebowitz challenges a perceived perfectionist tendency in Heller's notion of radical needs whereby the immediate class struggles of the present are criticized from the perspective of a fully constituted society of

³⁰⁸ Heller, *Theory of Need in Marx*, 94.

³⁰⁹ Agnes Heller, "The Marxist Theory of Revolution and the Revolution of Everyday Life," trans. John Cullen, *Telos* 6 (1970): 212-223, 223.

³¹⁰ Michael A. Lebowitz, "Heller on Marx's Concept of Needs," *Science and Society* 43, no. 3 (1979): 349-355, 350.

³¹¹ Lebowitz, "Heller on Marx's Concept of Needs," 351.

consciously associated producers. Moreover, according to Lebowitz, Heller effectively obfuscates the centrality of production as the “dominant moment” in the critique of capitalist society, so that the antagonistic needs which structure the relations between capital and labor—the former’s need for surplus value and the latter’s need for use values—disappears from her effort to advance a critical theory of need.³¹²

To be fair to Heller’s position, however, we must recognize that her principal motive was not to remain faithful to Marx or to his concept of production, but, rather, to develop critical concepts which would prove adequate to clarifying the normative dimensions of socialist emancipation. Heller’s reconstruction teases out both the genuine ambiguities of Marx’s critique of the capitalist system of needs and his own positive vision of a society of associated of producers and, in so doing, *consciously opts* for the concept of radical needs, even if it appears to contradict certain Marxian claims.³¹³ In this sense, the claim that Heller’s account in effect abandons “*the need of workers to dominate the conditions and results of their labor*” misses the mark.³¹⁴ Heller’s argument, in fact, recognizes this need for social autonomy and self-determination as a radical need, for, rather than equating the material wealth appropriate to the realm of production with “the general wealth of society,” Heller appears to follow Marx in regarding material wealth as a *condition of concrete human wealth* rather than as an end in itself.³¹⁵ The significance of this move lies in dislocating the commonsensical and reformist claim that socialism simply pertains to recognizing existing needs and redistributing wealth accordingly. It highlights the process of creatively transcending the separation of substantive

³¹² Lebowitz, “Heller on Marx’s Concept of Needs,” 353. Kate Soper makes a similar criticism, namely that Heller focuses one-sidedly on consumption, in her review article “The Needs of Marxism,” *Radical Philosophy* 17, no. 37 (1977): 37-42, 40.

³¹³ On Heller’s theory of needs as indicative of a “self-critique” of Marxism, see Jean Cohen, “Review of Theory of Need in Marx by Agnes Heller,” *Telos* 33 (1977): 170-184.

³¹⁴ Lebowitz, “Heller on Marx’s Concept of Needs,” 352.

³¹⁵ Heller, *The Theory of Need in Marx*, 104.

decision-making and the material conditions of existence in the grips of an alien, socially constituted power.

Moreover, centering the need of the working class for use values does not—and should not exhaust—the meaning of socialist critique. Radical needs are not reducible to use values, because, even on Marx’s terms, it is not “use,” as important as it is, that constitutes ultimate frame of normative reference. Heller recognizes this. She does not, therefore, “reject” material needs in the form of struggles for use values as ideological deceptions, as mere reflections of capitalistic possessiveness. As she writes: “The system of needs in communism must be dealt with from two distinct aspects: from that of material and non-material needs, and from that of the relation between these two types within a single structure of needs.”³¹⁶ We are dealing with a *single structure of needs*, hence with creation of a new relation between the realm of material necessity and the realm of freedom, as indicated above.

For this reason, there is no *immediate* line leading from the struggle for the redistribution of use values to the socialist reconstitution of society, which pertains to *the sphere of social freedom giving a new shape to its own material presuppositions through a confrontation with the contradictions which structure their interpenetration*. It is mistaken to privilege indeterminate “use” separated from the social conditions under which it acquires concrete meaning. The perspective of radical needs does not commit us to contempt for pressing material needs or struggles for their satisfaction, but it does make explicit other concerns of the greatest human significance, such as, for example, our alienated relationship to nature under capitalist conditions, the social character of the labor process, and the forms of social mediation necessary for articulating control over our social existence. The concept of radical needs, in other words,

³¹⁶ Heller, *The Theory of Need in Marx*, 99.

preserves the aspirations which guide the process of subordinating the ineradicable realm of material necessity to the sphere of consciously adopted social ends.

Heller's understanding of radical needs has only become more relevant, then. For not only do radical needs call for new forms of social mediation in the form of autonomous socialist creation; they also call into question narrowly *distributive* visions of socialist transformation. In foregrounding *quality* as the overriding moment of socialist transformation in light of the actualization of radical needs, Heller's claims come to coincide with a great deal of contemporary concerns with ecological sustainability as opposed to unlimited accumulation; with production for *use* rather than *exchange*; with redirecting the trajectory of human development and transcending the antagonistic relation between society and nature; and with the reproduction of everyday social life in its class, racial, and gendered dimensions under capitalist conditions. So it is that, in Heller's notion of radical needs, the overarching concern with social control and autonomy which continues to define the historical and normative parameters of the socialist alternative emerges as a concrete project.

Márkus on the Natural-Historical Determination of the "Human Essence"

Nevertheless, Heller's argument is burdened with certain limitations. According to Aaron Jaffe, one such limitation lies in that Heller's elaboration of radical needs exhibits an unresolved tension between her claim that no needs exist *apart* from those of concrete, empirical individuals, on the one hand, and her avowal that radical needs emerge *immanent historical* possibilities grounded in the consciousness of alienated social relations, on the other.³¹⁷ To

³¹⁷ Aaron Jaffe, "The Critical Power of Needs: The Radical Potential in Márkus's and Heller's Philosophical Anthropology," *Critical Theories and the Budapest School: Politics, Culture, Modernity*, eds. Jonathan Pickle and John Rundell (New York: Routledge, 2017): 82-99, 88. Others have noted the primacy of the individual in Heller's account of alienation, albeit in a less critical key. See, for example, Ward, *Freedom and Dissatisfaction in the Works of Agnes Heller*, 40.

begin, we must bear in mind that Heller's emphasis on concrete individuals as the only *real bearers* of needs is inflected with a suspicion toward a *hypostatized* conception of "the needs of society" which holds that the needs of individuals require the representation of those with a *true consciousness* of needs.³¹⁸ For this reason, Heller believes it is misguided to speak of a "social need" or even a "general interest"—the category of interest, she maintains, belongs to a society grounded in the *antagonism* of interests—suspended above the needs of real, living individuals, for this can only serve as an apology for subordinating these needs to so-called "higher ends" from which the individuals in question remain separated and of which they are, in the final analysis, "unconscious."

Recall that, for Heller, radical are those needs which arise through the social consciousness of alienation. Social consciousness of alienation gives rise to radical needs precisely because it does not rest content with satisfying needs as defined by the fetishistic system of needs under capitalism, but actively constitutes its own need for freely determined self-development in the very process of revolutionary socialist transformation. Heller, in fact, appears to *presuppose* and not explicitly name a distinction between a form of distorted form of consciousness which remains within the bounds of alienation (the alienated system of needs) and genuine social consciousness which pushes beyond it in an emancipatory direction (the realization of radical needs).

Thus, an inconsistency arises when we consider that the notion of radical needs *implicitly* acknowledges the deformation and alienation of human needs while, at the same time, placing too great an emphasis on the *given* needs of empirical individuals as the *sole* critical motivation underlying the critique of both capitalist and socialist societies. The purpose of Heller's

³¹⁸ Heller, *The Theory of Need in Marx*, 67. The critique of the persistence of alienation under socialism in the form of the bureaucratic state administration of needs is evident here.

development of the concept of radical needs is to challenge the belief that the collapse of capitalism is historically necessary in the sense of constituting an automatic process. Equally, Heller intends, though rather indirectly, to criticize the persistence of alienation of needs under actually existing socialism. Radical needs are the critical motivation consciously appropriated by the associated producers in their struggle to reconstitute society. But, again, if this critical motivation rests entirely upon empirical individuals as its ultimate court of appeal, how can such needs be radical if we acknowledge the persistence of the alienated system of needs in effectively constraining socialist transformation? If radical needs are critical to transforming the prevailing socioeconomic order, this must be the case precisely because the prevailing system of needs cannot be taken as naturally given, though it might indeed *appear* so.

In an essay concerning the possibility of a Marxist theory of value and written before *The Theory of Need in Marx*, Heller performs a reconstruction of the distinctively humanist normative commitments in Marx's thought. Concrete wealth, she insists, is the principal value insofar as it assumes "the viewpoint of the species."³¹⁹ At the same time, she maintains that, within Marxian social ontology, "it is impossible to empirically derive values."³²⁰ Values, as Heller understands them, appear to involve a conscious and even *a priori value-choice*, a kind of commitment to emancipation whose overriding criterion lies in the many-sided development of human needs and powers. One can argue that it is precisely the unresolved antinomy between fact and value in Heller that leads her, however, to embrace the position that the empirical derivation of norms represents an impossibility. Yet must we settle for an either/or in this case? That is to say, must we settle for positing a dualism between fact and normative judgement?

³¹⁹ Agnes Heller, "Towards a Marxist Theory of Value," *Kinesis* 5, no. 1 (Fall 1972): 7-76, 70.

³²⁰ Heller, "Towards a Marxist Theory of Value," 19.

For, in Heller's view, it would seem the value of radical needs must be assumed *first* as conscious individual moral choices *or* they cannot exist at all; they are either first subjectively recognized by individuals *or* they remain groundless, without an immanent historical basis. Yet, if this is true, the practical elaboration of radical needs, and hence socialist emancipation, can only be an *act of faith*, or even a sort of *moral wager*, which Heller indeed comes to embrace in the conclusion of her essay.

Consequently, and despite her earlier acknowledgment that the gap between actuality and potentiality as an anthropological process consists of a historically constituted contradiction between the relations of production and the productive forces, Heller's normative perspective approximates a kind of *groundless* faith in socialist emancipation. Moreover, while it is true that the notion of social individuals—individuals who substantively participate in determining the nature of their social conditions, determining their needs collectively *in advance* and not *indirectly* through market mechanisms—remains integral to any meaningful socialist project, this should not obscure the risks of rendering the empirical individual into ground of normative critique. For then socialist emancipation can only amount to a moral imperative that individuals are abstractly and directly called upon to realize. The issue, therefore, is not merely that Heller's appeal to the empirical individual fails to adequately contend with the ideological formation of individual consciousness, as Jaffe aptly observes, but also that socialist consciousness and radical needs risk being posited in an unmediated manner, with the result that they become immediate moral appeals made without regard to the specific class determinations and divisions which make such a universal project both possible and desirable in the first place.³²¹

³²¹ Jaffe, "The Critical Power of Needs: The Radical Potential in Márkus's and Heller's Philosophical Anthropology," 88

This had led interpreters to draw politically unfortunate conclusions—for example, Jean Cohen, who maintains that it is in all respects “meaningless” to speak of the *needs of a particular class* (even those of the proletariat), since, as Heller argues, classes are constituted by their *particularistic* interests and such interests, by definition, remain fettered to the capitalist system of needs, determined by the *general antagonism of particularistic interests*.³²² If this were the case, however, we would lose the vision of socialism as the process of the self-emancipation of the proletariat—a *particular class whose radical needs coincide with the universal needs of the human species and whose struggles are antagonistic to the interests of capital*. It must be stressed here, however, that this universality is immanently grounded in the material and historical situation of the proletariat, that is, on the centrality of social labor in the metabolic life-process of the species *generally* and in capitalist production *in particular*.

We can also avoid such theoretical impasses if we recognize, as Jaffe argues, that capital *is* the alienated form in which the powers and needs of the human species—the “species-essence”—appears as an objective power separated from our collective control.³²³ This does not require assuming the standpoint of immediate individuals as the exclusive bearers of radical needs, but instead turns our attention toward the existing relations of individuals to the social conditions of their existence and, indeed, whether such conditions contribute to their communal needs and activities or, inversely, distort and debase them. One of specificities of alienation under the capitalist mode of production lies in the *negative, irrational universality* of its antagonistically constituted forms of social mediation, not to mention the necessary separation of social labor from processes of substantive decision-making over its *own* activity. Individuals are

³²² Cohen, “Review of Theory of Need in Marx by Agnes Heller,” 178.

³²³ Jaffe, “The Critical Power of Needs: The Radical Potential in Márkus’s and Heller’s Philosophical Anthropology,” 90.

not only separated from conscious control over the conditions of existence; they are objectively constrained by their subordination to the division of labor and the class-relations which comprise it.

Alienation, in Márkus's reading, must be conceived precisely in these terms, namely, as the negative redirection or distortion of universally developed species potentials and needs in the service of capital. Alienation thus designates that historical condition in which work, sociality, and consciousness—those defining moments of the human essence—are separated not only from themselves, but from the historically unfolding social potentials particular to them. From the perspective of self-mediation as the ongoing concretization achieved through the historically unfolding potentials for universal sociality and many-sided needs, the essential determinations of the human essence, grasped critically, become abstract and one-sided, deprived not only of their historically determinate potentials, but also of the internal purposiveness proper to their very nature. For this reason, alienation is always essentially *self-alienation*, a distorted, dysfunctional, and dehumanizing form of appropriating the wealth of the species. Appropriation refers to the capacity, distinctive of the nature of human life-activity, to relate to the conditions of existence freely and consciously—in a word, to be able to *purposively* “take up” the conditions of social existence in a manner adequate to the self-actualization of social individuals and their vital needs. We have already had occasion to foreground in our earlier discussion of Heller the notion of such appropriative activity as itself a socio-ontological need for human beings.

Capital as the determinant of our global social metabolism, as we have argued following Marx and others, proves its irrationality not only in that undermines itself as an economic system, as evidenced by its ongoing crises (e.g., monetary and financial) but also in that it *must* undermine its own social and material presuppositions; that is, it distorts and debases the

necessary and universal and material conditions of human existence—nature, labor, human sociality generally—into conditions which sustain ecological spoliation and destruction, unfreedom and exploitation. The possibility of socialism as *universal human emancipation* is grounded in the recognition that the contradictions and crises of the system *necessitate* but do not make *automatic* a practical recognition of those universally shared conditions, however differentially they are constituted and concretely lived according to patterns of uneven development, the global division of labor, and unequal exposure to the effects of the planetary climate crisis. Under the rule of capital, in other words, we are alienated from our collective capacity to decide consciously *how* it is that we organize and appropriate this very social universality—and not only at the level of the labor process but with respect to the overall conditions of social reproduction as a whole—since the system is compelled to constrain this capacity through its self-propelling aims and the social divisions and fragmentations which perpetuate it.

We have argued that production is essential to the material reproduction of human existence; the material needs of society must be satisfied in *some* form or another through a particular organization of the labor process. This remains true even in the alienated, abstract form labor assumes—subordinated as it is to commodification, the valorization process, and the coercive whims of the market—under capitalist conditions. This distinguishes the proletariat as the social subject of revolutionary transformation, as that class whose emancipation *ultimately*, even if not immediately, coincides with the universal human needs which drive the creation of a society of associated producers, progressively freeing the social metabolism from the coercion of blind economic imperatives and accomplishing a new *communal or socialist synthesis of the individual and their social conditions of existence qua social individuals*.

In *Marxism and Anthropology*, Márkus engages these very problems through an investigation of the concept of ‘human essence’, which he views as a consistent, if not always readily apparent, normative category in Marx’s thought. Much like Heller’s account of needs, Márkus pursues a reconstructive analysis which also further develops the philosophical anthropological categories integral to the emancipatory vision of the critique of political economy. For Márkus is aware of the antinomies into which both abstract moralism and objectivism fall, the first relying on some transcendental notion against which present society can be criticized, the second seeking to establish a value-free science in which values might be admitted, but only as historical and ideological phenomena deprived of any universal or objective validity.³²⁴ So as to avoid the limitations of both, Márkus holds that the historical unfolding of the human essence makes communism intelligible as the embodiment not only of an objective historical transformation, but also of an “*historiosophical and moral contrast*,” that is, as the unity of a historically grounded investigation into the structural tendencies of capitalist society and a normative self-judgement *internal* to the latter.³²⁵

As opposed to a merely external judgement, however, it becomes necessary to discern not only those contradictions which indicate a self-undermining and irrational mode of social activity, but also to inquire after the *anthropological nature of the activity* in question for which such contradiction and irrationality could become a meaningful issue at all. And here we discover that the self-judgement internal to the capitalist mode of production derives from the

³²⁴ Márkus, *Marxism and Anthropology: The Concept of ‘Human Essence’ in the Philosophy of Marx*, 8.

³²⁵ Márkus, *Marxism and Anthropology*, 9. In charting the development of Márkus’s early work in the context of the shared concerns of the Budapest School, J. F. Dorahy writes that the latter “sought to confront the scientific pretensions of Soviet Marxism with a critical theory whose normative content had neither been derived from a hypostasised and ahistorical conception of human nature nor imported from the ethical postulates of universal reason, but rather from the very movement of history itself” (23). See J. F. Dorahy, “Alienation, Reification and the Antinomies of Production: On the Theoretical Development of György Márkus,” *Thesis Eleven* 148, no. 1 (2018): 21-38.

fact that its constitutive social relations of exploitation, alienation, and expropriation are *inimical* not only to individual self-actualization, but to the freely determined self-actualization or self-mediating activity of the human species as a whole. Accordingly, the concept of human essence demands a “practical choice,” or better, a practically grounded normative motivation circumscribing not only the essential determinations of social activity generally, but the contradictory potentialities which arise through their historical particularization.

From the beginning, therefore, Márkus stresses that the specific nature or form of human activity—paradigmatically work—exhibits a *tendency* toward universality, that is, toward a many-sided metabolism with nature involving the creation of a historical human environment and needs subject to conscious or deliberate transformation.³²⁶ In the concept of labor as conscious social objectification, however, *inheres* another determination, namely, that objects always have an *appropriate* manner of use. Objects, in other words, are subject to collectively articulated norms which circumscribe their practical-conscious uptake, their socially mediated appropriation.

This explains why the distinctiveness of the needs which these objectifications express lies in the fact that it is only through these same objectified mediations that they can be satisfied in an appropriate or inappropriate manner.³²⁷ Initially, therefore, we can say that the immanent basis for the determination of a contradictory or self-undermining form of social life inheres in the very form of this self-mediating and norm-giving form of social activity. This social self-reflexivity is established by the specific way human beings confront themselves *objectively* and

³²⁶ Márkus, *Marxism and Anthropology*, 17. For a similar interpretation, see Sean Sayers, “The Concept of Labor: Marx and His Critics,” *Science & Society* 71, no. 4 (2007): 431–454.

³²⁷ See also Carol C. Gould, *Marx’s Social Ontology: Individuality and Community in Marx’s Theory of Social Reality*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1980). “This process of objectification,” Gould argues, “is therefore one in which the world becomes endowed with values” (42)

universally in a historical and practical world of their own making, though it must be said that this always occurs under conditions not of their own choosing. This last point applies not merely to inherited historical circumstances, but equally to certain transhistorical material premises—for example, the metabolism with nature and the essential neediness of human beings.

Further developing Márkus's point, we can say that it makes little sense to posit an unbridgeable split, or merely accidental relation, between fact and norm, the material and the ideal, material conditions and consciousness insofar as the specific nature of human activity is concerned, since they inhere in each other, forming a dialectical unity which constitutes the objective ground of historical critique.³²⁸ It is for this reason, as Márkus writes, that “the philosophical concept of work is not reducible to merely technical action...but designates the material activity of human self-transformation existing always in some social form.”³²⁹ What is more, this philosophical anthropological concept of work, and human activity more broadly, as Márkus affirms elsewhere, must “be explained on the basis of the presupposition of a philosophical naturalism or materialism.”³³⁰

Such a philosophical naturalism or materialism, I want to suggest, both gives expression and *affirms* the *essential* nature of this productive activity as it bears on the social existence of the very beings to whom it belongs. Again, this essential nature refers not only to the fact that productive activity must occur for the purposes of reproducing human social and bodily life. Equally, the essential nature of such activity lies in processes of self-concretization which assume an array of socially and culturally mediated forms, not all of which are identical with or

³²⁸ On this point, see also Leo Kofler, “The Anthropology of Consciousness in the Materialism of Marx,” *Leo Kofler's Philosophy of Praxis: Western Marxism and Socialist Humanism*, ed. Christoph Jünke, trans. Nathaniel Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 2022): 227-239. Unfortunately, very little of Kofler's rich work drawing attention to the normative character of philosophical anthropological concepts in historical materialism has been translated into English.

³²⁹ Márkus, *Marxism and Anthropology*, 26.

³³⁰ György Márkus, “Marxist Humanism,” *Science & Society* 30, no. 3 (1966): 275-287, 278.

reducible to securing the reproduction of bodily life (hence the development of consciousness and self-consciousness). It is the unity of both moments that constitutes the moment of freedom immanent to the self-mediation of the human species. In this sense, productive activity, in its specifically human sense, does not *directly* and *immediately coincide* with its object, but strives to change it, which “by necessity develops and presupposes the *separation* of need and its object, *subject* and *object*, in other words, the emergence of *consciousness* and *self-consciousness*.”³³¹ That is to say, the mediation of specifically human productive activity and the objective world does not terminate in direct or immediate consumption, but embodies a *total* or *universal* practical disposition insofar as it is characterized by a “many-sided” form of productive self-mediation, the simultaneous transformation of external nature and of the subject who carries out this very transformation. Neither static oneness nor absolute separation, then, but a conscious, practical, and in principle open-ended—though again not undetermined—form of mediation is what defines human history.

Since Márkus does not fully elaborate on this insight, however, a few remarks are in order. First, the assertion that productive activity does not coincide with its object posits this activity as simultaneously a material presupposition and a form of practical expression—or self-actualization—which develops and provides *for itself* a human, historically constituted form (and this remains the case whether those involved are conscious of it or not). This immanent determination is present in *all forms of social life qua self-mediation*, supplying us with an objective criterion which integrates fact and judgement and constitutes the basis for an analysis that critically discerns whether historically developed needs and powers develop in a way adequate to the universal actualization of the species. Conscious sociality, therefore, not only

³³¹ Márkus, *Marxism and Anthropology*, 43.

precedes capitalist society, given that it is essential to human beings *as such*, but constitutes an *enduring condition* in light of which class society, including its apex under the capitalist mode of production, proves itself to be a condition of universal unfreedom and alienation—a subordination of human ends to the irrationally particularistic and falsely universalized ends of capital.³³² Insofar as conscious sociality is an enduring condition which makes human societies as such intelligible, it cannot be identical with the alienated forms it assumes in capitalist society. I want to suggest that this claim constitutes not merely an *analytical or methodological* distinction, in the sense that we can theoretically distinguish between the specificity of one form of organizing human life and another, but an immanent determination that can be grasped because it essentially belongs to the ongoing self-mediation (or self-movement) which is constitutive of the social metabolism, understood as the metabolic interchange between humanity and nature.³³³

To be sure, this process self-mediation does not stand apart from or above the natural world simply because it is conscious life-activity. Self-mediation as conscious life-activity is surely not *absolute freedom from all determination*, which, as Márkus suggests, can only be an “ideological illusion,” one which finds its basis in the division of labor, and especially in the contradictory separation between mental and manual labor.³³⁴ Human history, not least of all the development of needs through productive activity, remains materially embedded in, and in a very real sense limited by, the laws and dynamics of the natural world, so that to speak of freedom as

³³² See, on this point, Victor Wallis, “Species Questions (*Gattungsfragen*): Humanity and Nature from Marx to Shiva,” *Organization & Environment* 13, no. 4 (2000): 500-507. With respect to this conscious sociality expressed in social relations, Wallis aptly writes that “Marx is again stressing an aspect of human life that on one hand is prior to class, but that on the other is inescapably bound with every form that class relations—or their transcendence—might take” (502).

³³³ The conception of dialectics as exclusively a “method” of normative intelligibility, one that banishes ontological questions as “dogmatic,” in my view reflects an unfortunately Kantianized and deflated notion of dialectics.

³³⁴ Márkus, *Marxism and Anthropology*, 85.

an *ex nihilo* act of creation constitutes such an ideological illusion. The extension of our social metabolism through the mediation of the labor process never entirely suspends this material embeddedness, indeed this irreducible metabolic dependence, even as it generates new historical needs which tend, if only potentially, toward *relatively limiting* the power of immediate natural necessity.³³⁵ This relative limitation of immediate natural necessity, its displacement through historically developed needs, is the precondition of a new realization of concrete wealth and, ultimately, of the human essence, since this would necessitate the elaboration of a *universal form of rational control over the social metabolism as its guiding measure*.

This perspective is consonant with the Marxian conception in which the historical process is to be understood simultaneously as the naturalization of human life and the humanization of nature. Whereas the first refers to the “widening” interconnections between the social metabolism as a whole and the natural environment, the latter points to the process of humanization wherein, to repeat, human activity encounters an objective world of its own making, wherein the limits of nature (*Naturschranke*) are driven back. Nevertheless, Márkus suggestively claims that “in the course of history they may become temporarily and relatively divorced from, and opposed to, each other.”³³⁶ What could it mean to say, however, that these two moments—the humanization of nature and the naturalization of human life—become opposed and antithetical to each other? It is only another way of saying that, in the course of historical development, the self-mediation of the species becomes opposed not only to itself, but

³³⁵ Of course, it was Engels who underscored this point. See Frederick Engels, *Dialectics of Nature* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1934), 180. Thus, according to Engels, we do not stand above nature as would “conquerors”; we are *natural* beings which, while able to varying degrees to “master” or change our material circumstances and grasp the laws of nature, remain irreducibly subject to external nature, including the unanticipated results of our actions upon it. It is worth remarking, in this context, that the (socially necessary) illusion of an unchecked or absolute mastery over nature is a consequence of the alienation of nature constitutive of the capitalist mode of production.

³³⁶ Márkus, *Marxism and Anthropology*, 28.

to its own natural conditions as well, undermining its own historical dependency on the natural environment.

For the humanization of nature reflects that process of purposively assimilating nature in order to satisfy, in a mediated and objective manner, the diversity of human needs, so that sociohistorical life becomes increasingly preponderant. The naturalization of human life, on the other hand, reflects the process whereby humanity becomes increasingly dependent on its “inorganic body,” on those processes in nature which are mediated by human purposes, as a result of the very latitude of productive activity itself. That these two aspects becomes antithetical to each other suggests, then, that purposive human activity as a whole in capitalist society is distorted into its opposite in such a way as to disfigure, harm, and alienate human beings both from each other *qua* beings and, correspondingly, from their natural conditions of existence. The dialectical unity of these two moments is always present; they appear antithetical and opposed to each other only within the development of class society, of which capitalist society is the consummate and complete expression.

To be sure, the humanization of nature surely does not mean that nature becomes progressively irrelevant as far as human activity and need satisfaction go. “First nature,” it bears repeating, persists in an increasingly historically mediated form, even in alienated capitalistic conditions. And it is equally important to note that the term “nature” here does not mean that societies preceding the capitalist mode of production existed in a fictitious “state of nature.” The humanization of nature designates that historical process whereby the local, merely “natural” connections which bind human beings together give way to universal, albeit alienated, social interdependency, a reality which also makes the contradictions and crises of the capitalist mode of production *historically peculiar* insofar as the unity of nature and history—or the actualization

of the human essence—is concerned.³³⁷ This humanization of nature, in a word, coincides with one side of that historical process which Paul Burkett describes in the following terms: “the natural conditions required for human production have become increasingly distinct from those required for a reproduction and evolution of nature as unaffected by human intervention.”³³⁸

Thus, the human essence, the totality of communal life, appears merely as a means for the perpetuation of the particularistic ends of a system of class domination and exploitation in which social mediation (and hence the metabolic exchange with nature) is accomplished through the indirect and uncontrollable power of things. Social relations between human beings are posited on the basis of the objective ownership of money and capital as forms of value.³³⁹ It is not as human beings that they relate to each other, in other words, but as owners of exchange values that afford the power of disposal over the productive activity of others and its essential conditions.

In other words, capital’s mode of social integration, its peculiar form of social synthesis, consists of social bonds that necessitate separation, antagonistic disunity. Social freedom unfolds not directly between individuals, that is, in and through each other as a concrete unity of immediacy and mediation, but only as external, unreconciled mediation. Necessity therefore

³³⁷ The decolonial and postcolonial charge of a problematic developmentalism, one that sees a straight line from “nature” to “civilization,” might very well be raised here. One should, however, note that, while it is true that the capitalist mode of production constitutes a more “developed,” complex form of global integration and socialization, this fact cannot be seen in any sense as unequivocally indicative of historical progress. In fact, a principal aspect of the critique of political economy is precisely that the subordination of the social metabolism on a global scale to the value-expansionary imperatives of capital leads to that contradictory and dehumanizing condition of being subordinated to a destructive form of false historical necessity, i.e., reified “second nature.” Put differently, it is not some drive intrinsic to human nature or “civilization” as such that leads from “natural” to “universal” forms of social intercourse, but the process of uneven totalization constitutive of capital expansionary compulsions. Whether this abstractly universal form of social intercourse can be transformed so as to serve human ends and mitigate the worst effects of capital accumulation is an open question, though the problem is posed as an inescapable necessity for socialist struggle.

³³⁸ Burkett, *Marx and Nature*, 30.

³³⁹ In other words, they carry their social bond, their “reciprocal dependence,” in their “pocket,” to use Marx’s phrase in the *Grundrisse* (157). Alternatively, if they have nothing to fill their pocket, they are nothing in terms of capitalist society’s system of valuation. Individuals in capitalist society are united in their mutual indifference.

appears as unfreedom, since individuals are not for each other the necessary conditions of a living mutual freedom; instead, the freedom of one class takes place on the basis of the unfreedom of another, and this not only through class antagonism and domination, but through the alienated compulsions to which capitalist society as a whole is subject, i.e., the reified power of things and the self-valorizing imperative of capital. Extrapolating on David McNally's discussion of the notion of false infinity in Hegel and Marx, in capitalist society a "false infinity" prevails in social reality insofar as finite, particular individuals cannot be reconciled with or find their freedom in the infinite, in the free movement of open-ended self-mediation posited as reciprocal determination.³⁴⁰ Purposive productive activity as social freedom, under these conditions, is simply *unintelligible*, for it cannot genuinely experience itself as self-mediating in the world of capital, it cannot practically grasp its conditions as freely self-positing conditions, but can only move about in unreconciled antagonisms and contradictions.

The significance of this point should not be underestimated. For what Márkus's intervention makes clear is precisely that this historically peculiar mode of production in which concrete wealth develops in the form of the accumulation and unlimited pursuit of abstract wealth—in the form of value which both develops and frustrates human needs and despoils the natural conditions of human existence *generally*—contains as one of its immanent tendencies an antithetical separation between the ever-deepening embeddedness of the social metabolism in nature and the development of concrete needs, on the one hand, and the alienated compulsions of the capitalist system, on the other. On the whole, then, it can be said that the human essence as a critical philosophical anthropological concept permits us to claim that the processes through which human beings unfold and objectify their own "subjectivity"—their social needs,

³⁴⁰ McNally, "Beyond the False Infinity of Capital," 1-5, 14-20.

competencies, and essential powers—are realizable only in a *partial, abstract* manner. In this respect, these processes of social actualization can be grasped critically through their alienated *derealization* insofar as they develop human powers and needs in a contradictory form, so that they are realized only to the extent that they are disabled and negated.

Accordingly, to stress the positive potentiality of rational universal control as constitutive of the realization of the human essence should not lead us to downplay the contradictions which fester in its absence. Indeed, it has become glaringly clear in our own time that this process of universal extension, governed by the accumulative imperatives of our global socioeconomic order, has become altogether irrational and contradictory, i.e., it no longer only “pushes back the limits of nature” through the development of new needs, but does so in a manner *compelled* to perilously treat our inorganic body as a mere means, threatening to destroy the universal conditions of our social metabolism. In conformity with the irrationality of capital, it is the very uncontrolled character of this process of pushing back the limits of nature through universal production and exchange which gives rise to the *negative reassertion* of natural limits in the form of planetary ecological crisis.

Indeed, under the particularistic rule of capital and its class personifications, the productive forces have been developed in an increasingly distorted form, one-sidedly subordinated to the aims of profitability and capital’s fetishistic self-expansion. Their overriding “purpose” or *telos* under capitalist imperatives, inseparable from the ceaseless need for their revolutionization, lies in facilitating production for surplus value, for self-valorization, in direct contravention of the need for a sustainable, non-alienated relationship to the conditions which make need-satisfaction possible in the first place.

The notion of human essence is apposite here insofar as it articulates the critique of capital *as a critique of the way it necessarily distorts and alienates the universal development of human needs and powers*. The distortion and alienation of human needs and powers must, however, be understood in a modal frame of reference, one that recognizes the contradictory form of human development distinctive of capital. This latter point is crucial, since what Márkus means by alienation is not the loss of some static, unadulterated essence stymied or repressed by history. This would only sever form and content, positing an *unmediated* human essence lacking a historically specific form (we shall return to this relation between form and content implicit in Márkus's account of human freedom below). To be sure, Márkus contends that alienation as a historical process unfolds in the form of a "*separation and opposition of*" human essence and existence, or, put differently, in the form of a rift between potentiality and actuality which, in the course of its unfolding, becomes increasingly destructive, subordinating the social metabolism to the dictates of capital's self-expansion and, as we have been stressing, imperiling the human species and the natural environment.³⁴¹

In this sense, the alienation of the human essence means alienation appears as a *real* historical process in which individuals are separated from the historically constituted wealth of the species, in which they experience the social conditions of their self-actualization as *negative constraints* upon their historically developed, immanent needs, which become their needs precisely in view of the historical problems and contradictions to which these very negative constraints give rise. Under capitalist conditions, their sociality, their human essence, appears in opposition to these individuals because it really does stand opposed to them as an objective power over which they, as abstract, unreconciled individuals, have little to no control. The

³⁴¹ Márkus, *Marxism and Anthropology*, 72.

specific distortion of the universality of the species takes the form of individuals treating their universal sociality as mere means to their own particularistic ends, whereas the social powers and forms of cooperation of the species acquire an uncontrolled, external, and antagonistic life of their own.

Moreover, this process of separation—and it can just as much be described as an objective, socially necessary denial of needs—is internal to the irrational logic of capital. It is, so to speak, integral to its concept. For it is only through the mediation and power of capital and impersonal market forces that social labor can satisfy its need to concretize itself, yet, precisely for this reason, this concretization turns out to be false, an abstract and partial and self-negating form of self-realization, hence a mere semblance of genuine human activity. Indeed, it is only as abstract, private individuals that producers *relate socially* to the conditions of their existence. They are only *indirectly* related to each other, a *post festum* manner, through the mediation of commodities and money and through a division of labor indifferent to—and *supervening* upon—their vital needs.

Their social relations to each other are not consciously posited, then, even if they are formally relatively free to dispose over themselves as private individuals, as labor-power to be sold to the capital on the market (on the pain of ruin for living labor) or as the freedom to exploit the labor of others. Thus, the generalization of individualistic freedom and formal equality sustained by the exchange of commodities turns out to be its opposite: substantive social unfreedom, alienation, in short, the absence of social control over our social metabolism's basis in nature. The particularistic interests of capitalists, the concrete personifications of capital's imperatives, *constrain* the direction of the development of technology and science in the interests

of universal exploitation; establish the social and ideological legitimation of needs; and set the very *ends* driving production, exchange, distribution, and consumption.

Thus, if we define capital as an objective social power in which production for the sake of surplus value and accumulation tends to totally subsume the process of human self-mediation, separating the latter from conscious authorship over itself and its social conditions of existence, we can say that capital circumscribes a *definite historical stage* in the anthropological self-development of the human species, one which is “historically necessary” only in a very qualified sense. For by historical necessity, we do not mean that humankind *had* to pass through this form of life, only that the latter’s historical consolidation gives rise to necessary dynamics which become historically transitory when viewed from the perspective of its immanent contradictions and their potential human resolution.

These contradictions, in other words, only become normatively intelligible if they can be rendered as meaningful problems affecting the actualization of the human essence, since the problems the capitalist mode of production raises pertain to the needs of the species in its totality. We can, in this way, grasp the irrational nature of the capitalist mode of production from the fact that it cannot, within the bounds of its prevailing social relations, provide solutions to the universal scope of the contradictions to which it gives rise, placing on the horizon the necessity of a universal alternative, *concretely embodying new values*: the society of the associated producers, of social individuals whose social activities and objectives would, rather than appearing in the form of blind, external determination, as they must be under the compulsions of the capitalist mode of production, become *conscious social objects* for them. Under such conditions, in other words, they would be driven not by alienated ends which subordinate their need for each other to relations of exploitation, governed by the reified nature of capital’s

rationality and imperatives; they would, rather, be driven by the reciprocal need for, and the mutual recognition of, the manifestation of each other's free activities.³⁴²

Even if the mediations and transitional forms requisite for the creation of such a society cannot be *immediately derived* from this universal vision, given the objective constraints inherited from the prevailing historical order, not to mention the need to create mediations which would progressively embody forms of conscious social control at every level, the vision remains critical for socialist consciousness and struggle. For the concept of human essence as elaborated in Marx's critical theory, according to Márkus, pertains to "a *historical process* in the course of which the *human essence* becomes the *nature of men*."³⁴³ The transcendence of class society, therefore, *is* this very process of humanization which consists of overcoming antagonistic social divisions. But for this to occur, in order to transcend the separation of actual historical unfreedom and the potentially realizable concrete universality of the species, the conditions of social life must be reappropriated, transformed into self-given conditions in which the freedom of each is contingent upon the freedom of all. Further concretizing this claim, we might say that social relations adequate to the kinds of creatures human beings are as "social and conscious natural beings" requires actualizing free, reciprocal determination as the self-positing *ground* of social mediation. No longer would it be the case, then, that relations between people have as their overarching *telos* the exchange of commodities or the extraction of surplus labor and the

³⁴² Naturally, this perspective brings to the fore the question of recognition, from which I have admittedly shied away. It is not that I regard the problem as unimportant, only that I have sought to move away from the centrality of *beginning* with the recognition paradigm inherited from Hegel—and which continues to make itself felt in the critical theory of a figure like Axel Honneth—for the purposes of centering the normative significance of the problem of production. For some notable recognition-oriented readings of Marx, see Andrew Chitty, "Recognition and Social Relations of Production," *The Hegel-Marx Connection*, eds. Tony Burns and Ian Fraser (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000): 167-197; Michael Quante, "Recognition as the Social Grammar of Species Being in Marx," *Recognition and Social Ontology*, eds. Heikki Ikkäheimo and Arto Laitinen (Leiden: Brill, 2011): 239-267; Emmanuel Renault, "Three Marxian Approaches to Recognition," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 16, no. 4 (2013): 699-711.

³⁴³ Márkus, *Marxism and Anthropology*, 58.

class domination to which they correspond; rather, human beings would become *living ends for each other in and through their social activities and the mutual satisfaction of their vital needs*.

Such an account, in our time, might raise worries about philosophy of history beholden to “teleological” premises which can no longer be sustained, or even concerns about an inflated account of rational mastery which, limited beings that we are, constitutes an impossible—and for this reason undesirable—fantasy.³⁴⁴ As Márkus points out, however, to make this determination requires that the contradictory character of historical development, which we specified above, not be ignored: namely, the opposition between the needs to which this development gives rise and the actual existence of concrete individuals, antagonistically divided into classes and subordinated to a division of labor which admits of no *directly* determined norms and structures of mediation.³⁴⁵ Indeed, within the capitalist division of labor, individuals are impersonally cast into positions determined by their relation to and possession of things in which their alienated sociality is embodied—money, commodities, and ownership over the means of production and subsistence generally. They are brought together as individuals only through these “impersonal,” reified relations. But they are not conscious social individuals because their decisions,

³⁴⁴ For a critique of this reading, which Hans Joas and Axel Honneth embrace in their introduction to the most recent printing of Márkus’s text, see Aaron Jaffe, “The Critical Value of György Márkus’s Philosophical Anthropology: Rereading *Marxism and Anthropology: The Concept of ‘Human Essence’ in the Philosophy of Marx*,” *Thesis Eleven* 126, no. 1 (2015): 38-51. For a critical assessment of the image of communism as complete self-mastery, implying a society free of conflict and wholly “transparent to itself,” see Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, 110-114. We encounter a similar charge, albeit on the grounds that Marx (and Marxism more generally) provide a one-dimensional critique of civil society in reducing the latter to a mere instrument of class domination, in Jean Cohen, *Class and Civil Society: The Limits of Marxian Critical Theory* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983). For reasons of space, I cannot devote myself to a fuller engagement with these criticisms. Suffice it to say for now that the transcendence of capitalist alienation does not announce the end of history, but, rather, implies a process of reappropriating history and subordinating, as far as is possible, our social existence and the collectively developed means of production to social control. This does not stipulate the end of all conflict, nor does it aim for the chimerical transcendence of human finitude (a position which reflects, paradoxically enough, the logic of capital). It merely holds that, with respect to the conflicts and contradictions that beset our social existence here and now, socialist emancipation provides a normatively and historically compelling response: namely, a form of social life adequate to the pressing problems of our *universal interdependency*, one that would give a greater scope to the creation and satisfaction of genuine human needs, in contrast to their systematic denial and distortion under capitalist conditions.

³⁴⁵ Márkus, *Marxism and Anthropology*, 42.

opportunities, and activities generally are constrained by the objective power of these reified relations. They do not find freedom in the other because their relations are established through the *inverted primacy* of economic things, the social constitution of it is the struggle of socialist theory to comprehend and the struggle of socialist practice to overcome.

Under the capitalist mode of production, to repeat, universality develops in a distorted manner, for productive powers and forces, including the forms of social cooperation which structure the labor process, assume an alien form as bearers of value, contributing to the latter's reproduction. The universality immanent to the productive, social powers of humanity becomes *untethered, abstracted* from the needs and powers of living human beings as "personifications" of value-mediated relations of production, expressed most acutely in class divisions and a socially antagonistic totality dominated by fetishistic, quantitative imperatives. Transcending alienation refers not to realizing an unchanging human essence, then, but to superseding "*the separation and opposition of...essence and existence.*"³⁴⁶ It involves reintegrating on a universal scale the *qualitative* measures which alone give human freedom and self-development substance. Here the critical force of the Marxian critique of political economy appears sharply in Márkus's reading, for the critical judgement as to the constitution of the human essence rests upon the projection of a to-be-accomplished human essence as an open-ended yet non-arbitrary historical process. *This last is not merely given, nor is there any "finality" involved; the very process of reconstituting social life through the collective struggle to supersede the gap between essence and existence, between what is and what could be, constitutes a practical task, a historical need.*

The dynamic relation between form and content alluded to earlier proves critical here, even though it remains only implicit in Márkus's account of the human essence. A given content

³⁴⁶ Márkus, *Marxism and Anthropology*, 46.

necessarily assumes a particular form, just as there is no form absolutely detached from determinate content. Form *is* always the form *of* a determinate content, that is, its determinate mode of actualization. As far as human activity is concerned, we cannot speak of an unbounded content or essence which would fail to take on a particular form, a mode of appearance. This initial dialectical unity of form and content is the condition of possibility for determining their historically specific actualizations as alienated and contradictory, since in such actualizations two moments which are, properly speaking, internal to each other appear abstracted from each other, in the form of a separation of existence and essence, actuality and potentiality. Indeed, we can say that this reciprocal determination of form and content pertains to the very nature of human social activity, which can *rearticulate* itself and its material conditions of existence, its own inner and outer nature, not merely in accordance with conscious purposes, but with conscious purposes which are conducive to its own peculiar mode of self-realization and which do not fail to take into consideration the material needs, constraints, and limits of its own activity.

In this sense, it is the power to *critically particularize* a given and *falsely naturalized* form of social organization, to raise a given form of self-mediation at odds with itself to the level of conscious reflection, which constitutes the critical core of this philosophical anthropological account of human activity. “Freedom in this sense,” Márkus writes, “appears as the expression of the principle of negativity”—that is to say, as the transcendence of existing constraints from which follows a positive moment, allowing us to discern historical progress as the realization of a universal sociality in which human needs and essential powers might progressively become ends-in-themselves.³⁴⁷ The principle of negativity should be understood here as the movement of the relation between form and content grasped as the process of self-mediation *for which* this

³⁴⁷ Márkus, *Marxism and Anthropology*, 86.

interpenetration of form and content is mutable but not *eliminable*, for which it is possible to render a form of its own essential determinations as but one of its particular historical instantiations. It is the capacity to denaturalize the specific mediations which structure work, consciousness, and sociality as the core determinants of the human essence, to make what appear as immutable facts into transient conditions contingent upon self-undermining social and normative commitments, which lies at the heart of this notion of the principle of negativity as constitutive of human freedom.

Thus, it is the non-coincidence, the non-identity, established between consciously grasped life-activity and its prevailing alienated form, then, which allows for a transformation of the material conditions of human existence, for giving a new form to the material content of social life. The wrongness and irrationality of capital, a judgement resting upon the distorted realization of the human essence, must presuppose that a new unity of form and content is not only possible, but made necessary by the inversions which are requisite for this form of life.

At its most radical, the emergence of needs unfolds as a historically immanent imperative the task of which lies in the creation of those conditions most adequate to the realization of human freedom given historically existent and yet to be realized social potentials. Insofar as the human essence unfolds historically, the Marxian approach enables appropriating socio-historical dynamics “with the knowledge of objectives corresponding to the needs and exigencies of the present and the conditions of their realisation.”³⁴⁸ This act of historical projection is itself a moment of the practical need for self-determination indexed to these historically developed historical potentialities.

³⁴⁸ Márkus, *Marxism and Anthropology*, 54.

Value as Alienated Measure or the Rational Self-Determination of Society: Mészáros on the Dialectical Intelligibility of History

In the final substantive section of this chapter, we shall consider Mészáros's treatment of needs, which finds its most powerful elaboration in three works: *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, *Beyond Capital*, and the two volumes of *Social Structure and Forms of Consciousness*. Of the three philosophers engaged in the course of this chapter, it is in Mészáros's work that we find the most sustained and obdurate commitment to the critical substance and emancipatory aims of Marx's critique of the capitalist mode of production. His distinct contribution to socialist struggle and theory, in my view, lies in envisioning anew the dialectics of universality and particularity in historically determinate terms, foregrounding the emancipatory commitment to the necessity of conscious intervention into the historical process which this dialectic makes intelligible. It would not be a misrepresentation to say, therefore, that the red thread running through Mészáros's thought leads us towards a critical reactivation of *specifically human historicity* and the dialectic of temporality, of human advancement and regression, involved therein. It is on this basis we can begin to grasp the historical and normative intelligibility of the socialist alternative as the creation of the communal system, that "new historic form," to borrow Marx's phrase. What is more, quite unlike Heller and Márkus, Mészáros takes up the task of integrating the Marxian conception of human emancipation into a robust theorization of the contentious theme of socialist transition.

In *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, Mészáros does not so much reject philosophical anthropology as an attempt to critically situate the anthropological problem itself within a "dialectical social ontology."³⁴⁹ In the absence of a dialectical social ontology, we cannot hope to

³⁴⁹ Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, 44.

comprehend those laws of causality which prove largely inexplicable in anthropological terms. This includes not only the laws that governing natural processes, that totality within which human activity by necessity unfolds, but also the peculiarity of “a process...which is determined by *its own* immanent laws of movement and imposes on human beings *its own* patterns of productive procedure.”³⁵⁰ Consequently, Mészáros cautions only against *ahistorical or transcendental postulates* concerning human nature by means of which one might seek to explain social and historical affairs without reference to actual historical conditions and natural circumstances. The central conceit of this latter approach lies in appealing to some existing aspect of human life (for instance, “innate” self-interest or selfishness) and abstracting it from its total context, so as to banish from view the actual contradictions of existing conditions. Following Karl Korsch, we can say this form of “false consciousness...mistakenly attributes an autonomous character to a partial phenomena [sic] of social life.”³⁵¹

It is clear, however, that this rejection of ahistorical postulates need not commit us to abdicating from the task of determining rigorous, universal grounds of historical explanation. Thus, before we can specify the meaning of socialist freedom, we must consider Mészáros’s understanding of the *specific nature of human history*, that is to say, the *nature of historical determination*. Here Mészáros’s central contention is that, in contrast to “cosmic time,” “human historical time unfolds according to its own terms of reference of which *human subjectivity...is an integral part*” and that, accordingly, this renders human historical time “*rationally controllable* by human beings.”³⁵²

³⁵⁰ Mészáros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation*, 44.

³⁵¹ Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 83.

³⁵² István Mészáros, *Social Structure and Forms of Consciousness: The Dialectic and Structure of History*, Vol. 2 (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011), 305.

In other words, if the human historical process exhibits a kind of rationality, this rationality must be regarded as immanent to the process in question, so that it becomes necessary for the critique of political economy to be both “inside” and “outside” at once. Let us say that the rationality of its standpoint derives not solely from remaining within the bounds of its object, i.e., capitalist society, but equally from its assessment of this society’s irrationality from perspective of the essentially open-ended process of human self-mediation, which it is the task of an alternative to adequately realize on a “higher,” because rationally controlled, level. Immanence and transcendence constitute two aspects of this self-developing historical process in which human beings, in actively producing and reproducing the determinate social and material conditions of their existence in accordance with historically existing and developing needs, must participate. This ontological premise is a necessity to the extent that it designates the universal condition of the self-actualization of human beings. It must be emphasized, however, that this necessity is a relative one precisely because the very nature of this historical process of self-actualization lies in relativizing immediate necessity, transcending the latter, though never entirely, in the form of historically posited needs.

For a philosophical pillar of historical materialism, as we have had occasion to stress, is the reciprocal determination of subject and object. Reciprocal determination assumes an immediate or simple material unity between human beings and the given conditions of their existence. This immediate unity cannot be suspended, only historically modified, insofar as human beings are limited, corporeal, suffering beings whose material and social needs must be satisfied under all conceivable historical conditions. To deny this is to lapse into a largely uncritical irrealism which leaves untouched the material bases of social life. *Indeed, this unity persists as the necessary material substratum of all forms of human life. “The subject of history,”*

Mészáros writes, “is the *sentient human being*, with nature-determined elemental *needs* imposed on it as *external necessities* for as long as they cannot be progressively overcome by the historic creation of new needs through productive advancement.”³⁵³

The historical unity of the process of production lifts needs beyond their immediacy into self-positing, mediated needs—*needs no longer posited by nature alone, but socio-historically in their manifold determinations*.³⁵⁴ The restlessness of human activity practically unfolds the immediate unity between subject and object as non-identity—self-mediation and change through social production.³⁵⁵ That is why Mészáros argues that the totality of human needs, “together with the conditions of their gratification, is radically altered in the course of historical transformation.”³⁵⁶ And further, that “humanity’s productively instituted historical advancement is made possible by pushing back the boundary of strict *natural* necessity and progressively replacing it by potentially emancipatory *historical* necessity and the corresponding creation and transformation of *human need*.”³⁵⁷ This refers us to the Marxian conception of needs which emerges in and through the process of production, where the latter refers to the transformative metabolism which mediates between humanity and nature, subject and object in its ever-shifting character. Accordingly, needs are never simply ‘given’ and cannot be reduced to immutable

³⁵³ Mészáros, *Social Structure and Forms of Consciousness*, Vol. 2, 332.

³⁵⁴ “Production thus not only creates an object for the subject,” writes Marx in the *Grundrisse*, “but also a subject for the object” (92). See also, Theodor W. Adorno, “Theses on Need,” *Adorno Studies* 1, no. 1 (2017): 101-104. There Adorno remarks that “Each drive is so socially mediated that its natural side never appears immediately, but always only as socially produced” (102). The material moment of need is not denied, but, on the contrary, treated as a mediated immediacy.

³⁵⁵ In *Marx’s Theory of Alienation* (London: The Merlin Press, 2005), Mészáros writes that “In Marx’s theory there is no static element. The complex manifestation of human life, including their objectified and institutional forms, are explained in an ultimate reference to a dynamic principle: *activity* itself” (148). Such an analysis proves to be of the greatest significance for Marx’s praxis-oriented approach to social reality and its disruption of reification, critically disclosing that what appears as a natural or merely given fact is a result of specific social and historical forms of human practice. For a brilliant analysis of Marx’s social ontology and its corresponding vision of freedom, see Gould, *Marx’s Social Ontology*, 69-100.

³⁵⁶ István Mészáros, *Beyond Capital: Toward a Theory of Transition* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010), 525.

³⁵⁷ Mészáros, *Social Structure and Forms of Consciousness*, Vol. 2, 321.

natural datum, entirely insulated from historical modification.³⁵⁸ For the assimilation of nature through productive activity is at the same time the free expression of the life of the species, constituting the immanent unity of life and consciousness, necessity and freedom.

In this respect, I must note my disagreement with Søren Mau's recent treatment of the problem of unity. This disagreement, I believe, sheds light on the stakes of my own argument. For, as a result of his attempt to avoid a "romantic" critique of capitalist society derived from an ahistorical postulate of unity, Mau embraces an "antihumanist" stance and, on these grounds, infers that the metabolism between humanity and nature in general is characterized not by "unity," but instead by an incorrigible "disunity."³⁵⁹ Capitalist society, Mau suggests, is only another historically specific instantiation of this fundamental disunity. Yet he burdens the notion of the metabolic unity of humanity and nature with unnecessary content, seeing in it only a romantic yearning for unadulterated nature, one that, in his view, fails to grasp that no society has ever consisted of unity with nature.³⁶⁰ The category of unity, however, does not commit us to a nostalgic desire for absolute oneness with nature against which to criticize capitalist society.³⁶¹

³⁵⁸ For an example of the effort to derive a theory of a perennial human nature from Marx's thought, see Norman Geras, *Marx and Human Nature: The Refutation of a Legend* (London: Verso Books, 2016). But lest I be misinterpreted, my claim here is not that human needs have no *natural basis*. Human beings are indeed natural beings, albeit beings whose form of activity is such that they constitute their own social nature through self-activity, that is, through the practical transformation of external nature which necessarily implies a change in the subject carrying out this very transformation. Marx's theory insists on the irreducible, dynamic unity of the natural and the historical as essential to the critical and explanatory bases of his overall theory.

³⁵⁹ Søren Mau, *Mute Compulsion: A Marxist Theory of Economic Power* (London: Verso, 2023), 98. I have already said that the charge of "romanticism" very common among Marxists is often a way of designating a position one finds undesirable without, however, actually interrogating the historical context of the term and the critical concerns it might raise. Why should we not embrace certain elements of "romanticism," provided that they help to clarify the theoretical and practical problems before us? If notions such as unity—discussed, it should be said, not only by romanticism but also by Hegel and Marx, among others—help us to appropriately frame the problem of metabolism, why abandon them simply because they invoke those nebulously defined specters we have been told to avoid?

³⁶⁰ Whereas Mau embraces a kind of dualism in the form of his stipulated "disunity," Jason W. Moore, as we saw in Chapter II, embraces monism against dualism. Both perspectives are inadequate for articulating the unity of identity and difference which is the basis of the notion of productive activity as self-mediation. See Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015).

³⁶¹ This point is also partly missed by Dan Swain, *None so Fit to Break the Chains: Marx's Ethics of Self-Emancipation* (Leiden: Brill 2019). Following Alfred Schmidt's reading of the concept of metabolism, Swain writes: "While previously Marx appeared to have a notion of unity with nature being achieved through identity or—

Unity in this metabolic sense of self-mediation is, from the beginning, a dialectical category, since by its immanent movement it already implies mediation and self-differentiation and, potentially, self-return, meaning a new unity that transcends the limitations of an alienated, hence historically obsolete, metabolic unity.

The basic limitation of this position becomes palpable when considering the peculiarity of the imperatives which make capitalist society a *particularly destructive and uniquely unsustainable*—in both human and ecological terms—form of regulating our social metabolism on a *universal scale*. For instance, a system governed by the compulsion to accumulate capital is historically peculiar in extending this alienated imperative to every domain of social and political life, with the consequence that it generates a condition of *universal alienation* which, for the first time in history, gives rise to social uncontrollability on a global scale and threatens humanity with unprecedented forms of self-destruction, from ecological crises (metabolic rifts) to nuclear annihilation in light of extant geopolitical antagonisms and imperial aspirations. Capital's tendency to produce a mode of production marked by universal alienation and by the reified instrumentalization of human beings and nature proves so persistent and pervasive as a result of the very fact that it actualizes what is essential to human existence—conscious social activity in its self-mediating unity with nature—in a manner that not only produces “disunity,” but a disunity that is historically specific in its *totalizing*, though never total, character.

the humanising of nature and the naturalising of the human such they are one and the same—the idea of metabolism seems to suggest a unity in *difference* between human beings and nature” (21). However, the influence of the natural sciences is not detached from the materialist view that all knowledge of nature begins from the sensuous human experience of nature, a knowledge that is only possible for self-mediating beings of nature who, in their very self-differentiating productive unity with nature, can grasp nature in a *specifically human manner*: Nature as our “external body” which we must appropriate and which we can only relate to in a human manner when it is not one-sidedly appropriated on the basis of immediate consumptive needs. Though formulated in more explicitly philosophical terms, the dialectic of a unity in difference is present already in the claim, denounced as “speculative” by Schmidt, concerning the naturalization of human beings and the humanization of nature.

If we follow Mau in construing the rule of capital as simply another instantiation of an original disunity which exhibits no more and no less disunity than any other past or future manner of organizing social life, however, we find no way to meaningfully specify and hence fundamentally transform the human and ecological contradictions of the present society on the basis of the conscious, directly determined unity consisting of the substantive freedom of the associated producers. *Pace* Mau, the category of unity, conceived in metabolic and dialectical terms, commits us to the necessity of establishing a *sustainable socialist unity between human beings and their natural conditions*, a unity that is free, moreover, only insofar as it recognizes the many-sidedness of the natural world and no longer reduces our inorganic body to being narrowly instrumentalized and commodified by the dictates of capital's reified mode self-expansion.³⁶² In this way, the inversion of the order of priority between unity and disunity, rather than grasping the two in their dialectical reciprocity, can serve to obscure rather than clarify the specificity of capitalist society's metabolism and the necessity of a socialist alternative.

And here the assumption of the standpoint of labor distinctive of the Marxian account of alienation proves critical in drawing a distinction between objectification and alienation. Conscious social objectification, as we have seen, constitutes the specific modality through which human productive activity and historical life unfolds. Since productive activity is this process of objectification, a manner of appropriating both our own nature and external nature in a

³⁶² In *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, Schmidt, by contrast, mistakenly argues that the "identity" between human beings and nature established by the Marx of the *Paris Manuscripts* is symptomatic of a "romanticizing anthropology," one which persists in his thought, albeit in a modified form, as a kind of "nature-speculation" (80). On this basis, he arrives at the conclusion that, for the mature Marx, "The new society is to benefit man alone, and there is no doubt that this is to be at the expense of external nature" (155). As a consequence of this misplaced critique, Schmidt, interestingly enough, would later turn to Feuerbach's "anthropological materialism" as the basis for a more ecologically sensitive materialist theory of subjectivity (and not without interesting results!). See Alfred Schmidt, *Feuerbach o la sensualidad emancipada*, trans. Julio Carabaña (Madrid: Taurus, 1975). For a critique of Schmidt's arguments, see Paul Burkett, "Nature in Marx Reconsidered: A Silver Anniversary Assessment of Alfred Schmidt's *Concept of Nature in Marx*," *Organization & Environment* 10, no. 2 (1997): 164-183.

purposive manner, it becomes an immanent focal point of the process of “self-transcendence” as an objectively discernible counter-tendency internal to the capital-relation.³⁶³ Both objectification and alienation are, accordingly, inherently dynamic concepts.

As Joseph Fracchia notes, objectification unfolds as the extant unity of the “corporeal organization” of the human organism, its natural capacity for self-mediation, and the historically specific forms this capacity, in its self-differentiating character, assumes.³⁶⁴ In its human modality, objectification constitutes a limit definitive of the specific activity of a “world-making” wherein productive life actively appears in the world, apprehends itself, becomes actual; it expresses that condition which makes historical continuity and discontinuity not only intelligible conceptually but empirically actual, since it always partakes of the social activity of incorporating or “appropriating” the objectified past in the present, opening onto the future. Objectification, in this sense, is a definite form of practical receptivity towards the external world, a subject-object relation that transforms the limits of the human being into occasions for creative activity. We can therefore say that, since the ontology of labor constitutes the locus of self-transcendence, the critique of political economy is nothing if it is not an emancipatory critique of social labor’s self-alienation.

Thus, the distinction between objectification and alienation is of great ontological and normative significance not because it opposes something essential to something inessential in any absolute terms, but because it provides the categorial framework to identify the contradictory forms that objectification assumes not as a result of any metaphysical or immediately natural

³⁶³ Mészáros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation*, 64.

³⁶⁴ Joseph Fracchia, “Organisms and Objectifications: A Historical-Materialist Inquiry into the ‘Human and Animal,’” *Monthly Review* 68, no. 10 (2017): 1-16, 8. For this reason, labor is not the exclusive mode of objectification, as Fracchia correctly notes, though it does retain explanatory primacy in the critical analysis of alienated labor.

reasons, but as a result of distorted social relations. By objectification, then, we understand the free potentiality of human beings not merely to shape the world in their image and in accordance with their needs through their productive activity, but equally the distinct self-reflexivity internal to such activity, hence the capacity to recognize themselves as the free subjects or authors of their self-activity, which can only mean producing *for* others and with direct consciousness of doing so.

The paradox here is that human beings need not be “directly” or immediately conscious of producing socially for each other. To the contrary, it might very well appear that they produce for the sake of something external to them—god, for example—in which case their productive activity is still “unfree,” though in a rather different sense than under capital. With the historical consolidation of the latter, a qualitatively new fetishism emerges in place of previous forms being torn asunder—namely, abstract wealth, value, as something external to human beings, as their reified social nature. That this fetish is “secularized” and embodied in a historically discernible form of universal social interdependency mediated by the power of commodities, money, and value makes it all the more stubborn, pervasive, and irrational. Nevertheless, to frame the rule of capital as a dehumanizing worship of abstract wealth is not at all to issue a condemnation of greed or the proclivity of particular individuals towards endless acquisitiveness; rather, the fetish-character of capital—its perverted religiosity—is embedded in the very inversions constitutive its basic social forms and imperatives, a fact also observed by Walter Benjamin, who noted that, in its cult of utilitarianism, “Capitalism is entirely without precedent, in that it is a religion which offers not the reform of existence but its complete destruction.”³⁶⁵

³⁶⁵ Walter Benjamin, “Capitalism as Religion,” *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996): 288-291. For the reasons provided above, Benjamin (and Marx too, if we recall his critique of the “theological niceties” of the commodity-form in *Capital*) rightly insists that the cultic religiosity distinctive of capital is not, as Weber famously supposed, merely the supplementing ideology or

But let us return to our central concern. Alienation is a disfigured modality, a distorted actualization, of the essential activity of objectification, since under alienated conditions it is not possible for individuals to confront their social conditions freely; they cannot abide freely in such conditions but encounter them in the form of an external reified “necessity,” though it is still their mode of sociality all the same. Freedom as being with oneself in the other—and this means not only other human beings, but also our external body, nature, with which we must maintain contact in order to survive and flourish—proves impossible here, for alienated labor implies that essential life-activity not only belongs to another as their property but also that the social conditions through which individuals realize their self-mediating nature as social beings enables them only to secure their mere “physical being,” alienating activity from true human fulfillment and human needs.³⁶⁶ As Thomas Khurana puts it, this distortion “turns what is a manifestation of our true defining activity as a genus-being into mere means for the reproduction of us as individual animals.”³⁶⁷ Thus, we see that the capitalistic inversion consisting of the relativization of the absolute and the absolutization of the relative applies to human activity equally in an ecological as in a social sense, since the necessary ends of production, self-mediating social

“ethic” that legitimizes this form of life. The everyday, fetishized reality of life under capitalism, and necessary participation in it, objectively occludes its historical nature. See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 1992). As for Marx, perhaps the earliest mention of this worldly fetishism is to be found in his more politically oriented 1842 articles for the *Rheinische Zeitung* concerning the Wood Theft Laws. See Karl Marx, “Debates on the Law on Thefts of Wood,” *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 1 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010): 224-263. Criticizing the enforcement of the particularistic interests of private property over the general *human* interests of the Rhinelanders’ ability to freely collect wood from the Rhenish forests, Marx makes the following statement, which proves relevant to our discussion here: “In direct contradiction to those writers of fantasy who profess to find in the representation of private interests ideal romanticism, immeasurable depths of feeling, and the most fruitful source of individual and specific forms of morality, such representation on the contrary abolishes all natural and spiritual distinctions by enthroning in their stead the immoral, irrational and soulless abstraction of a particular material object and a particular consciousness which is slavishly subordinated to this object” (262). Could not the enforcement of the interests of private property by the Rhine Province Assembly be seen, Marx caustically asks, as their own “fetish”? (263).

³⁶⁶ Mészáros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation*, 83.

³⁶⁷ Thomas Khurana, “Genus Being: On Marx’s Dialectical Naturalism,” *Nature and Naturalism in Classical German Philosophy*, eds. Luca Corti and Johannes-Georg Schüle (New York: Routledge, 2023): 246-278, 257.

human beings, become mere means within a system in which the alienated movement of ‘blind’ economic laws prevails. In capitalist society, we do not produce for each other directly as human beings, but only in and through the alienated mediation of commodities, money, and value as the predominant social bonds, and an antagonistically structured division of labor in which execution and control are severed.

At the level of dialectical method, clarifying the stakes of these determinations becomes imperative, given that the consolidation of this form of socioeconomic life subordinates the *open-ended ontology* of human self-mediation to the distorted imperative of capital accumulation and the “vicious circle” of what Mészáros calls the system’s second order mediations.³⁶⁸ And the effect of this process is the structurally entrenched tendency of the system to establish an identity, not only practically but at the level of social consciousness, between its own alienated systemic requirements and the *permanent, first order mediations of the social metabolism*.

The compulsory separation of the immediate producers from collectively determining the *substantive telos* of production and the overall parameters of their social metabolism; the fact that the social character of labor appears in the form of reified things which naturalize the historically determinate social relations in and through which these very things acquire fetishistic primacy and power over labor in the first place—these social processes generate mystification precisely because they express *real inversions which obtain in reality*.

As Mészáros writes, capital as a modality of social control requires that its own destructive historical limits and enabling conditions be posited as “the insurmountable limits of all production in general.”³⁶⁹ The methodological reason we must distinguish between first order mediations and second order mediations is that, under the capitalist conditions, we find ourselves

³⁶⁸ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 108.

³⁶⁹ Mészáros, *The Challenge and Burden of Historical Time*, 58.

in a situation where second order mediations are *fetishistically* conflated and identified with the first order ones, so that social activity *must appear* as if there could be no alternative to the prevailing form of alienated, commodity-determined activity and destructive economic growth.

Another aspect of this distorted, contradictory mode of social control inheres in its systematic disavowal of the *absolute conditions* and limits of human existence, namely, the metabolic exchange with nature. The ecological contradictions of the capitalist mode of production we spoke of earlier become explicit in one of its structural inversions—the perverted relativization of the absolute conditions of human social reproduction and absolutization of the conditions of its own historically relative (when viewed from the perspective of open-ended self-mediation) and destructive mode of social control, which threatens humanity with total uncontrollability.³⁷⁰

Hence, due to the objective character of these inversions, the “new historic form,” if it is to become a realizable historical project, cannot be grounded in abstract moral exhortations. Instead, it must be elaborated as a *determinate advancement* on what precedes it—hence as the conscious self-determination of society in accordance with a rationally organized metabolism with nature and with meaningful, because self-given and genuinely *socialized*, human activity. From this we can infer that advancement remains a value-laden concept, since it implies a critical judgement on our present form of socio-economic life as dehumanizing and alienating, as a distortion of human needs and social relations, and, consequently, as a negative constraint on the actualization of *positive* human potentialities. This value judgment thus derives from the

³⁷⁰ Mészáros, *The Challenge and Burden of Historical Time*, 29. It is not surprising, then, that Marxist ecological analysis regards the work of Mészáros as essential to a historical materialist critique uniting both ecological and human concerns. See, for example, Brett Clark and John Bellamy Foster, “The Dialectic of Social and Ecological Metabolism: Marx, Mészáros, and the Absolute Limits of Capital,” *Socialism and Democracy* 24, no. 2 (2010): 124-138.

“necessity” of the socialist alternative as a consciously pursued project which would transcend those negative constraints constitutive of the law of value and the imperative to accumulate. Put differently, the necessity of this critical judgement is immanent to the analysis of a contradictory historical condition wherein human self-mediation is blocked from practically assuming or appropriating its own universal—albeit antagonistically constituted—historical becoming in a consciously social manner.

Nevertheless, some have raised the objection that such an account is insufficiently determinate. Guido Starosta, for instance, maintains that Mészáros limits himself to merely formal account of the negation of alienated labor (or the negation of the negation). And, given that Starosta is interested in a “scientific” mode presenting the emergence of revolutionary proletarian consciousness, one that can be directly derived from the immanent movement of capitalist social forms, he contends that Mészáros uncritically reproduces the limitations of the early Marx’s critique of alienation in grounding the necessity of its transcendence in a mere “logical necessity” which amounts, in the final analysis, to no more than “a *moral* basis for the necessity of transcending the alienated forms of bourgeois society.”³⁷¹

As might be expected, it all depends on what one means by “moral basis” here. If one means by this that socialism can be derived from a moral claim that would be detached from the process self-mediation, the most straightforward answer is that such a notion would be inadequate, offering only a wishful moralization in response to existent social problems in their objective dynamics and conditions of possibility. On the other hand, if by “moral basis” one does not detach the latter from the necessity of elaborating a form of mediation that “is in *agreement* with the objective ontological character of productive activity as the fundamental condition of

³⁷¹ Guido Starosta, *Marx’s Capital, Method and Revolutionary Subjectivity* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 38.

human existence or *alien* to it,” the stakes of the problem become clearer. In that case, we no longer find ourselves dealing with a merely “logical” or “formal” necessity from which to envision the transcendence of alienation, but with a material necessity that pertains to the alienated development of the necessarily cooperative character of human sociality and reciprocal productive activity. “Ontological necessity cannot be realistically opposed,” Mészáros writes, “except by another ontological necessity.”³⁷² This ontological necessity confronts the reified necessity of capital, which appears to be the defining, natural form of the primary and ontologically fundamental form of self-mediating productive activity. This necessity, moreover, refers to none other than that vital need for individuals to become *humanly social* precisely in establishing the immanent guiding motivation for their activity in the particular needs of others as the substantive end, as the formative *premise* and *result*.

In this context, it is unsurprising that Mészáros should reiterate the characteristic Marxist suspicion of the notion of socialist transformation as the mere realization of “an abstract moral postulate.”³⁷³ Because the capitalist system is governed by an uncontrollable logic and torn asunder by the systemically entrenched antagonism between capital and labor, normative claims *divorced* from an analysis of these objective conditions will prove inadequate to the task of socialist transformation. To settle for greater formal equality in a system *logically constituted* so as to reproduce itself in accordance with the interests of capital accumulation and its beneficiaries must prove self-defeating in the end insofar as such an approach does not substantively take up the challenge of transcending the semblance of an absolute or “natural” separation between political determination and the realm of production, a separation through

³⁷² Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, 113.

³⁷³ Mészáros, *Social Structure*, Vol. 2, 461.

which it becomes possible to perceive the organization of the economy as lying outside the bounds of political transformation.³⁷⁴

By the same token, it would be woefully inadequate to settle for economic concessions from capital—a bigger piece of the proverbial pie—since the problem is the historically peculiar nature of this very separation, which tends to mystify the contradictory and incorrigibly exploitative organization of production. Nevertheless, as we have seen, it should be clear that attending to this problem does not commit us to a renunciation of normative claims altogether, but instead indicates the *limits* of any such claims, particularly when they assume the unmediated, self-sufficient nature of juridical and political concepts such as formal equality and individual freedom. In other words, in the absence of the social forces and the apprehension of those objective mediations which could concretely—practically and feasibly—bring to life the values of the alternative, the latter remain hopelessly formalistic postulates. A mere moment or part, in short, can be mistaken for the whole.³⁷⁵

And that is precisely what makes it crucial to not lose sight of the radicality of the Marxian thesis according to which any “freedom” or “equality” separated from the realm of necessity and production is no freedom or equality at all, at least in the substantive sense of the term. To elaborate a critique attentive to the specific distortions and inversions of the capitalist system proves equally crucial in light of the fact that the power of capital is such that “*it can afford* to define the separately constituted sphere of political legitimation as strictly *formal/legal* matter, thereby excluding the possibility of being legitimately challenged by parliamentary

³⁷⁴ See Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), esp. 19-48.

³⁷⁵ It is worth recalling, in this context, Korsch’s succinct definition of ideological “false consciousness”: “Ideology is only a false consciousness, in particular one that mistakenly attributes an autonomous character to a partial phenomena [sic] of social life” (83). See his *Marxism and Philosophy*, trans. Fred Halliday (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008), 83.

politics in its *substantive* sphere of socioeconomic reproductive operation.”³⁷⁶ *Human emancipation*, the goal of socialism, becomes altogether illusory unless we can envision the unification of the powers of collective decision-making, which assume an alien form in the power of state, with the material life-process of society upon which capital’s reified power primarily depends.

We have already indicated that a fundamental historical constraint which allows us to specify the peculiarity of the capitalist system is the “sacrifice of the human end-in-itself to an entirely external end”—production for the sake of abstract wealth measured in self-valorizing monetary terms alone, in constant but never fully achievable abstraction from its material presuppositions.³⁷⁷ The inversion of means and ends examined in our earlier reconstruction of the normative parameters of Marx’s critique of political economy becomes crucial for our discussion here. Properly speaking, the conditions of production are the objective means, the

³⁷⁶ Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Control*, 190.

³⁷⁷ By virtue of its very logical tendency, capital can be specified as a “bad infinity,” to speak with Hegel, since its fetishistic mode of quantitative expansion by necessity abstracts, through its peculiar runaway and destructive form of economic growth, from its concrete and finite conditions of possibility—nature, social labor, and human needs generally. This abstraction is constitutive of capital’s very concept, then, forming the objective basis of its dehumanizing and ecologically wasteful and destructive historical trajectory. Capital as bad infinity, in other words, is nothing but an infinity which exhibits abstract indifference to finite content and thereby negates its own substantive presuppositions. See, for example, G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 109. Bad infinity, “the infinite of the understanding,” is, Hegel writes, a “finitized infinite...in wanting to maintain the infinite pure and distant from the finite” (109). It is true that Hegel here speaks of the false infinity involved in the *absolutization* of what is but a limited moment of the overall movement of consciousness, i.e., the Understanding. All things considered, Hegel’s account remains of great importance insofar as it permits us to discern the varieties of *abstraction* constitutive of the logic of capital, making visible the logical irrationality of a socioeconomic system *compelled* to disregard the limits of human embodiment and sociality (needs) and the limits of nature itself, of which human beings remain a self-mediating part. The *defetishization* of capitalist relations of production must lie, therefore, in shattering the illusion that this abstraction constitutes a seamless process, pointing to the revolutionary and creative subjectivity of social labor in its manifold efforts emancipate itself from its own alienated activity, objectified in the form of capital’s *ostensibly* autonomous and unchallengeable power. This defetishization is not unlike what Karel Kosík, in *Dialectics of the Concrete*, calls the “materialist destruction of the pseudoconcrete” (8). This movement consists, on the one hand, of the critique of the inverted world of capital, that is, as a critical exposition of the fetishism whereby the relations which structure the system disappear in their immediate economic manifestations. And such an analysis, as Kosík argues, discerns “the dialectics of the historical and the trans-historical, i.e., the unity of ontological and existential determinations” (114). The critique of economics thereby grasps not only the alienated movement of economic entities which dominates human beings under the rule of capital; it also regards this process as a *historically particular totality constituting the life-process of society*.

enabling historically extant conditions, of human activity, though this relation should not be understood in a one-sided instrumental sense, since these same conditions can only be grasped as the means for free self-actualization insofar as they are humanized and made adequate to the human need for conscious productive activity, hence expressive of that “‘inner need’ for being humanly active and finding fulfilment for the powers inherent in...productive activity...as well as in human enjoyment of the non-alienated products of his activity.”³⁷⁸

To make critical judgements, then, means we cannot go without a theory of human freedom at the basis of which lies the kinds of creatures we are *qua* natural-historical beings. Yet, as I have argued, and as the just discussed criticisms of Starosta show, contemporary Marxist theory exhibits a propensity to one-sidedly emphasize the need for a historically determinate critique of political economy that can forgo a theory of human freedom with philosophical anthropological and ontological claims at its basis. Such perspectives, however, accord with the prevailing tendency to adopt a rather *deflated* conception of critique that renounces substantive ontological claims and commitments, blunting their critical force. This, in my view, makes Mészáros an indispensable interlocutor in elaborating a critical theory of freedom wherein “[H]uman freedom is not the *negation* of the specifically *natural* in the human being, he writes, “but, on the contrary, its *affirmation*.”³⁷⁹ The implications of this claim ought

³⁷⁸ Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, 91-92. There is nothing in principle objectionable about instrumentalization as such, though it has become a common point of contention among those concerned primarily with criticizing the notion of instrumentalization as an anthropocentric epistemic/conceptual framework. By instrumentalization, however, we mean here only the self-evident need to make use of, appropriate, and metabolize nature—a commonality among all living organisms. On the other hand, a one-sided, reified form of instrumentalization involves a deficient modality of specifically human instrumentalization to the extent that the latter partakes of the ability to render and comprehend the qualitatively differentiated character of nature, that is, to view the latter not as a *mere* repository for consumption but as a dynamic, living totality in its own right. It would be absurd, for example, to attribute reification to the activity of a non-human living being, since this pathology by necessity is only intelligible for the kinds of beings who can alter their social world in such a way that it can become alienated in the first place. The failure to make these crucial distinctions often leads to the claim that instrumentalization *as such*, and not its *specific* alienated modality, is the main problem, thereby unwittingly naturalizing the one-sided instrumentalization and universal alienation of nature distinctive of capitalist society.

³⁷⁹ Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, 162.

not be reduced to theoretical clarification alone; the stakes are also practical, since they bear on how we envision elaborating those socialist mediations under which our social nature can flourish and be realized in a self-mediating, human manner. This distinctive naturalism affirms the open-ended nature of human history as a process of self-creation without, however, becoming untethered from necessity, from those natural determinations that, at one and the same time, constitute the social and material premises, limits, and enabling conditions of freedom and self-activity. Still, there seems to be a paradox here. How can necessity be something that both limits and enables our freedom?

In the historical materialist view, we cannot intelligibly speak of an unconditioned or absolute freedom. Freedom is not the unconditioned, transcendental property of an equally unconditioned subject. Human freedom pertains, rather, to the particular nature of a universal freedom that is, from the beginning, concretely actualized only within the limits of our social relations as they mediate the metabolism with nature through which we fulfill our needs and secure our bodily integrity. Only in this way can human freedom be put in its proper light, since, as Mészáros observes, “Fulfillment, by logical necessity, implies limitations, for only that which is limited in some way can be fulfilled.”³⁸⁰ Or, in what amounts to the same, we can say that the materialist conception of freedom is grounded in the determinate limits of the self-mediating beings that we are by nature, circumscribing at the same time the limits of the modes of social mediation that are humanly appropriate for satisfying this need for self-mediation. As Charles Mills puts it, Marx and Engels saw “realm of human freedom...consisting not in the break with causality (as metaphysical libertarians would hold), but in the overcoming of *coercive*

³⁸⁰ Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, 167.

causation.”³⁸¹ Interestingly enough, the coercive nature of certain forms of historical and social causation is precisely what demands that we have a theory of the ways the enabling conditions of our freedom—e.g., labor as purposive objectification—unfold, develop, and assume a form antithetical to those immanent conditions.

Consequently, as far as the problem of this self-mediating activity goes, the moment of “transcendence,” expressed in the overcoming of limits, is always internal to “immanence,” to our determinate existence as natural-historical and irreducibly social beings, just as “immanence” is itself transformed in light of the process of “transcendence.” This dialectical reciprocity and movement *is* the logical-material form of self-mediating activity; it *is* human freedom in its actuality and necessity.

Freedom outside of these conditions is therefore unintelligible, though, as we know, the illusion of unlimited individual sovereignty remains central to the alienated self-understanding of capitalist society; it does immediately appear that the illusion of such unencumbered freedom is itself socially conditioned, not at all the seemingly natural property which bourgeois political and economic theory tends to attribute to abstractly conceived individuals.³⁸² At the level of the self-representations of bourgeois society, its ideological forms, it is not surprising, for instance, that atomism reigns supreme. A society of abstract individuals, their sociality determined by their separation from the objective conditions of their existence and established only indirectly through the alienated mediations of commodity exchange and monetary transaction, necessarily produces social “false consciousness,” which is less a matter of inculcated belief than it is a problem of necessary false appearances and semblances sustained by the fetish-character of

³⁸¹ Mills, “Marxism, ‘Ideology’, and Moral Objectivism,” 379. See also Mészáros, *Social Structure and Forms of Consciousness*, Vol. 2, 39-42.

³⁸² See Marx, *Grundrisse*, 156-157.

capitalist social relations. In such a society, moreover, it is unsurprising that freedom in its distorted form should appear as *natural* and that *natural freedom*, the freedom appropriate to social beings, should appear as a *negative constraint* and *external imposition*, in short, as a situation of irresolvable antagonisms and contending interests in which everyone is formally equal precisely in virtue of having such contending individual interests. Liberalism as “ideal theory”—as a the elaboration of normative ideals in which the contradictions of material circumstances are a mere afterthought, if not entirely excluded—uncritically reflects and tends to take as given this ideological distortion.³⁸³ The typical anxiety of liberal thought with respect to “collectivism,” “rational planning,” and any *substantive* claims grounded in discernible ontological and philosophical anthropological determinations, must also be situated in the context of a society in which all individual interests appear formally equal in the midst of the *total partiality* that governs the reproduction of capitalist society as a whole, namely, the particular interests of capital and its personifications.

As might be expected, however, the problem is not exclusively ideological in nature. In drawing on Mészáros, we have seen that freedom and necessity at the level of self-mediation are not *intrinsically* antagonistic. We are by nature conscious social beings; whatever mode of sociality prevails will necessarily express this in some specific form, even when that form obfuscates its historically specificity through its inverted appearances and alienated social relations. Here it becomes crucial to turn our attention to the distortion and alienation of the

³⁸³ Refer to footnote 6. For notable critique of ideal theory, see Charles W. Mills, “‘Ideal’ Theory as Ideology,” *Hypatia* 20, no. 3 (2005): 165-184. In this context, we can also cite following claim by Adorno: “No society which contradicts its very notion—that of mankind—can have full consciousness of itself” (27). Equally, we can state: No theory which contradicts or distorts its notion—humankind—can have full consciousness of itself. And that is Adorno’s very point. A society which contradicts its concept, human beings, necessarily reproduces itself by negating both human beings and distorting social consciousness. Behind the apparent rationality of individual consciousness and the façade of the rational integrity of capitalist society lies the irrationality and contradiction-ridden nature of the social process as a whole. See Theodor W. Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1988): 17-34.

substantive conditions of social freedom itself. By social freedom, I understand mainly the process of self-mediation in the manner described earlier: productive social activity as the unity of immanent necessity and the site of transcendence. And indeed, it is this process that allows us to grasp the alienation distinctive of capitalist social relations in its falsity, wrongness, and fundamental irrationality—and this not only at the level of social consciousness but as *practically* expressed in the very negation of social reciprocity, the negation of needs, and the negation of nature itself. This will give us a way to turn, finally, to Mészáros’s conception of “the communal system,” conceived on the basis of *an exchange of reciprocal, consciously planned activities*.

First, capitalist social relations negate social reciprocity, fundamentally in the form of alienation. In the world of capital, labor is alienated to the extent that its very exploitation presupposes (and further consolidates) its ongoing separation from the objective, intrinsically social conditions of its existence, conditions which in principle belong equally to everyone—insofar as *everyone materially* depends on them for their flourishing—and thus to no one individual in particular. A private “right” to dispose over these *collective conditions as private property* is a contradiction in terms, a contradiction that nevertheless obtains universal objectivity in capitalist society. Further, individual workers relate socially to the fundamentally cooperative process of production only through the indirect mediation of commodity exchange, in the form of labor-power sold only to be subjected to the despotic plan of capital and the valorization process. Labor, in a word, is *systematically dissociated* from social control over the process of production, dominated and exploited by the particularistic ends which determine the process as a whole in its capitalist form. Hence, the vital human need for a rational, socially conscious, and qualitatively oriented determination of the labor process is effectively alienated

from labor, since the conditions and laboring activity itself are subordinated not only to the private interests of the capitalist class, but to the imperatives of capital as a whole. The fact that the worker can work for one capitalist as for any other reveals that the alienated relation is systematic and pervasive.

In this sense, labor can only actualize or realize itself socially to the extent that it negates or alienates itself, since the mode of cooperation and its conditioning ends are not consciously posited or mediated from the beginning by the associated producers. The mode of cooperation does not “belong” to labor, since it is a product not of conscious association but of the productive targets and ends which are determined externally by capitalist imperatives. Because the labor process is necessarily and essentially a social process, one through which human beings satisfy and develop their needs through self-mediating activity, it ought to be organized in such a way as to actualize and reflect this necessity in a consciously posited, human manner governed by the principle of quality, not the wasteful, unsustainable, and need-denying measure of abstract value. Here it becomes clear that we can determine, in materialist terms, the nature of a particular instance of wrong when we critically apprehend it in and through universal social and ontological determinations constituting the very conditions of social freedom.

Second, the alienation of needs refers to the systematic negation and distortion of social and material needs. Production within capitalism takes place for the sake of self-expanding exchange value, not in order to satisfy human needs. An obvious objection, perhaps more convincing in brighter times for capitalism, is that the system indeed delivers the goods; more than any other society, it provides people with consumer choice or “sovereignty,” conforms to

the harmonious laws of supply and demand, promising eventual abundance and “modernization” for all.³⁸⁴

Concrete wealth, however, understood as wealth responding to vital human needs, is not measured *exclusively by the fetishized quantitative standard of exchange value nor by capitalistically determined technological development alone*. Given that capitalist production establishes the goals of production according to the dictates of profitability, in direct contravention of vital human and ecological needs, it is necessary that socialist production and consumption be socially coordinated on the basis of prioritizing satisfying these needs, increasing production where necessary, and halting it altogether when it serves no discernible social need. By definition, however, a socioeconomic system whose decisive compulsion lies in unlimited accumulation through the extension of market-imperatives—the ongoing privatization and commodification of every domain of social and political life—cannot develop *natural human needs*.

Recall that the specific nature of human needs lies not in their immediate physical satisfaction or consumption but in their socially mediated nature, in the conscious relation that inheres between the needs themselves and their actual modes of satisfaction. This objective fact is normatively consequent, for it sets limits that make it possible to critically determine whether a

³⁸⁴ Concerning the twin problem of consumerism and a new form of “technology domination,” it is illuminating to refer to the once prevalent thesis as to the “integration” of working-class, most notably in Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*. Another example would be Lucien Goldmann, for whom the triumphant material and social gains of post-World War II capitalism had proven able to contain and indefinitely pacify the working-class struggle (curiously excluding from his analysis glaring structurally entrenched misery of the rest of the world). This diagnosis permeates Goldmann’s projection that the main problem with “organized capitalism” for the foreseeable future would be its incapacity to provide any substantive meaning for alienated, albeit materially satisfied, individuals whose everyday existence is characterized by a generalized anomie. See Lucien Goldmann, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment: The Christian Burgess and the Enlightenment*, trans. Henry Maas (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1973). Today, in the midst of capital’s structural crisis, those illusions have been altogether crushed. For a critique of Marcuse, see Paul Mattick, “One Dimensional Man in Class Society,” accessed October 12, 2023, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/mattick-paul/1972/marcuse.htm>.

given mode of organizing productive life is appropriate or not to the development of these human needs. A socioeconomic system whose overriding need—capital accumulation—is in principle limitless and propelled exclusively by fetishistically quantitative compulsions, as well as dependent on implicit and explicit forms of coercion for its enforcement, is one in which free productive activity, consciously setting its own limits, cannot freely reside, necessitating a new, “unfinished” and open-ended form of socialist freedom and reciprocal association: real humanism.³⁸⁵

On one level, the capitalist mode of production, because it develops needs only indirectly through the mediation of commodities and money, logically presupposes the primacy of things in determining not only whether needs can be satisfied, but also because it is itself systematically driven by *abstract needs* divorced from concrete human needs. That is why, under the rule of capital, the need for self-mediating activity that constitutes the only adequate form of activity for human beings becomes an abstraction in the sense that it is separated from its full actuality. Individual needs and social existence, freedom and necessity, life and consciousness, are mediated in such a way as to be divorced from and contradictory to each other. Human powers and needs are, in this way, developed in an alienated, one-sided form insofar as the social relations under which they develop are self-contradictory; that is, they exclude human, because reciprocally and collectively determined, needs grounded in what Mészáros calls substantive, as opposed to merely formal, equality.³⁸⁶ And it could not be otherwise given the alienated power of disposal over the collective conditions of social and natural life definitive of the capital-relation.

³⁸⁵ Bloch, *On Karl Marx*, 135.

³⁸⁶ István Mészáros, *The Structural Crisis of Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010), 156-163.

In view of the above, we must also stress that it is not the universalizing tendency of capital which constitutes the central object of critique, but the overall *negative, contradictory form* in which this universalizing tendency unfolds. Freed from the fetters of capitalist imperatives, the universal tendencies expressed in this process of socialization must be creatively transformed by the activity of the associated producers, consciously setting the goals and limits of their productive activities and social needs. Here productive activity refers not only to securing the material means of satisfying needs, but to the need for a variegated development of individual human powers and capacities as an end-in-itself. This universal socialization therefore *exceeds* and effectively *points beyond* its antagonistic capitalist form. That is, it demands a socialist, communal form of human association advancing beyond the contradictions of capital. To be sure, yet another of the constitutive inversions of the capitalist mode of production is that it gives rise to the *real possibility* of a universal form of human cooperation while actively frustrating this very possibility in accordance with capital's distorted actuality, where potentially satisfying cooperative universal human activity is necessarily perverted into its opposite. Capital thus requires the perpetuation of a "necessity" which has become false and irrational—or historically "unnecessary"—in view of the very need to humanize those conditions and activities which, in their present dehumanized, alienated form, assume the character of uncontrollable determinations.

Under the capitalist mode of production, the socialization of labor constitutes an altogether *ambivalent*, contradictory historical development. On the one hand, the integration of production and exchange and the universal socialization of labor constitute irreversible historical developments, meaning that they cannot be simply wished away by discourses—whatever their ideological orientation—which moralistically bemoan one or more of its isolated

consequences.³⁸⁷ None of this is to deny the existence of the underdevelopment which is the result of neo-colonial forms of domination and expropriation or the necessity of particular struggles against this state of affairs through socialist development. Indeed, the essential question, in this sense, is not whether this historical development can be reversed, but whether a determinate transformation of the mode of production as a whole can advance beyond the alienated and dominating capitalist form of socialization, uncontrollable in its very nature, into a self-determined form emanating from the vital needs of the associated producers, a form of socialization no longer requiring the top-down dominating requirements of capital and the coercive political organs—those second order mediations—which consolidate its relentless pursuit of abstract wealth in a manner external to genuine human needs.

I must emphasize here that the conception of productive activity as self-mediation we have been discussing implies not only the dynamic character of needs; it also grasps such activity, precisely as the activity of superseding of natural and historical limits, as itself a vital need which can be made historically intelligible through an analysis of the socio-economic process and its immanent, developmental tendencies. We saw this also in our discussion of Márkus, where the overcoming of limits—the principle of negativity—defines the specific form of free human activity. Hence the need for that form of *self-directed activity* which the socialist alternative cannot but embody if it is to make successful inroads against capital. Only a form of social life in which the premises are consciously mediated (or internally determined) *from the beginning* by the associated producers can serve as the sustainable ground, the mediating

³⁸⁷ It is relevant, in this context, to mention that contemporary right-wing accounts of a so-called “globalist” plot exhibit a warped desire to return to a *closed world* of idealized autarkic nation-states and identitarian ethno-nationalist communities free of the corrosive influence of those international institutions beholden to the interests of those tradition-destroying “global elites.” Such views, which have acquired increasing political traction and should warrant deep concern, must leave entirely unexamined and obfuscate the structural dimensions which sustain the ravages of the capitalist system, since they reject both globalization and universalism in the abstract and violently insist on the necessity of reviving national and cultural particularities.

principle, of socialist freedom. All of the central concepts of socialism—comprehensive planning, gratifying forms of work, the rational regulation of the metabolic interchange with nature, substantive freedom, concrete wealth, the reciprocity of individual and social self-development—ultimately hinge upon the universal realization of this self-directed modality of human activity.

What I wish to suggest here is that this dialectical humanism proves markedly different from bourgeois humanism, paradigmatically that of the Enlightenment, which, given the limits of its largely individualistic standpoint, failed to grasp the dialectical reciprocity of the individual and sociality, as well as the unity of the life-process of society and nature. In contrast, the immanent humanism distinctive of dialectical materialism, as Lucien Goldmann argues, expresses the unity of individuals and their shared social conditions, so that freedom no longer appears as a frozen, naturally given opposition between individual and community or between human beings and nature. “If, in its turn, the human community, acting through the individuals of whom it is composed, makes itself the object of its action,” Goldmann writes, “then its action is conscious history,” and simultaneously implies a historically achieved reconciliation of human beings and nature, where reconciliation means an ecologically sustainable manner of negotiating our global social metabolism.³⁸⁸

³⁸⁸ Goldmann, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, 87. The antinomies of the Enlightenment are by no means unambiguous. On the one hand, its core commitment, the supreme authority of the individual, had a determinate content, namely, the struggle against dogmatic forms of religious and political authority; on the other, in privileging the individual, it not only negated historicity, but naturalized the cult of the abstract individual instrumental to the formalistic self-understanding of bourgeois society. For another treatment of this problem, see Ellen Meiksins Wood, “The Enlightenment, Postmodernism, and the Post-‘New Left,’” *The Ellen Meiksins Wood Reader*, ed. Larry Patriquin (Leiden: Brill, 2012): 221-243. Let us also note that even commentators not particularly sympathetic to Marxism have acknowledged that the notion of social individuals intimates a new unity of the individual with their constitutive otherness in other human beings. Genuinely social individuals would no longer experience their sociality as an opaque, uncontrollable, and hostile fate, but would instead see themselves reflected and freely expressed in their actual sociality. See, for example, Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Thought*, trans. David E. Green (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 145-147, 152-158.

Mészáros does not frequently rely on the concept of autonomy, but I would suggest here that one of his chief critical contributions lies in elaborating a substantive notion of *socialist autonomy*, wherein the meaningful participation of social individuals in the determination of their shared social conditions constitutes an essential need. Accordingly, the alienated anthropology of bourgeois society, with its hypostatized notions of natural self-interest and its possessive individualism, must be superseded by a new socialist form of autonomy wherein individuals actualize themselves as genuinely social individuals whose purposes are appropriately mediated by conscious, rather than unconscious and external, needs. Or, in other words, “*self-fulfillment in the self-determined and externally unhindered exercise of human powers.*”³⁸⁹

Thus, a world of difference exists between the alienated and compulsory determination of self-expanding value as the exclusive measure of social wealth under capital and socialism conceived as the planned allocation of both labor time and disposable time towards qualitative ends and needs, which must coincide with forms of consciously posited, autonomous social reciprocity. Indeed, “It is this latter meaning—‘the law we give ourselves’—which is relevant in this context of the economic use of time under the conditions of the communal system,” Mészáros writes.³⁹⁰ While I cannot fully address this matter here—we will return to it in greater detail in the following chapter—it should be clear that this conception of socially grounded self-determination as the cornerstone of socialist freedom radically alters the transcendental notion of autonomous freedom systematically elaborated by Kant (this critical affinity is at least implicit in Mészáros’s formulation concerning a ‘law we give to ourselves’). For the purposes of brevity, though, let it be said that the basic difference lies in the rendering of self-determination as a

³⁸⁹ Mészáros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation*, 186.

³⁹⁰ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 765.

problem pertaining to the substantive necessity of concretely mediating between human beings in their historically specific social relations, with all the contradictions and obstacles constitutive of the latter.

Freedom and autonomy therefore no longer pertain to the abstract individual capacity to conduct ourselves rationally *despite* the existence of those external constraints to which this capacity stands essentially opposed; rather, these “external” constraints become the object of the critique of political economy and socialist transformation as largely unconscious, negative constraints which must be transcended by the cooperative activity of social individuals in order that they progressively become the positive conditions of their social freedom and a free expression of their essential needs, not least of all “individuals’ basic need for *humanly fulfilling life-activity*.”³⁹¹ Socialist planning is, accordingly, not an abstract imposition, but emanates from the internally motivated and practically assumed participation of individuals in creating the social conditions adequate to their need for self-development not only at the level of immediate production, but at all levels of social life. Against the caricatures one frequently encounters, then, it is imperative to insist that substantive socialist planning takes as its premise not “development” or “growth” in the fetishized form sustained by the destructive treadmill of capitalist accumulation, but the unfolding of concrete wealth in which cooperative social mediation constitutes the primary axis, the self-mediating *premise* as opposed to a premise only indirectly posited, indeed negated, by the world of commodities and money.

This, and not some scholastic epistemological concern, captures the humanist element of the dialectical reciprocity of emancipatory theory and practice, social consciousness and social being. Naturally, such reciprocity is effectively blocked in a system whereby the concrete labor

³⁹¹ Mészáros, *The Structural Crisis of Capital*, 151.

of particular individuals acquires social validation only in being at the same time negated by, and subordinated to, alienated mediations which render concrete human freedom *unintelligible*. For concrete human freedom is intelligible only in and through the consciously posited, self-actualizing, and reciprocal affirmation of the other's free activity and respective needs, proving fundamentally *incompatible* both with the social relations of coercion, subordination, and exploitation that characterize capitalist production on global scale and its constitutive structural compulsions: runaway, endless accumulation and the domination of exchange value over use value.

Nevertheless, it is crucial that we introduce some further clarification concerning the meaning of the unhampered development and exercise of human powers, so as to respond to the criticism that the notion of development under consideration is itself beset with those "productivist" premises commonly associated with a fetishization of growth, work, and the indiscriminate instrumentalization of nature.³⁹² First, as we have already stated, we should remember that the notion of development deployed here implies a radical critique of the distorted and pathological rationality of capitalist development, wherein productive and technological "advances" and ongoing destruction become increasingly indissociable, making graphically

³⁹² See, for instance, Sarah Vitale, "Beyond 'Homo Laborans': Marx's Dialectical Account of Human Essence," *Social Theory and Practice* 46, no. 3 (2020): 633-655. As with many other theorists who, in opposition to "Traditional Marxism," argue for a "post-work" society, Vitale problematically assumes, here also following "Wertkritik" theorists such as Robert Kurz, that capitalist automation and technology already portends a socialist future in which work will lose its centrality, for under such conditions "Creation...is untethered from necessity" (634). However, the problem is certainly not, as Vitale contends, that "In a world of productivism, the human remains defined by her capacity to work" (635). This assertion is misleading for two reasons. First, it relies on a misrepresentation of the graphic global inequalities which capitalist exploitation perpetuates in the form of increasingly coercive labor practices which cannot be explained let alone solved by automation and mechanization. And second, it relies on a slippage in terminology that equates the ideology of productivism with the notion of human beings as essentially productive beings. To be sure, the problem consists of the fact that in capitalist society the capacity to work is systematically dissociated from forms of cooperative social mediation that would make such activity a fundamental moment of an integral freedom determined by *social needs and priorities*. Socialist society will by necessity need to produce, and such production refers not merely to the production of objects satisfying needs, but equally to the creation of those social relations and mediations prioritizing the needs actively set forth by the associated producers themselves.

evident not only the limits of those widely touted technocratic, “modernizing” solutions to capital’s contradictions, but the determinate limits of the system as a whole as an historically specific form of social and ecological integration (or better, disintegration).³⁹³ These limits evince the structural irrationality of capital and call for a new form of human development grounded in a commitment to substantive socialist planning that *posits in advance the self-allotted targets of production in order to meet real social needs*.

Hence, the overarching critical judgement which sustains the vision of the socialist alternative is that human social relations need not remain shackled to a historically specific form of social mediation which effectively contradicts its own immanent concept of an *interdependent* humanity that is—and this is key—*divided by incorrigibly unequal class relations and the appearance of antagonistic, abstract individuals which mask the reality of class domination*. While making universal human association both possible and necessary, then, the imperatives of the system must divert this potentially positive development into a *negative*, alienated modality of development antithetical to human needs.

In this context, it is understandable that Mészáros should reiterate the Marxist suspicion, alluded to earlier, of the notion of socialist transformation as the mere realization of “an abstract moral postulate.”³⁹⁴ Because the capitalist system is governed by an uncontrollable logic and torn asunder by the systemically entrenched antagonism between capital and labor, no moral imperative divorced from these objective conditions will prove adequate to the task of socialist transformation. To settle for a greater degree of justice, for instance, in a system *logically predisposed* to function in accordance with the interests of capital accumulation and its beneficiaries proves self-defeating, remaining within the confines of the prevailing socio-

³⁹³ Istvan Mészáros, “The Necessity of Social Control,” 49-50, 530.

³⁹⁴ Mészáros, *Social Structure*, vol. 2, 461.

economic order. Nevertheless, as we have seen, it becomes clear that this perspective does not involve a renunciation of normative claims altogether, but only indicates the *limits* of any such claims, particularly when they assume the unmediated. In the absence of the social forces and mediations which could concretely—practically and feasibly—bring to life the values of the alternative, the latter must remain unlimited ideals, hopelessly formalistic postulates.

Thus, any project that aims to transcend the capitalist mode of production in the interest of a socialist alternative must center the problem of need, quality, use, Mészáros holds.³⁹⁵ Equally significant is the necessity of “the realization of the principles of a *socialist economy* which centre on a *meaningful economy of productive activity*.”³⁹⁶ Such an alternative would need to overcome the totality of social relations grounded in the peculiar form of unfreedom generalized by the capitalist mode of production in which human activities and powers “are *dominated* by a need *external* to them.”³⁹⁷ A notion of socialist freedom which centers needs must contend with the peculiar inversion which structures the capitalist mode of production, an inversion which instrumentalizes human needs, powers, and social interdependence for the purposes of sustaining the *alienated need* for the self-augmentation of value, with all the destructive consequences this process implies.

In this account, capital, as a historically specific form of social interaction, lifts needs and labor beyond hitherto existing limitations, revolutionizing the productive forces and powers of humanity in a seemingly unlimited fashion and generating a global context of social interdependency through the self-valorization of value and the universal exchange of commodities. Under such conditions, “The overall purpose and motivating force of the capital

³⁹⁵ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 530-531.

³⁹⁶ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 893-894.

³⁹⁷ Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, 186.

system cannot conceivably be the need-oriented production of use-values but only the successful *valorization/realization* and constant *expansion* of the given mass of accumulated wealth.”³⁹⁸

The capitalist mode of production is, then, compelled to transform the production of use-values, hence the satisfaction of needs, into a *mere moment* of its own reproduction. The inversion which structures capital is socially objective, constituted through the universal subordination of the products of labor and of labor-power itself to value and its forms: commodities, money, exchange-value. Capital is a system of unfreedom inasmuch as it separates the totality of social labor from the objective conditions of its realization, and hence from the dire need to reconstitute the process of production on the basis of the qualitative concerns through which alone needs become substantive.³⁹⁹ The capitalist mode of production “suspends” local, “natural” limitations, replacing them with historically constituted necessity, one that implies its own historical superfluity when measured against the need for self-determination, which alone can address the ecological, social, and political contradictions of capital. *But this is only a historical potential which can be made into a radical need through the practical effort to reconstitute the social metabolism.*

To repeat, an essential aspect of the logic of capital consists of reproducing the distortion of historically developed needs and potentials in line with the system’s uncontrolled, “runaway” form of expansion and growth.⁴⁰⁰ Under the capitalist mode of production, relations between human beings really do assume the form of relations between things precisely because these relations are constituted by the dominating, reified preponderance economic objects—commodities, money, capital. It cannot but be the case that the alienation of needs—their

³⁹⁸ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 540.

³⁹⁹ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 542.

⁴⁰⁰ For an incisive analysis of this historically specific form of “runaway economic growth,” see Moishe Postone, “Critique and Historical Transformation,” *Historical Materialism* 12, no. 3 (2004): 53-72.

subjugation to an external end which reproduces itself *blindly*—lies in the social forms of capital, which acquire an abstract life of their own as abstract economic domination. The Marxian conception of socialism, perhaps better grasped as the process of socialization, implies a conscious recognition of the limitations placed upon human development by the negative constraints of the prevailing social order.

Nevertheless, even if it is the case that use-value remains central to a socialist project and a critical analysis of capital, use-value, *indeterminately* conceived, does not give us the exclusive critical point of reference. *A critique of the capitalist mode of production ought also to grasp the contradictory unity of the positive and the negative which determines its development.* This means acknowledging the distortion of productive potentialities and forces for the purposes of sustaining the necessity of capital itself as the absolute horizon of social life.⁴⁰¹ *Hence, breaking with this contradictory system in which the productive potentials of humanity become sources of*

⁴⁰¹ It must be stressed that, for Marx, social relations are themselves productive forces. The abstract universality of capital, one that globally even if unevenly integrates production through the compulsions of commodity and monetary exchange, is itself a productive force. Hence, it is not enough to simply reject the abstract in the name of the concrete, since the abstract is an expression of a particular form of life, a definite kind of social activity and interdependency which supplies the material presupposition for the concrete universality of the socialist project. The determinate negation of capital must be universal in scope precisely because capital is a globally integrated system. *This means that the false universality of capital, one grounded in antagonisms and class domination, must be consciously reappropriated and transformed so as to establish universality as the positive condition for human freedom and development.* For a suggestive analysis of Marx's indebtedness to the Hegelian notion of "absolute necessity" which sheds light on the distortion of human activity as objectification, see Rocío Zambrana, "Actuality in Hegel and Marx," *Hegel Bulletin* 40, no. 1 (2018): 1-18. Zambrana stresses that, following Hegel, the Marxian account of the actuality of alienation of labor tracks the necessity of the "suppression" of liberation. Thus, rather than grasping merely abstract possibilities, which follow an additive logic and therefore provide little insight into the determinate character of the matter at hand, the Marxian critique of alienation diagnoses capital as a form of life that relies on the necessity of the ongoing alienation of labor; that is, under capital, labor can only "actualize" itself in the form of "deactualization," it can only become "effective" to the degree that it alienates itself, becoming ineffective. I largely agree with this analysis, but I would add that the suppression or negation of liberation also implies a positive moment, one anticipated and guided by theory but ultimately realizable only practically. Such a positive development, then, is not only about the negation or suppression of liberation, a perspective which remains within the bounds of a "negative dialectic," but pertains to the realization of the possibilities developed *within*, hence immanent to, this form of domination and alienation. Rather than being guided by the heteronomous ends of capital, human activity would *universally guide itself* through the progressive negation of capital in accordance with the positive potentials of the present and the practical elaboration of the new. The need for the negation of the old and the creation of the new, a process which must take its bearings from the actuality of the contradictions of the present, expresses the open-ended character of the Marxian historical dialectic. This contradictory process of creation is *freedom* and offers no historical guarantees.

domination—instead of developing needs in accordance with the principle of substantive equality and social autonomy—is itself a defining feature of the meaning of need. For the capitalist mode of production sustains a distorted dialectic that suspends immediate natural necessity, on the one hand, and imposes its own value-driven imperatives as historically necessary, on the other. This dialectic is contradictory precisely because it opens the possibility of “genuine historical achievements” *and* wasteful, manipulated needs, ones driven by the needs of the capitalist wealth or value.⁴⁰²

Mészáros’s notion of the “communal system” as the necessary historical alternative to capital sheds light on the contradictions outlined above. In stark contrast to the irrational, uncontrolled manner that labor-time is allocated and determined in capitalist society, the socialist project involves substantive planning, with the time necessary for the production of a particular object determined by consciously articulated needs and not by the movement of commodities and market compulsions.⁴⁰³ It involves the reappropriation of the substantive material conditions of social reproduction in the interest of universal social individuals whose historically posited conditions no longer assume the form of alien, dominating, and destructive forces.

To conclude, need as an emancipatory category must retain a central place in critical social theory. Need is not a purely theoretical concern, however, but ought to be guided by the emancipatory struggles of the present not only *against* but impelled to go *beyond* capital, to use Mészáros’s language. The Marxist accounts of needs elaborated above reframe needs as immanent and transcendent to their historical context; needs are historically constituted, but their contradictory development under the domination of capital provides the condition of possibility for their reconstitution towards the end of socialist autonomy and self-emancipation. The very

⁴⁰² István Mészáros, *Social Structure and Forms of Consciousness*, Vol. 2, 280-282.

⁴⁰³ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 746.

possibility of determining needs in the effort to transcend capital, then, cannot lie in fanciful abstractions from the abstract, whether in the form of the satisfaction of “basic capacities” or fetishistic particularisms which seek to oppose the concrete to the abstract. An alternative to capital as a dire radical need must be global, hence *concretely universal*, in orientation, or it cannot be. This requires an affirmation of a different *kind* of production. At stake is the conscious reconstitution of those powers and potentials, subsumed by capital, in the interest of universal human emancipation in accordance with the wholesale transformation of social relations. The very necessity of this historical project rests on the need for the elaboration of a concrete universality which opposes the false universality of capital, one in which the flourishing of each proves to be the condition for the flourishing of all. This radical need still defines the contours of the socialist alternative.

Conclusion

In this chapter, it has not been my aim to establish a seamless synthesis of the thinkers under discussion. Rather, I have sought to show that the affinities between their respective theories of need and the nature of human freedom ought to be seen through the prism of reactivating the normative, emancipatory horizon of Marxist theory, one grounded in a distinctive philosophical anthropology and social ontology. The normative critique of capitalist society and the parameters of a socialist alternative, we have seen, constitute an indissociable unity. To sever these two moments generates not only conceptual antinomies, but also hinders a substantive critique of the capitalist present and its own system of “counter-values.” The distortions, the manifold forms of alienation distinctive of capitalist society, must be made intelligible from a human perspective, that is, from the perspective of the universal humanization—the self-emancipation—of our social metabolism, a process of wresting our

social powers and needs from the power of capital. Central to this analysis, as Ellen Meiksins Wood put it, “is an emancipatory vision that looks forward to the *disalienation of power* at every level of human endeavour, from the creative power of labour to the political power of the state,” and this, to be sure, must participate in “a new driving mechanism, a new rationality.”⁴⁰⁴ Nevertheless, as I have stressed throughout, this does not mean that our critical efforts must be directed exclusively toward delineating a philosophically rigorous visions of the normative underpinnings of socialist emancipation detached from material struggles. But it does perhaps commit us to the view that these material struggles *already* contain implicit or explicitly normative principles guiding them, and that critical philosophy, with philosophical anthropology as one of its central concerns, still has something to offer us if it can clarify those essential determinations of human life upon which the new rationality of socialist freedom and transformation continues to depend.

⁴⁰⁴ Wood, *The Ellen Meiksins Wood Reader*, 282, 309.

V. SPIRITUAL FREEDOM AND THE MEANING OF FINITUDE: AN EXCURSUS ON MARTIN HÄGGLUND'S ACCOUNT OF 'DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM'

Introduction

In this chapter, we shall turn to Martin Hägglund's *This Life*, a work unique in its effort to rigorously delineate the philosophical and normative principles of a renewed socialist project for the 21st century. Since it is not possible here to trace the entirety of its argumentative arc, I will limit myself, given my own arguments, to a critical exposition of Hägglund's account of the normative force of Marx's critique of political economy, particularly as it bears on the meaning of the historical project Hägglund calls 'democratic socialism'. As should be clear from the arguments developed in the preceding chapters, we share a mutual concern for elucidating the normative horizon of socialist freedom. For if a transformation of historical circumstances is always a process of self-transformation or self-mediation, normative or 'spiritual' concerns, to use Hägglund's Hegelian language, inevitably enter our frame of reference; they matter. After all, the Marxian vision as to the blossoming of the realm of freedom explicitly takes an *affirmative* stance toward what is most distinct about the 'spirit' or nature of human freedom: a *free reconciliation* with the necessary determinations of our existence that provides the basis for forms of self-development as ends-in-themselves.

If philosophy contributes towards this end, it will have partly satisfied the demand not only to make the world philosophical, but also to make philosophy worldly through a critical confrontation with the constraints to and possibilities of freedom and emancipation not only *here and now in the capitalist present*, but with the natural-historical determinations which circumscribe human life in general. If there is only *this life*, this *finite life* which we cannot but share with others, as Hägglund rightly insists, we begin to glimpse more clearly what has been

one of our implicit guiding concerns all along: How is it that we can organize our collective temporal existence in accordance with our vital needs and essential determinations, rather than with imperatives which assume the form of external constraints which appear independent of human intervention and control and distort that which makes us essentially human? While this might appear *prima facie* as an overly abstract philosophical concern, the temporal determination of the finite beings that we are demands that we reimagine a socialism consistent with this basis. The significance of Hägglund's intervention lies in bringing this question to the forefront of philosophical consideration.

Nevertheless, we shall see that Hägglund's reliance on a thoroughly *denaturalized* conception of freedom, inherited from Robert Pippin's post-Kantian reading of Hegel and from Postone's methodologically restricted—and ultimately rather confused—notion of immanent critique, precludes a more substantive conception of socialist emancipation grounded in the historical materialist philosophical anthropology we have been elaborating.⁴⁰⁵ I want to suggest that the elision of this problem is not without theoretical and practical significance. For in the effort to displace the distinct naturalism so crucial to both Hegel and Marx in a post-Kantian register, Hägglund's vision of socialism suffers from an inability to grasp the necessity of an alternative to capital as grounded not merely in a notion of social freedom as a normative “historical achievement,” but in a recognition of those necessary material determinations or conditions which circumscribe *human life-activity as such in its historically specific manifestations*. For historical materialism recognizes that societies are organized not through a temporally-oriented consciousness of finitude constitutive of an historically achieved and

⁴⁰⁵ The presence of Pippin and Postone has also been highlighted, though in a less critical vein than here, by Michael Lazarus, “The Lives of Marx: Hägglund and Marx's Philosophy after Pippin and Postone,” *Historical Materialism* 29, no. 4 (2021): 229-262.

idealized “spiritual freedom,” but primarily through inescapable and necessary corporeal and social determinations which are simultaneously social and expressive of our self-mediating form of freedom—namely, the physical and social reproduction of human life through the satisfaction and ongoing development of material and social needs. That is why, ultimately, the socialist alternative finds its locus in the process of *labor’s self-emancipation*, not in the realization of the values which are already implicit within capitalist society.

The Meaning of an Immanent Critique of Political Economy

One of the most salient aspects of Hägglund’s interpretation of the Marxian critique of political economy is its attentiveness to the implications of a rigorously immanent critique. It is well known that, in the tradition of Marxist theory and various other modes of critical social theory, the rather contested problem of immanent critique concerns how we *critically approach* the *internal contradictions* of the capitalist mode of production, and hence the *immanent reasons* we give as to the wrongness and systematic irrationality of this self-undermining, crises-ridden form of organizing our social metabolism. The preoccupation with immanence is inseparable, then, from bringing to light those immanent tendencies and the emancipatory motivations which point towards the “necessary” dissolution of the system in question, its determinate limits. We might say that immanent critique grasps those *limits* beyond which capital cannot go, *except ideally*. The socially necessary yet false appearance that capital can finally surmount such limits (about which more in a second) is but a result of the *fetishism* of capital in all its forms—its fetish character—as well as of the varieties of alienation and abstraction which reproduce the system, practically consolidating its appearance as naturally given, eternal, non-contradictory.⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰⁶ The literature on the problem of fetishism is vast. For a classic account, see Isaac Rubin, *Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value*, trans. Milos Samardzija and Fredy Perlman (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1973); Norman Geras, “Essence and Appearance: Aspects of Fetishism in Marx’s *Capital*.” *New Left Review* 1.65 (1971): 69-85; Guido Starosta, “The Role and Place of Commodity Fetishism in Marx’s Systematic-Dialectical Exposition in *Capital*,”

For the logical drive of capital, as Marx so compellingly demonstrated, lies precisely in its totalizing tendency to dismantle those barriers which stand in the way of its compulsion to universally develop and constantly revolutionize the productive forces, generate a world market governed by commodities and the money nexus, and create “an all-sided development of production, and the exploitation and exchange of natural and mental forces.”⁴⁰⁷ Again, we must stress the *ideal* character of this altogether contradictory compulsion to treat limits as mere barriers, since, *materially speaking*, there are certain limits which capital’s self-valorizing and expansionary process, try as it may, cannot overcome. One such limit is the existence of the class struggle itself—the capital-labor relation—in its manifold forms, embodied in the antagonism between capital’s *imposition* of the regime of abstract labor and concrete labor’s vital needs, including the struggle for a qualitatively new, communal mode of labor’s self-organization. Another such limit lies in the domain of ecology—that is, in the perilous transgression of those planetary limits which threaten society with ecological collapse, distributed according to patterns of uneven global development and the exploitative and expropriative relations such development presupposes.⁴⁰⁸

Historical Materialism 25, no. 3 (2017): 101-139; Georgios Daremas, “The Social Constitution of Commodity Fetishism, Money Fetishism, and Capital Fetishism,” *The Unfinished System of Karl Marx: Critically Reading Capital as a Challenge for Our Times*, eds. Judith Dellheim and Frieder Otto Wolf (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018): 219-249; Desmond McNeill, *Fetishism and the Theory of Value: Reassessing Marx in the 21st Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Michael Heinrich, *How to Read Marx’s Capital: Commentary and Explanations on the Beginning Chapters* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2021).

⁴⁰⁷ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 410.

⁴⁰⁸ Here we must include a qualification. The fact that capital cannot overcome those specific limits which stand in an antagonistic relation to its systemic imperatives does not mean that advancing beyond these antagonisms is guaranteed. At the same time, labor, for example, can never be entirely “integrated” into the system, if by integrated one means that capital can finally surmount its dependence on the exploitation and alienation living labor. The capital-relation is by its very nature antagonistic, even when the class struggle acquires a more muted character during periods of relative stability. Whether these antagonisms assume the necessity of socialist revolution is, however, a practical question pertaining to the consolidation of a united struggle whose objectives and orienting values are adequate to that task.

Nevertheless, when Marx identifies the universalizing and totalizing tendency of capital—
—that historically peculiar ability of the system to subordinate and shape social life according to
its accumulative imperatives—he also identifies *universal countertendencies in light of which the
abstract and contradictory universality of capital becomes an increasingly negative and
destructive constraint, thus inimical to human development*. This universal countertendency is
potential development of the communal system, the socialist alternative, the society of associated
producers, that new synthesis individual and community in which human beings become active
participants in rationally determining the ends of production and social life more broadly.

The theme of immanence brings us again to the figure of Hegel, whose critique of
formalism we had occasion to discuss in Chapter III. The Hegelian critique of formalism
concerns any mode of subjectivity—here it should be recalled that, for Hegel, institutions and
norms always exhibit a subjectivity, a discernible logical and even rational unfolding—that relies
on externally imposed standards in comprehending and assessing the determinate limits of a
given object of analysis. Truth, it will be recalled, is nothing but the self-movement of the matter
at hand, and the form of this self-movement, the dialectical exposition of which Hegel entrusts to
philosophical science, turns us, paradoxically, towards an even more rigorous formalism, one
that pertains to the *logic and form of a content* that simply, as Hegel puts it, “is the indigenous
coming-to-be of the concrete content itself.”⁴⁰⁹ Form, in other words, is the modality in which a
given content is actualized or expressed. A “positive,” reified formalism, the internal limitations
of which Hegel’s dialectical philosophy relentlessly exposed, on the other hand, can be seen as
an instance of ‘dogmatism’, a reliance on external standards immune from the rational
assessment afforded by the coming-to-be of the concrete content itself and which claim to be

⁴⁰⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 36.

sovereign over it.⁴¹⁰ Of course, the problem is not merely that such standards are dogmatic and external, but that, in their very externality, they remain powerless in critically confronting the *objective contradictions* internal to the matter at hand.

One way to understand this proposition is that critical philosophy (or, at any rate, dialectics) ought not shy away from the contradictory and dynamic unfolding of the unity of form and content, but instead strive to present the latter as the “*immanent* movement”—and this in opposition to a vain, self-satisfied form of thinking content to dispel, by ‘clever’ argumentation, something as *unconditionally false*, perhaps along the lines of a false “representation” without objective truth of its own.⁴¹¹ The unfolding of this immanent movement, dialectics, contains the resources for philosophical critique because it demonstrates the *finite* coming-to-be of a particular norm, institution, historical commitment—a coming-to-be whose internal contradictions indicate its simultaneous passing away towards a new determination, a new unity of form and content, a *new universality* which *cannot be actualized* within the prevailing circumstances. It precisely in this sense that there exists a more than incidental affinity between the Hegelian notion of the ‘Absolute’, long regarded as among the greatest excesses of Hegelian philosophy, and the Marxian vision of an emancipated society that would exhibit an ‘absolute movement of becoming’ because its presupposition is the development of social individuals and their needs as an end in itself. This movement, for both

⁴¹⁰ The concept of “positivity,” which appears so frequently in Hegel’s early writings, is also important in this context. See, for instance, G. W. F. Hegel, “The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate,” *On Christianity: Early Theological Writings*, trans. Richard Kroner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996): 282-301. The great insight of Hegel, even in these early writings, was to have shown that these “external” forms of positivity which claimed, and authorized for themselves, the status of an unquestionable objectivity were the product of subjective determinations which had become untethered and abstracted from human life.

⁴¹¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 37. Hegel’s recognition of the limits of representational forms of thought is intimately connected to its implicit reliance on a rigid separation between subject and object. Thus, the very notion that ideas can be criticized as false on narrowly empirical-representational grounds, i.e., on the grounds that the representation does not coincide with its object, fails to recognize that “truth” is not merely something in our minds, but is conditioned by the totality of objective and subjective conditions through which it becomes possible.

Hegel and Marx, is nothing but the restless self-mediating movement of the actualization of historical freedom.⁴¹²

Now, Hägglund recognizes the Hegelian elements of Marx's immanent critique of the tendencies and countertendencies of the capitalist mode of production. With respect to Marx, he writes that "an immanent critique locates a *contradiction* between the avowed ideals of an institution or an ideology and the actual practical form it legislates for itself."⁴¹³ The liberal ideals which Marx criticizes—notably, "Freedom, Equality, Property, and Bentham"—are immanent to the capitalist mode of production. For this reason, Marx does not abstractly reject such ideals outright as "false," that is, as epiphenomenal, unreal ideas obscuring a deeper reality. Rather, he attempts to grasp their moment of truth—not only the historical conditions which necessitate them but, equally, the impossibility of their concrete realization given the negative constraints of the prevailing social order. And, Hägglund supposes, it is the *explicit* nature of the commitment to equality and freedom which characterize modern life that becomes the object of critical focus. Only in *modern* life do freedom and equality become explicitly avowed in social and political life. Accordingly, the contradiction upon which Hägglund concentrates, and which, in his view, constrains the realization of these ideals, is that which obtains between value as the necessary measure of social wealth and the potential expansion of free time, or 'socially available free time'.⁴¹⁴

This requires further explanation, since the contradiction between value as the measure of wealth and socially available free time gets to the very heart of the modal categories which we

⁴¹² For another account of this parallels between Hegel and Marx's conceptions of freedom and the problem of the absolute, see Raya Dunayevskaya, *Philosophy and Revolution: From Hegel to Sartre, and From Marx to Mao* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003).

⁴¹³ Martin Hägglund, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2019), 225.

⁴¹⁴ Hägglund, *This Life*, 229, 259.

encountered earlier—actuality and potentiality, appearance and essence, necessity and freedom. The key here, however, lies in grasping the historical obsolescence of socially necessary labor time, extracted as surplus value, as the overriding *actual* principle of a historically specific form of wealth:

Capitalism can sustain itself only by extracting more and more relative surplus value, which is why we are committed to an annual growth of value. The extraction of relative surplus value depends continually on reducing the socially necessary labor time, which is accomplished by technological progress. The reduction of socially necessary labor time *could* lead to more free time for everyone, but under capitalism that is not possible, since surplus time must be converted into surplus value.⁴¹⁵

The extraction of relative surplus value here refers to the introduction of scientific and technological transformations in the process of production under the rule of capital so as to increase the generation of value in *less time*, as opposed to increasing the length of the working day for the same end (absolute surplus value). These technological transformations in the process of production make socially necessary labor time increasingly obsolete as the measure of social wealth, for the development of the productive forces renders the ongoing necessity of proletarian labor itself superfluous in historical terms. This, in a sense, is *prefigured* in capital's tendency to make wealth less and less dependent upon the direct expenditure of labor time, even as it *must* tyrannically continue to impose the latter on living labor.⁴¹⁶

⁴¹⁵ Hägglund, *This Life*, 250.

⁴¹⁶ Hägglund's understanding of value is explicitly indebted to Postone's reinterpretation of Marx's critical theory. Postone makes the claim that, for Marx, the form of domination distinctive of capital is temporal, involving a contradictory 'treadmill dynamic' he describes as follows: "increasing productivity increases the amount of use-values produced per unit of time, but results only in short-term increases in the magnitude of value created per unit of time" (59). The irrationality of this treadmill dynamic is manifest in the increases of material productivity, making the production of material wealth (use-values) increasingly independent of direct labor time expenditure, and the historically compulsory norm which propels the system, the imposition of socially necessary labor time and abstract labor. See Postone, "Critique," 65-66.

Technological and social development, mediated by the imperative to extract relative surplus value, reproduce the historically obsolete necessity of the system's social relations and compulsions. Means and ends are also inverted. What ought to be the means for satisfying human ends and needs, not least of all the need for the historically determinate extension of free time for self-development and for a *free, self-determined relation* to the realm of necessity itself, become, in their capitalist integument, forces for the perpetuation of unfreedom, of historically superfluous necessity and toil. This unfreedom proves 'true', hence necessary, insofar as it in fact governs the exploitative nature of capitalist relations of production and its destructive form of economic growth. It proves 'false', however, given that the system's mode of reproduction structurally requires not only the subordination of social labor to the imperative of socially necessary labor time—to the form of abstract labor—but also blocks the very process of collective determination over the *meaning of needs and the meaningfully temporal allocation of human activities*. Capital, in other words, curtails and distorts how it is that we choose for ourselves the kinds of constraints under which we might otherwise freely live. The irrationality of the capitalist mode of production inheres, ultimately, in that it “treats the *negative* measure of value as though it were the *positive* measure of value and thereby treats the *means* of economic life as though they were the *end* of economic life.”⁴¹⁷

Hägglund's vision of democratic socialism calls for the abolition of this contradiction through “the *revaluation of value*.”⁴¹⁸ The revaluation of value which defines this democratic socialism touches upon the *qualitative meaning* of human finitude as a social project of managing the finite time of *this life* in a manner most adequate to human needs, capacities, and activities. For Hägglund, only the kinds of creatures who contend freely with their finitude can

⁴¹⁷ Hägglund, *This Life*, 257.

⁴¹⁸ Hägglund, *This Life*, 259.

make collective decisions about the measure of wealth itself, which is not reducible to the capitalist form of abstract valuation. This defines socialism not only as a material transformation, but also as a ‘spiritual’ one insofar as it concerns the very *form of self-relation* which defines the specifically human form of living freely. According to Hägglund, democratic socialism “makes it possible for us to *own* the question of what is worth doing with our live—what we value individually as well as collectively—as an irreducible question of our lives.”⁴¹⁹ The normative principles of democratic socialism, conceived as a society of mutual recognition, make it possible to recognize ourselves both individually and collectively in self-legislated values which lie beyond the wasteful and destructive measure of wealth under capital—namely, abstract wealth as value.

Indeed, if capital can indeed be described, in Hegelian terms, as a false or ‘spurious infinity’, as a *historical logic* whose overarching qualitative telos is purely quantitative and in which qualitative considerations are obliterated, with the consequence that it must everywhere contravene the finitude of social life and the natural conditions of human existence; if capital is a system of domination and alienation wherein our “collective spiritual cause” becomes narrowed so as to conform to the dictates of runaway economic growth, profit, and accumulation; if this is the case, then a socialist alternative ought to rearticulate the prevailing regime of time and the valuation of social priorities and activities in such a way as to concretely forward the “spiritual cause” of mutual recognition, that is, “democratic socialism.”⁴²⁰ But the principal goal here, it is worth noting, remains socially available free time, the time belonging to us as *spiritual* rather than as merely *natural* beings.

⁴¹⁹ Hägglund, *This Life*, 386.

⁴²⁰ Hägglund, *This Life*, 385.

The Circularity of Spiritual Self-Legislation

Curious, then, that Hägglund should interpret the category of species-being in Marx as evidencing the rejection of a given nature or essence.⁴²¹ While it is true that Marx rejects mystifying conceptions such as we find, for instance, in claims about human nature as essentially competitive, antagonistic, and self-interested, he does not wholly reject the material and social basis of human history in the open-ended but not entirely contingent process of practical self-mediation embedded in nature. Hägglund's account, however, expresses some reservations regarding Marx's formulation of the human metabolism with nature as a 'Nature-imposed condition of human existence' inasmuch as it appears to imply an "anthropological" and biological conception of the transhistorical conditions of socioeconomic life.⁴²² Without delving into the issue as to whether biological determinations and drives have some bearing on how we approach social problems (and how could they not?), there is little in Hägglund's account that would justify a rejection of an anthropological, even socio-ontological, account of the ground of historical critique stressing universally shared, albeit unequally and particularly lived, social and material premises.

Thus, while he stresses the problem of *historical intelligibility* in order to challenge a naïve naturalism content to appeal to an unmediated immediacy for rendering its critical claims intelligible, the reader is forced to ask: Must we opt for an account which *elides* the problem of natural determination, which sees, in a narrowly Kantian manner, freedom exclusively in terms of its stipulated *distance* from nature, rather than, say, in and through the elaboration of social relations adequate to the kinds of creatures that we are both naturally and historically? For Hägglund, however, the realm of normativity and spiritual "intelligibility," which somehow

⁴²¹ Hägglund, *This Life*, 213.

⁴²² Hägglund, *This Life*, 218.

becomes “explicit” in modern life, appears to hover above nature. The realm of collectively legislated norms relates to its natural and material presuppositions in an external and seemingly contingent manner.

With animals we share “natural freedom,” a freedom pertaining to “ends that cannot be called into question by the agent itself,” whereas *spiritual freedom* presumes the capacity to act in accordance with imperatives of our own choosing, including contesting those imperatives which become antithetical to our freedom. Both non-human animals and human animals are subject to the natural norms of their species, then, but it is only human beings, on the basis of freedom as a self-constituting historical achievement, for whom being subjected to norms can become a determinate problem.⁴²³ Freedom, in this account, is posited equally as that *indeterminacy* intrinsic to participating in collective norms; in order that such norms be sustained, they require active involvement and participation (and possible non-compliance in cases where norms become problematized). “[W]hat we do and who we take ourselves to be,” Hägglund writes, “is inseparable from a historical-normative framework that must be upheld by us and may be transformed by us.”⁴²⁴ Thus, Marx (and much Marxist theory heretofore) misses the dimension of “the conditions of intelligibility for spiritual life,” for this would have required recognizing all forms of “spiritual life must be finite, embodied, and social—not because of imposed biological or anthropological conditions but because life is intelligible as spiritual life only in terms of an economy of time.”⁴²⁵ It is the self-consciousness of life as finite, therefore, that makes life meaningfully finite. It is not that human social life is circumscribed by unchosen—necessary—material and social conditions which become meaningful in light of historical

⁴²³ Hägglund, *This Life*, 175-76.

⁴²⁴ Hägglund, *This Life*, 177.

⁴²⁵ Hägglund, *This Life*, 218.

predicaments and emancipatory struggles, but that self-legislated normativity allows us to choose what predicaments we see as worth taking seriously because we are already immersed in a “modern” normative universe where such predicaments can become intelligible at all.

In other words, here we abandon historical materialism and embrace a kind of idealism. For, again, the claim here is that the realm of spirit—of collectively legislated norms—is finite not because it is grounded in the materialist recognition of certain *necessarily finite material determinations*—labor and nature. Rather, these norms become finite only in light of what we agree to do or not do with our finite time. Socialism, in this view, seems to be a question of “meaning” alone. It is necessary to insist, however, that what we do with our time is not entirely a matter of mere self-legislating agreement or disagreement. In Hägglund’s idealist conception of spiritual life, however, *necessity is spiritualized all the way down*, to the extent that socialism is equated not with the necessity of revolutionizing the relations of production, for example, but with institution of that “free time” which makes us spiritual *which is irreducible to material necessity*. It is not the class struggle, the struggle of social labor, for socially conscious control over those necessary conditions which constitute the unchosen material premises of freedom, but “spiritual freedom” and free time itself that emerge as the immediate practical task of “democratic socialism.”⁴²⁶

Hence, the democratic socialism sketched by Hägglund tends at times to resemble more of an anxiety-ridden existential project, concerned as it is with the “spiritual” determination of time, than with socialism as it has been understood by revolutionary Marxist theory, namely, *as a conscious struggle over necessity, a struggle to transcend the antagonistic class-determinations of the realm of necessity which is the precondition of a new communal synthesis of freedom and*

⁴²⁶ For different but not unrelated reasons, I agree with Jodi Dean, “Socialism For Liberals,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 15, 2020, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/socialism-for-liberals/>.

necessity. Furthermore, a critique that bases itself on the institution of free time makes unwarranted assumptions about whether the realm of necessity in its *capitalist form*, i.e., in the form of an exploitative and extractive labor process mediated by the valorization process of capital, is appropriable in such a way as to give rise to the possibility of free time in an unproblematic manner. Questions pertaining to the immediate vicissitudes of socialist transition—the humanization of the labor process (which is, at the same time, the humanization and creation of an ecologically rational, sustainable metabolism with nature), the creation of communal forms of consumption and distribution, and the transcendence of entrenched patterns of global inequality and distorted development, the development of sustainable technologies—seem to fall out of view here.

And this, I would argue, is not unrelated to the problematic opposition between nature and history that persists in Hägglund’s argument. For Hägglund, we are natural like other organic beings, yet the distinctive nature of spiritual freedom seems to be that it is untethered from natural determination. As I mentioned earlier, in spite of the philosophical sensitivity with which he treats the problem of historicity and finitude in Hegel and Marx, his reading suffers from an uncritical reliance on Pippin’s post-Kantian deflationary reading of Hegel, which goes on to affect his reading of both Marx and socialism. If only for this reason, it is worth turning briefly to the main thesis underlying Pippin’s reading of Hegel. Pippin, like Hägglund, does not go so far as to deny the problem of nature (both inner and outer) in Hegel’s practical philosophy, but he does maintain that, insofar as the problem of spirit goes, any authority *can for us only be the result the self-legislating and self-instituted form of normativity distinctive of modernity*. “The concept gives itself, over time, as a result of a kind of self-education,” Pippin writes, “its own

actuality.”⁴²⁷ The concept is a historical achievement whose actuality is *entirely* a matter of self-given or self-instituted norms. Or take another of Pippin’s assertions concerning the transcendental affinity between Kant and Hegel: “We alone can be responsible for the norms that direct our lives, and so the determination either to constrain or to elect to satisfy those urges.”⁴²⁸ In other words, as in Kant, nature—inner and outer—is for Hegel altogether extraneous when articulating the collective norms and mediations that ought to direct our lives. The key difference between Kant, transcendental idealist, and Hegel, historicist dialectician, is that the Hegel proceeds to historicize and index to modern institutions the normative commitment to self-legislation which Kant had restricted so as to mean the rational subject’s ability to conform to the lawful and unconditional dictates of human reason.

But let us take note of the fact that the critical question here is not *whether* “spirit” is self-mediating. Rather, at stake is *what kind of understanding of the basis of this self-mediation we adopt*: namely, a spiritual freedom abstracted from natural determination or a dialectical perspective which grasps the unity of nature and history upon which a critique of their pathological disunity and alienation becomes possible. Hegel’s practical philosophy of freedom, in Pippin’s view, however, pertains solely to the problem of normative justification, eschewing any substantive foundations which find their basis in natural determinations which always assume a historically specific mode of expression. This, it bears repeating, explains why Pippin readily sees Hegel’s idealism as identical in its basic premises to Kant’s: there is a realm of nature, coterminous with causal necessity, and a realm of freedom in which questions of normative self-determination alone gain philosophical relevance.⁴²⁹ Freedom must, therefore, be

⁴²⁷ Robert Pippin, “Hegel’s Practical Philosophy: The Realization of Freedom,” *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, ed. Karl Ameriks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 180-199, 191.

⁴²⁸ Robert Pippin, “Hegel’s Practical Philosophy,” 192.

⁴²⁹ Pippin, “Hegel’s Practical Philosophy,” 180.

intelligible in exclusively *non-empirical and immaterial terms*, that is, as a quasi-transcendental capacity for grasping those forms of legality and reason-giving which bind us with the force of conceptual necessity.⁴³⁰ Modern freedom as self-determination occurs *in opposition to and away from* natural and ontological determinations.⁴³¹ Freedom here means the realm of intersubjectively being bound to provide reasons on the basis of which we ought to act, whereas natural necessity, as Kant would put it, is a sphere in which freedom cannot even rise to the level of an intelligible problem, since what rules there is *causal* and hence cannot be free. The transcendental split between form and content, concept and material reality, is retained here; mediation between the two, let alone the possibility of their free reconciliation, cannot gain traction.

So, for example, in Pippin the emergence of the need for recognition has no basis in the immanent specificity of human life-activity, since it is “we must institute what will count as the fulfillment of such a demand.”⁴³² Concerns relevant to “spirit” or the realm of normativity, in other words, can be understood *either* in terms of *self-positing norms* or, contrarily, in terms of dogmatic appeals to nature or empirical determinations; such concerns cannot, even in a mediated manner, appeal to any “facts” about or determinations of the kinds of creatures that human beings are, with the consequence that it becomes impossible, within this framework, to identify *material determinations which are not exclusively a matter of self-positing norms and which have the force of material necessity within the critique of capitalist society*. In my view, this distinguishes an idealist conception of normativity from that which we encounter in the tradition of historical materialism, where no such dualism between nature and spirit, fact and

⁴³⁰ Pippin, “Hegel’s Practical Philosophy,” 186.

⁴³¹ See Schuringa, “Hegel on Spirited Animals,” esp. 485-95.

⁴³² Pippin, “Hegel’s Practical Philosophy,” 189.

value, proves legitimate, since freedom becomes a question concerning the *manner we relate to those material necessities which are not simply self-legislated and with which we must contend under any conceivable conditions*. The point is not to separate the two realms, but to freely reconcile them, since society is itself mediated nature and subject to its laws, not an autonomous normative development which can, as it were, leave nature behind.

As we have seen, for Hegel the dynamic unity of form and content pertains not simply to the specific institutional and normative coordinates of modernity; it circumscribes the distinctly self-mediating nature of free human activity in unity with its natural and historical conditions. As Karen Ng argues, partly against Pippin, Hegel in fact *breaks* with transcendental idealism precisely because he does not accept the legitimacy of an irreducible gap between logic and matter, concept and material world, so crucial to Kant.⁴³³ On the contrary, for Hegel, Ng writes, “the content of logic must be an actual object of thought, the thing itself (*die Sache selbst*) as thought.”⁴³⁴ Thus, the concept of freedom as the transcendental capacity for self-legislation will not be of much help to us in elaborating the kind of materialist normative foundations we need. For this requires that we unfold a material-normative, natural-historical logic that is precisely *not* external to the empirical world, but that instead grasps the dialectical and logical unity between what we are and what we ought to do, between being and spirit, in their dynamic interdependency and reciprocal determination (which also implies their non-identity and the irreducibility of nature to human activity).

Loughlin Gleeson puts the matter even more strongly. Pippin, Gleeson holds, distorts Hegel by reading into his concept of a spirit a “deontologized” and empty form of rational self-determination at odds with the neglected Hegelian notion of *concrete freedom*, understood as a

⁴³³ Karen Ng, “Hegel’s Logic of Actuality,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 63, no. 1 (2009): 139-179.

⁴³⁴ Ng, “Hegel’s Logic of Actuality,” 149.

reconciliation with our inner and outer nature—a concrete, because free, articulation of unity in difference—a conception with clear normative ramifications as far as our social and ecological relations go, as we also saw in Chapter III.⁴³⁵ Our status as sensuous beings who extend beyond and externalize ourselves through productive activity in order to satisfy our needs—an immediate fact about us—is not ontologically separable from our existence as “objective” free beings who actualize ourselves consciously in relation to nature and in relation to other human beings. The one presupposes the other. The immediate ground of sociality, then, is this very necessity of satisfying our needs that drives us to transform nature, thereby *concretizing ourselves historically and self-consciously in the process*. These two moments are materially entwined, even if they *appear*, under conditions of alienation, to be radically disjoined.

To be sure, one consequence of alienated labor is precisely that this objective historical world, which is but an expression of essential productive activity, necessarily confronts abstract individuals as a mere means with which no free mediation between particular individuals and universal sociality can be established. This remains key for understanding the critique of *abstract labor as alienated labor*. While it is often supposed that the mature Marx disavows a critique of alienation focusing on the separation of individual and social life and the disunity between particularity and universality, we should recall that, even in *Capital*, Marx describes commodities as result of “the labour of private individuals who work independently of each other.” The separation of labor from the conditions of production appears in the form of abstract, private, independent producers who relate to each other socially *only indirectly* through the exchange of commodities and money, with the result that “the social relations between their

⁴³⁵ Loughlin Gleeson, “An Evaluative Essentialist and Holistic Reading of Hegelian Concrete Freedom in Outline: *Contra Pippin*,” *Hegel-Jahrbuch* 11, no. 1 (2018): 216-225. For a similar albeit more sympathetic critique, see Robert Stern, “Freedom, Norms, and Nature in Hegel: Self-Legislation or Self-Realization,” *Hegel on Philosophy in History*, eds. Rachel Zuckert and James Kreines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017): 88-105.

private labours appear as what they are, i.e., they do not appear as direct social relations between people in their work, but rather as material [*dinglich*] relations between persons and social relations between things.”⁴³⁶

This captures the fetishized world of capital, the inversion of subject and predicate wherein human to human relations become crudely material and thoroughly instrumentalized, subordinated entirely to the social power of things, whereas the world of capital acquires a life of its own, seemingly autonomous and beyond all human intervention. The forms of social mediation here are nothing but direct, social relations between things and indirect, seemingly natural relations between people. This inversion perpetuates the appearance that these historically specific forms of social mediation—commodities, money, capital—are identical with social mediation in general, and not alienated forms in which human sociality and needs develop in an altogether one-sided manner. Essential productive activity, labor, assumes a self-contradictory form of existence, given that, within the established relations of production, it does not positively develop human social needs and activities but thwarts their potentially free, self-mediating expression.

Here it is important to insist that the philosophical anthropological concepts—species-being, labor as purposive activity, objectification—do not imply a return to an idealized natural condition, however; rather, they capture those self-developmental determinations which articulate the conscious metabolic unity between human beings and nature *qua* self-mediation. The critical identification of an indirect, unconscious form of sociality which perpetuates the fetishized power of things can be determinately opposed only by the alternative of a conscious, directly associated, and universally realizable form of sociality and productive activity.

⁴³⁶ Marx, *Capital*, 165-66.

Of course, this directly associated form of sociality should not be reduced to a merely instrumental exchange between individuals. Rather, it ought to be understood as free production in which each is affirmed insofar as their own free activity is, from the beginning, reciprocally affirmed and determined by the free activity of the other.⁴³⁷ No longer do individuals relate to each other in the form of mutual indifference and accidentally, meaning that you become the concrete embodiment—the living, affirmative end—of my own freedom and activity. Under capitalist conditions, however, this “you” is in principle fungible, since I am not interested in you as a particular other with particular needs but only as an undifferentiated proprietor of economic objects, as a personification of economic categories. It is the emancipatory normative logic described above, however, that tears apart from within, in the form of the necessity of the class struggle for a society of associated, self-directed production, the fetishism and alienation of the economic structures constitutive of capital.

Again, here it is not a matter of opposing consciousness to life, but of grasping consciousness, which is always already social, other-directed consciousness—and this remains the case even when a condition of mutual indifference prevails, as it does under the capitalist mode of production—as an internal moment of the overall material reproduction of natural-historical life itself. It is this process and its alienated distortion that must form the basis of any consistently materialist and socialist critique of capitalist society. In a recent essay, Thomas Khurana formulates this ‘dialectical naturalism’ as follows:

Marx specifies what it means to make one’s life-activity into an object of willing and consciousness by suggesting that it paradigmatically means manifesting one’s life-activity in the transformation of the external world. This way, one’s own being gains reality in objective form and can, in this form, be willed and known and

⁴³⁷ For an analysis of this notion of free activity in light of the problem of solidarity, see Henry W. Pickford, “Anthropological Solidarity in Early Marx,” *Solidarity in Open Societies*, eds. Jörg Althammer, Bernhard Neumärker, Ursula Nothelle-Wildfeuer (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2019): 133-151.

shared. A genus-being thus actualizes itself through the production of a ‘second nature’: the transformation of nature such that it becomes expressive of the human being’s genus-character.⁴³⁸

Thus, in order to be able to say that capital constitutes a contradictory and alienated form of human development, we must be able to determine the character of the productive activity which can become socially conscious of itself as alienated, and so transform both itself and its objective conditions. And this socially and materially grounded self-reflexivity lies at the basis of that vision of *labor’s self-emancipation* as the central axis, embodying the radical needs, to use Heller’s phrase, of the project of socialist freedom. As Lebowitz writes, “if the self-creation of real human beings is a product of their own activity, then people are not changed by changing circumstances *for* them.”⁴³⁹ Only the process of self-transformation constitutive of the transformation of material and social circumstances can sustain the *internal motivations of social individuals* towards ends in which they recognize themselves as substantive participants. Naturally, this self-mediating dialectic between particular individuals and their social conditions cannot be actualized under capitalist conditions, where labor by necessity is subject to the impersonal whims of market coercions and the despotic plan of capital within the production process itself.

To be sure, the self-emancipation of labor can only be accomplished by labor precisely because its own activity is self-alienated in the form of the power of capital, in the processes of alienation and expropriation by means of which labor becomes abstract individual labor, separated from direct social control over their conditions of existence. In wresting the production process from the power of capital and its personifications, therefore, labor returns to itself and

⁴³⁸ Thomas Khurana, “Genus Being: On Marx’s Dialectical Naturalism,” *Nature and Naturalism in Classical German Philosophy*, eds. Luca Corti and Johannes-Georg Schüle (New York: Routledge, 2023): 246-278, 255.

⁴³⁹ Michael A. Lebowitz, *Between Capitalism and Community* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020), 78.

begins the process of reconstituting—humanizing and socializing—its conditions of existence. That is the absolute premise of a socialist form of development in which the active participation of conscious social individuals—and this implies, too, the need to transcend the division between manual and intellectual labor, execution and social control—becomes a concretely embodied principle. Nevertheless, the primacy of this socialist principle proves largely absent in Hägglund’s notion of democratic socialism. For the fundamental premise of socialist emancipation is not the becoming explicit of the modern commitment to freedom per se, but the self-mediating form of the labor process which makes historical development, in the integrality of its positive and negative dimensions, intelligible in emancipatory terms in the first place.

In the previous section, we observed that Hägglund, following Postone, regards the contradictory nature of value as the measure of wealth under capitalism as constituting the central object of the critique of political economy. For Postone, the elaboration of a critical theory of capitalist society requires that we abandon the ontological premises of historical materialism and “Traditional Marxism.” In his view, Traditional Marxism misapprehended the categorical framework of the Marxian critique of political economy. Traditional Marxism problematically naturalized categories whose historical specific and transitory character the critique of capital sought to unmask. Value is one such category. Whereas value was understood by Marx to constitute a historically specific form of wealth grounded in abstract labor, Traditional Marxism took an affirmative stance toward value, meaning that labor was transhistorically understood as value-positing, with the mode of private property and appropriation as the only real “fetter” to be overcome. In this way, he argues, Traditional Marxism failed to develop a *critique of labor* and instead provided a critique *from the standpoint of labor*. The first corresponds to a fetishization of capitalist categories at worst and a

transcendental critique at best, the second to an immanent critique that grasps in the contradictory development of the capitalist form of wealth (value) the possibility of its immanent overcoming.⁴⁴⁰

Expressed another way, Postone contends that the critique of alienation and domination changes drastically based on whether we adopt a transhistorical conception of “labor” grounded in a philosophical anthropology or social ontology or one grounded in the specificity of “the duality of labor in capitalism.” The first form of critique leads to productivism, a reduction of socialism to mean simple redistribution, and an indeterminate conception of use value coinciding with an uncritical attitude towards capitalist industry. The second form, for which Postone opts, makes it possible to determine that the alienated form of abstract labor “does not entail the externalization of a preexisting human essence; rather, it entails the coming into being of human powers in alienated form.”⁴⁴¹ Indeed, the very centrality of labor in social life is specific to capitalist society alone, since only in capitalist society can we speak of labor as a general (or abstract) form of social mediation which assumes the form of abstract social domination and compulsion. Thus, to regard social labor as a generalizable form of social synthesis seems to commit one to conceiving of abstract labor as the expression of a “preexisting essence.”

The practical and theoretical incoherence of this argument becomes more apparent when Postone asserts that, in contrast to Traditional Marxism, his reconstruction of the critique of

⁴⁴⁰ Despite his critiques of the Frankfurt School’s pessimism, Postone’s largely fatalistic account of capital as the self-referential and “automatic” yet contradictory “Subject” of history tends to replicate the very limits of that paradigm. Thus, Postone, in terms strikingly similar to Adorno, identifies a “self-generating ‘nonidentity’ intrinsic to its [capital’s] social relations” (88). Yet, as we shall see, this “nonidentity” is, in a rather technologically determinist manner, posited as the product of capital’s internal tendencies seemingly *untethered* from the dynamics of the class struggle, since the latter, Postone argues, remains internal to the reproduction of capital and does not ever transcend it. Postone would thus have us see the class struggle as a mere affirmation of the logic of capital. The basic diagnosis internal to thesis of the “one-dimensional society” or the “administered society” in Marcuse and Adorno, respectively, remains, protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, fundamentally intact.

⁴⁴¹ Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 161-62.

political economy does not affirm the “realization of labor” as central to the organization of social life. Rather, the centrality of labor in social is itself the source of the impersonal domination constituted by the commodity-form and value as historically specific categories of social mediation; the socially mediating role of labor is therefore a negative historical condition to be abolished, not positively affirmed. “Far from entailing the *realization* of the proletariat, overcoming capitalism involves the material *abolition* of proletarian labor.”⁴⁴² The notion that socialism consists of positing “the realization of labor,” Postone holds, never moves beyond a critique of unequal distribution, because it tacitly naturalizes the historically specific capitalist form of labor, namely, abstract, proletarian labor as the substance of value. In other words, to posit labor or productive activity as a general principle of social and historical intelligibility, or even as the normative basis of historical materialism, can amount only to “a critique of the unequal distribution of wealth and power, and the lack of social recognition given to the unique significance of direct human labor as an element of production—rather than a critique of that labor and an analysis of the historical possibility that it be abolished.”⁴⁴³

Consequently, the materialist categories which make socialist freedom and emancipation intelligible are seemingly condemned to *complete immanence*; they are but internal moments of capital’s distorted dialectic, not of human historical life in general.⁴⁴⁴ The dialectics of immanence and transcendence is short-circuited. Postone occasionally concedes that labor in a “commonsensical” and “transhistorical” sense is present in all societies, only to reject that this

⁴⁴² Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 33.

⁴⁴³ Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 70.

⁴⁴⁴ On this matter, Postone is of one mind with Adorno, who in *Negative Dialectics* declared that “dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things” (11). In effect, for Postone, Marx did not materialize Hegelian dialectics, nor subject it to “anthropological” inversion, a move he attributes to Lukács; rather, Marx justified in historical terms how the idealist character of Hegel’s philosophy expresses no other truth than the “quasi-independent” movement of abstract social domination peculiar to capitalist social relations and structures. See Postone, “The Subject and Social Theory: Marx and Lukács on Hegel,” *History and Heteronomy: Critical Essays* (Tokyo: The University of Tokyo Center for Philosophy, 2009), 79.

might have any bearing whatsoever on the meaning of socialism. He sees no discrepancy between his correct descriptive claim that the alienated development of “socially general productive powers” under capitalism means that these powers can “no longer be understood as those of immediate producers,” on the one hand, and his seeming rejection of the normative force of transhistorical categories, on the other.⁴⁴⁵ For the very problem lies precisely in the fact that these historically constituted powers appear and become independent of the immediate producers and dominate them, though this is the very phenomenon that Postone sees as an anticipation of life *beyond labor*. He fails to recognize that, if labor as a transhistorical category is entirely relativized, so that its centrality is specific only to capitalist society, there is no way to transcend the alienation of the very historically developed powers he identifies *through the conscious reconstitution of the labor process in accordance with the material and social needs of the immediate producers*. Productive activity as self-mediating is *universal* only insofar as it is already *specific* to the kinds of creatures that we are as natural-historical beings. In this sense, it serves as the immanent, universal “standpoint” of critique through which the limits of existing modes of organizing social mediation can be critically evaluated.

In a review of *This Life*, Peter Hudis points to some of the limitations which Hägglund inherits from Postone’s reconstruction of Marx’s value theory. I find myself in general agreement with Hudis’s charge that Hägglund inherits some of the less than felicitous ambiguities present in Postone’s attempt to recuperate Marx’s critical theory of capitalist society.⁴⁴⁶ As Hudis notes, Hägglund does not always properly distinguish between socially

⁴⁴⁵ Postone, “Rethinking Marx’s Critical Theory,” 42.

⁴⁴⁶ Peter Hudis, “Time, Labour, and the Overcoming of Domination: Reflections on Martin Hägglund’s ‘This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom,’” *Historical Materialism* (the blog). September 7, 2021. <https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/blog/time-labour-and-overcoming-domination-reflections-martin-haggmonds-this-life-secular-faith-and>.

necessary labor time and labor time expenditure. The first corresponds to the form of abstract labor which concrete labor assumes under the rule of capital, whereas the latter refers to concrete labor as transhistorical condition of the material reproduction of human society. The contradiction between the two remains central, in my view, to the meaning of any socialist horizon, since it points to the narrowly quantitative needs of capital in opposition to qualitatively articulated the needs of social labor for a different organization of the labor process, for another form of production, consumption, and distribution. If the need of capital is to increase the productivity of labor through the oppressive imposition of socially necessary labor time, the need of the proletariat is everywhere to resist this imposition and impose its own consciously determined form of its self-organization and time allocation. The affirmation of human life and human time as ends in themselves is intrinsic not only to the normative coordinates of capitalist modernity, however, but constitutive of the peculiarity of human freedom as self-mediation as embodied in the labor process.

Conclusion

We have seen that the centrality of labor as self-mediating cooperative activity is not merely a historically contingent phenomenon. It is a fundamental premise of history grounded in the nature of self-mediating or transformative sensuous activity. In other words, labor or productive activity is alienated, exploited, and dominated in capitalist society not simply because capital compels it become essential, but because labor is already the ontological and material premise of historical and anthropological development. Productive activity or labor as sensuous, objective activity in which human life is actualized and expressed, to use Mészáros's language, constitutes a *first order mediation*, and the alienated *second order mediations* constitutive of capitalist society are but “a *historically specific* mediation of the *ontologically fundamental*”

process of human self-mediation.⁴⁴⁷ What is demanded, therefore, is a new unity of subject and object, of labor and its fundamental conditions of existence, not the altogether chimerical notion of abolishing labor or of imagining freedom as lying beyond it.

Now, Hägglund rightly ascertains a normative gap that undercuts Postone's account. This normative gap consists of not having properly accounted for "why our freedom matters."⁴⁴⁸ This indeterminate account of freedom thus ends up positing dead labor as providing the technological and emancipatory conditions for a new society.⁴⁴⁹ As we have seen, the solution proposed by Hägglund is that we must learn to value our time differently. The finite time of this life must be determined by rational collective purposes, expressing a commitment to reducing labor time where possible and allowing individuals to increasingly develop their practical identities as ends valuable in themselves. My critical concern is that this perspective seems to have no locus in the revolutionary self-emancipation of labor. Democratic socialism is, rather, grounded in the realization of modern ideals, which, under capitalism, cannot but be partially and even distortedly realized. It is true that ideals such as substantive, as opposed to merely formal, equality are of the highest importance for socialism. But without an immanent basis in the self-activity of the proletariat to achieve universal self-emancipation against capital's fetishistic and falsely universalized imperatives, socialism is bound to fall short of its ultimate aims.

For this reason, it makes little sense to speak of the immediate institution of socially available free time, "potentially" achievable by means of technological developments blocked by capitalist social relations, when the very question of the relations of production adequate to realizing that necessary endeavor is not taken to be the principal task. At this level, the vision of

⁴⁴⁷ Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, 79.

⁴⁴⁸ Hägglund, 277.

⁴⁴⁹ This shortcoming has also been pointed out by Gulli, *Labor of Fire*, 88-93.

socialism under consideration tends in fact to obscure more than it clarifies matters, for it regards “socially available free time” as the first governing principle of socialism *already made possible by capitalist development*, in complete abstraction from the more pressing problem as to a *responsible allocation of labor time towards vital social needs and the means necessary to develop such needs in a world of global underdevelopment and corresponding patterns of entrenched inequality and scarcity*. It is worth stressing here that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with the claim that technological and scientific development ought to serve the purpose of decreasing, where possible, direct labor time expenditure. The expansion of free or disposable time remains, of course, an axis of socialist transformation. But time is free or disposable only to the extent that it is consciously adopted by social individuals who determine their mode of productive cooperation purposively and internally, rather than having their social activity imposed upon them in an altogether external manner by the dictates of capital’s self-expansion.

For Häggglund, however, the expansion of the realm of freedom pertains to the quality of free time devoted largely to individual pursuits as ends in themselves, described by him as “practical identities” with corresponding institutional forms that socially recognize their intrinsic value. The realm of necessity, in contrast, is structured by “the *quantity* of labor time that is socially necessary to sustain our lives.”⁴⁵⁰ Under democratic socialism, Häggglund maintains, the two domains are not radically separate. Nevertheless, they remain distinct insofar our collective commitment to spiritual freedom compels us to strive to minimize the realm of necessity and expand the realm of freedom. But the problems already identified emerge even more clearly here. “To make an activity or an identity our own,” says Häggglund, “it cannot be imposed as a necessity.”⁴⁵¹

⁴⁵⁰ Häggglund, *This Life*, 302, 308.

⁴⁵¹ Häggglund, *This Life*, 309.

True, Hägglund does not go so far as to call for a so-called “postwork” society nor a society of blissful abundance.⁴⁵² Yet the antinomies which beset such discourses—between life and work, leisure and labor, freedom and necessity—partly persist here. In the realm of freedom, the argument goes, we lead our individual lives and pursuits, whereas in the realm of necessity, we simply live them. We can see, then, that the realm of freedom and the realm of necessity remain split off from each other, so that *free motivation* is not *endogenous* to the *necessity* of the labor process, but becomes the product of an autonomous realm of freedom as a specifically “modern” institutional commitment to which the labor process is, in the final analysis, subordinate. However, as I have argued, it is only through the free coordination of the realm of material production, which qualitatively changes its character, that the antagonistic and alienated relation between freedom and necessity can be transcended.

Moreover, Hägglund’s historicism commits him to a defense of the very idea of a state as such. Indeed, he reifies the concept of the state and conflates it with social mediation in general, obfuscating not only the Marxian critique of the state, but ignoring rich discussions within Marxist theory generally dealing critically with the problem of the state. And here his account

⁴⁵² For a paradigmatic example of the postwork position, see Kathi Weeks, *The Problem With Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). The “work ethic,” for Weeks, “is widely understood as an individual moral practice and collective ethical obligation” (11). Weeks does not deny the necessity of productive activity, or even that it can be meaningful and creative. But she aims to show that we can be creative outside of work, that human life need not be wholly identified with work. Well and good. However, in order to untether ourselves from the work ethic, we must, she contends, subject to criticism the forces that lead us to pose work as “such a potent object of desire” (12). This perspective, however, puts proverbial cart before the horse in asking why we are psychically and ideologically invested in work rather than asking the more fundamental question as to why the relation between work and life must assume an alienated form that wastes human powers and distorts human needs. It is not capitalism, after all, that is responsible for the constitutive role of productive activity in human existence. Capitalism, however, must be held responsible for distorting work into an abstract, dehumanizing activity beholden to mere survival, given its instrumentalization by capital and its personifications. The concept of a “postwork speculative horizon” is a weak substitute, therefore, for the kinds of changes required to transcend capitalism, where the need for a rational organization of the labor process to adequately meet social needs remains the *sine qua non* of socialist transformation. I remain unconvinced, in short, that we can get there through the largely voluntaristic advocacy of a “postwork” politics whose principal enabling condition is a “basic income” that will somehow give us the “time” to prioritize “life” over production. How can this be the case when productive activity, in its most essential meaning, is precisely “life-generating life”?

becomes altogether contradictory. On the one hand, he embraces the deflated historicism of Hägglund's post-Kantian reading of Hegel; self-legislation, the capacity to choose the normative commitments which mediate social life, is a product of *modern institutions of freedom* and hence constitutes a historically specific phenomenon. On the other, he defends the claim that our existence as "spiritually free beings" means that "we have always lived and will always live in a state."⁴⁵³ Marx too readily conflated the *idea of the state as such* with a *capitalist state* whose task it is to enforce the prevailing division of labor and relations of production.⁴⁵⁴

The protracted subordination of alienated political power to the needs of society in order that it no longer serves to falsely reconcile the fundamentally irreconcilable interests which are the product of class domination in socioeconomic life, however, does not mean that the state is slowly democratized and left intact. For this very process implies that the state is not a self-explanatory "normative" political concept, as misrepresented by Hägglund, but one whose historical specificity must be clarified by grasping its function and social constitution in light of the prevailing socioeconomic relations of production. The *limits* of formal political emancipation are at the heart of the Marxian critique of bourgeois society. Human freedom cannot be adequately actualized within the actuality capitalist state not only because the capitalist state offers an illusory reconciliation of what cannot be reconciled, i.e., class domination, but because it *presupposes and enforces material inequality at the level of the material conditions of social life*. But lest this should be seen as forwarding a claim about the epiphenomenal or merely superstructural character of engaging in political struggle within state institutions, a few words of clarification. My contention is not that we ought to embrace a voluntarist rejection of political

⁴⁵³ Hägglund, *This Life*, 267.

⁴⁵⁴ Hägglund, *This Life*, 267. Here we can perhaps assume the inclusion of those socialists and communists who argued that the capitalist state, together with its socioeconomic conditions of existence, must be transcended and entirely replaced with forms of social association which make them *unnecessary*.

struggle. Rather, my position is more modest, namely, that it is that only within a social ontology that can contend with the material process of production as a *natural condition* of human social life through which our historical nature unfolds that we can grasp the limits of a narrow focus on changing political institutions, including struggles over the role of the state and concerns about formal equality and freedom.⁴⁵⁵

For Hägglund, it would appear that capitalism itself, paradoxically enough, equips the project of socialism not with serious social, material, and normative problems with which it must contend, but with a real—if distortedly realized—solution, if only we would value time and the idea of a state differently.

⁴⁵⁵ It is not surprising, therefore, that the well-known invectives of post-Marxism against “economic determinism” and “orthodox essentialism” set as their principal aim the displacement of the materialist view as to the primacy of material production in socioeconomic life, establishing in turn the primacy of political “hegemony” and “radical democracy.” No longer is labor the subject of socialist transformation. Everyone is equally near and equally distant from the center of creating a socialist “collective will,” since completely detached from any material basis. For an example of this position, see Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and the Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd Ed (London: Verso, 2001): 75-88.

VI. CONCLUSION

Let me begin by saying that I do not believe it a mere coincidence that, in a time saturated with the accumulation of catastrophes—a process coterminous with the irrational logic of capital—we should encounter a renewed interest not only in Marx’s critique of political economy, but in the distinct conception of human beings and human history which constitutes the self-mediating, immanent ground of this critique’s normative and historical intelligibility. The 2007 financial crisis, an episode in the overall structural crisis of capital, not only occasioned a return to the critique of political economy, but also to the substantive *philosophical* claims underlying this critique.⁴⁵⁶ Skepticism and “irrealism,” to use Bhaskar’s term, as to the need for materialist normative foundations, those fundamental “premises” of history, is no longer the only game in town. The inadequacy of theories which unduly rejected universalism (and along with it any notion of a *universally oriented alternative to the rule of capital*), naturalism, and materialism has become increasingly apparent in their incapacity to confront the structural crisis of capital.⁴⁵⁷

My dissertation sought to show that the critique of capitalist conditions in Marx’s thought not only contains a philosophical anthropology, one situated within a broader ontology, but that it remains crucial for envisioning a *positive alternative* to the fetishistically quantitative logic of

⁴⁵⁶ Needless to say, this did not always result in an explicit return to Marxist critical analysis. Yet today, even those who once argued in favor of that old dream of a reformed, fairer capitalism have made common cause with the need for some kind of “socialism.” See, for instance, Thomas Piketty, *Time for Socialism: Dispatches from a World on Fire, 2016-2021* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

⁴⁵⁷ The term “irrealism” appears in Bhaskar, *Dialectic*, 191-216. Such irrealism is beset by the problem of presupposing what needs to be explained, since it purports to disavow any ontological claims while also claiming that phenomena can be exclusively explained (if they can be made intelligible at all) “in terms of statements about our knowledge of being” (192). This has the effect of masking “the generation of an implicit ontology—in the dominant modern form, a Humean one of atomistic events and closed systems” (192). In the context of normative claims, this “is reflected in a profound *dualism* between embodiment and agency such that inevitably irrealist philosophies are unable to sustain a concept of *intentional embodied causally efficacious agency*...informed with real, and potentially with good, reasons for action” (258). Since I wholly agree, I will let Bhaskar have the last word here.

capital, since its primary concern is not merely to provide a taxonomical description of human properties, but to give an account of those *qualitative determinations* or *conditions* of human existence which prove integral in *critically assessing* whether a form of organizing social life is conducive to freedom as *self-mediation*, or, in what amounts to the same, to freedom as that open-ended process of changing material and historical circumstances so that they no longer fall confront human beings as sources of alienation, division, dehumanization and the destruction of the natural conditions which ought to be considered as real limits which this mode of production is compelled to organize in a fundamentally irrational, and ultimately *structurally irresponsible*, manner. To tie these related themes together without sacrificing coherence, drawing freely on a broad range of past and present Marxist theory and scholarship as well as other philosophical traditions, represents the cardinal striving of this project.

In this sense, the arguments developed here have underscored the inseparability of Marx's historically determinate critique of political economy from his distinctive conception of human beings as self-mediating beings of nature, a conception which can be *partly* traced to the materialist metacritique of Hegelian philosophy. I should like to stress *partly* here, since Marx's materialist metacritique of Hegelian idealism is surely not the whole story. Indeed, my own reconstruction primarily considers the pertinence of the distinct notion of activity in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and Hegel's reflections on aesthetics. Hence, it tends to exclude other essential works—for instance, *The Science of Logic* and *The Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, not to mention Hegel's *Jena Writings*, in which questions relevant to this project, especially concerning the relation between labor and consciousness, begin to emerge.

All the same, it seems to me that the emphasis on the problem of aesthetics is not unwarranted given the problems at stake, not least the free relation between life and self-

consciousness which both Hegel and Marx see not only as characteristic of aesthetic production, but of human activity more broadly. In future research, therefore, I would like to further investigate this affinity between Marx and Hegel concerning the aesthetic dimension as it bears on the problem of social freedom.⁴⁵⁸ What is the relation between the aesthetic dimension and the self-emancipation of social labor—that process in which the transcendence of the alienated separation between productive activity and aesthetic enjoyment becomes a reality? In other words, what does the aesthetic dimension prefigure about the realization of social freedom? How might this bear, for example, on matters as important to socialist conceptions of freedom as the transcendence of the capitalist division of labor, manifest in the systematic dissociation between social labor and its alienated conditions of existence, execution and control, activity and consciousness?

For we saw that something crucial emerges in the aesthetic dimension. It will be recalled that, for Hegel, the aesthetic dimension constitutes a fundamental expression of the free activity of “spirit.” This is so because the aesthetic dimension not only expresses, in the form of sensuous beauty that *appears in the world*, the disunity of spirit and nature and the violence done to nature by spirit and to *itself* through those forms of rationality which, in their abstraction from concrete human existence and nature, Hegel critically identifies as forms of reified “positivity”; at another level, the aesthetic dimension also expresses the reciprocal determination of nature and history, since the critical claim pertaining to their *disunity*, which the aesthetic dimension makes visible, rests on an initial identity, on the self-mediating or self-actualizing unity of subject and object which is the very life of spirit in all its forms. This dialectic makes clear that the intimation of

⁴⁵⁸ The problem has been treated by Sean Sayers, *Marx and Alienation: Essays on Hegelian Themes* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). John Bellamy Foster also traces the essential role of the aesthetic dimension in socialist and ecosocialist critique within what he calls “the second foundation of Marxism,” especially in the work of William Morris and Christopher Caudwell, in *The Return of Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020), esp. 417-56.

social freedom distinctive of the aesthetic dimension originates in the *immanent distance* it establishes between nature and history, between sensuous life and the variety of forms this life takes on in the course of its concrete unfolding.

In other words, we catch a glimpse, however partial, of substantive freedom in the aesthetic dimension precisely because it instances an objective manifestation of the human capacity for essential self-expression, for recognizing ourselves, and freely, in our own activities as *ends in themselves*. That we might *not recognize* ourselves in our current socioeconomic, political, and cultural institutions, however, that we might be alienated in this way and seek to transform such conditions—such a determination is made possible by the self-distancing nature of human social activity, an immanent rationality defined by the capacity to grasp itself and its concrete forms of actualization as its own, even when they appear not to be. To be more precise, it is the capacity not to abandon conditions of sensuousness and finitude altogether, but to stand in a particular relation to it, a relation of immanent distancing, that defines the free movement of human social activity. Following Karen Ng, for Hegel a free movement between life and consciousness inheres in a distinct form of activity which has itself for an object and unfolds “in the dynamic and negative movement of subject and object.”⁴⁵⁹

Nevertheless, we should not overstate the similarities. Marx indeed “breaks” with Hegel’s idealism, though not in the sense of that now largely exhausted trope of an epistemological break. For Hegel, the actuality of spirit which makes an appearance in art (and, to an even higher degree, in philosophical inquiry) is an actuality which has genuine being *only* in and for itself, that is, by raising itself above the accidental flux of the contingent existence

⁴⁵⁹ Ng, “Ideology Critique,” 396.

constitutive of what he identifies as “this bad, transitory world.”⁴⁶⁰ For Marx, in contrast, the realization of genuine social freedom does not mean rising above or transcending the factual falsity of “this bad, transitory world” by philosophical or aesthetic contemplation (or reconciliation) alone. Actualizing social freedom as the nature of human beings necessitates practically revolutionizing existing social conditions in which their historical nature develops in a distorted form, concretely intervening so that human consciousness need not regard the world as one from which it must escape, so that human beings can reconstitute and return to themselves as active, conscious social individuals who rationally regulate their social metabolism and appropriate the conditions of their existence in accordance with their own vital needs and the demands of ecological sustainability. This is not merely a difference in political orientation; it also constitutes a philosophical difference insofar as Marx locates the highest realization of the “ideal” at the level of *directly communal* social relations between human beings and not in the philosophical transcendence of a given situation which is presumed to be false because it does not rise to the level of the idea’s universality.

Indeed, in Marx’s early writings, which we considered in Chapters II and III, we discovered that the “ideal” is not external to the process of social mediation. The “ideal relationship” between the objects we produce for each other is itself grounded in human need, in that inescapable extension of human productive activity toward others, which is always *implicit*

⁴⁶⁰ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 9. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel explains that philosophy only emerges when immediate necessity is suspended; “the purely finite interests of men must have been worked off” (110). We saw earlier that this proclamation is not as uncomplicated as it might first appear. Nevertheless, it remains the case that, for Hegel, in order to rise to the level of universality, to touch upon the so-called “dignity of man,” it is necessary to “rise to the thought of what he is” (111). G. W. F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. T. M. Knox and A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987). Even the most revisionist reading would be hard-pressed to demonstrate that, for all his talk concerning the impossibility of anyone leaping beyond their historical age—“No one can escape from the substance of his time,” Hegel adduces, “any more than he can jump out of his skin”—Hegel does not *ultimately* allot primacy to philosophical contemplation as the highest human vocation. By contrast, Marx maintains that universality is manifest essentially in the *immediacy of sensuous socio-practical activity*.

or *immanent* in social life, even if it assumes a form that proves antithetical to human needs and ends, as well as the mutual complementarity at the level of social activity such needs and ends presuppose. That is why, as Ernst Bloch explains, “the ideal looks *entirely different* when it is not immediately introduced into history from above, when rather it is concretely and utopianly extracted from its dialectical mediations.”⁴⁶¹ Thus, the appearance of social mediation in the form of the impenetrable power of things is a result of the alienated relations between human beings, of non-reciprocal, exploitative forms of production and exchange, which Marx sees as crystalized in the overriding, socially representative power of commodities and money. Where individuals experience the social character of their productive activity as powerlessness, as a negative constraint which confronts them as a mere means to their individual ends—subordinated as they are to a division of labor and market coercions beyond their control—rather than as a positive condition of their “ideal” need for free self-actualization, there, Marx argues, a condition of alienation prevails. There, too, the struggle for socialist freedom begins and persists.

For historical materialism, it is in the nature of the species not only to produce for each other, but to *potentially* produce for each other in such a way that individuals reciprocally contribute to positive development of each and all, and this can only occur in a “human” manner when it occurs *directly* and in response to the concrete needs of others. In other words, the genuine *end of production is the reciprocal satisfaction of human needs and powers, human self-actualization*. Our universal interdependency, a socio-ontological determination which becomes *abstractly universal* within the capitalist mode of production, is a condition from which we cannot, in voluntaristic manner, opt out; it has the character of “necessity” which is neither “good” nor “bad” by nature, a condition that depends in turn on the social and natural conditions

⁴⁶¹ Bloch, *Natural Law and Human Dignity*, 197.

of its actualization. Needs and powers, and their relationship to the natural world, cannot have a properly free, appropriately “human” form, however, where their prevailing modes of satisfaction occur *indirectly* through the preponderance of the socially constituted power of things, abstract possession and antagonistic competition, production and consumption compelled by the imperative to accumulate, and a division of labor which systematically dissociates social labor from substantive control over the labor process.

Of course, this does not mean that these inversions are not “human” in the sense that they are not results of determinate forms of social mediation. Rather, they are contradictory, alienated forms of social mediation and they can be subjected to critical scrutiny precisely because they constitute, in the final analysis, a distorted, contradictory forms of the essential nature of human self-mediation, understood as the ongoing process of social actualization or objectification.⁴⁶² Marx, in the *Paris Manuscripts*, describes the conscious activity constitutive of our species-being as “life-engendering life,” in other words, as self-mediating, free activity conditioned by an ensemble of definite material premises.⁴⁶³ Is it not true that the capitalist mode of production also constitutes an expression of human life engendering itself in a peculiarly distorted form and that to defetishize this state of affairs requires that we not collapse self-mediation in general with its prevailing, dehumanized instantiation?

The practical necessity here, to be sure, requires the elaboration of a communal way of *living together* which is already implicit in in a universally shared but antagonistically constituted historical condition. And here it might very well be tempting to object that we need

⁴⁶² On this point, consider the powerful account offered by Alfred Schmidt, *History and Structure: An Essay on Hegelian-Marxist and Structuralist Theories of History*, trans. Jeffrey Herf (Cambridge: The MIT Press 1981), 61.

⁴⁶³ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 3. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 275.

revolutionary struggle, not normative musings about the nature of human freedom, and that, in turning to the latter, we pass over, or even moralize away, the antagonisms which prevail in reality: a world divided by imperialism, neocolonialism, global inequality and exploitation structured not only according to class, but also race and gender as determinants of the class relation itself. But how else can we meaningfully frame a commitment, say, to the global solidarity that must form the basis for any socialist alternative if not in enduring commitments to practically enabling the freedom of all? Such commitments always emerge from *particular* social and political struggles, but they extend into *universal human demands*. The form is particular, but the content is universal. Solidarity, to name one such commitment, is not merely a prudential consideration, since it assumes that we can, from a human standpoint, experience the emancipatory struggles of others as bound to the materiality and fate of our own, even as we acknowledge their particularity.

In other words, there seems to me no compelling reason to oppose revolutionary struggle to universally binding normative or humanist considerations. Still, it must be acknowledged, as Frantz Fanon remarked in the specific context of neocolonial domination, that “The natives’ challenge to the colonial world...is not a treatise on the universal.”⁴⁶⁴ Some might be inclined to see this as a rejection of the “trap” of universalism and the racial order upon which the latter, seemingly intrinsically, depends.⁴⁶⁵ Yet this proclamation of Fanon’s is not a renunciation of

⁴⁶⁴ Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 41.

⁴⁶⁵ See, for instance, Rocío Zambrana, “Hegelian History Interrupted,” *Crisis & Critique* 8, no. 2 (2021): 410-431, 429. Fanon, according to this view, saw decolonization as a project of “complete disorder,” implying a rejection of the trap the humanism often attributed to him. This anti-humanist tendency is also a typical misrepresentation of Fanon’s views among Afropessimism. See Frank B. Wilderson III, “The Prison Slave as Hegemony’s (Silent) Scandal.” *Social Justice* 30, no. 2 (2003): 18-27. According to this view, “Black positionalities” *as such* can never find solidarity with others, given that anti-Blackness is metaphysically ensconced in the very fabric of “civil society” in such a way that “hegemonic interventions” (in the Gramscian sense) prove altogether illusory and serve only to reproduce an essentially anti-Black world. It is not surprising, therefore, that the vision of liberation here takes the form of an altogether indeterminate, ahistorical postulate of *absolute negation* excluding any substantive emancipatory vision of the future. It must embrace rather than transcend the social death and dehumanization that is

universalism or humanism *tout court*. For this assertion only acquires meaning in light of Fanon's arguments in *The Wretched of the Earth* as a whole, in which he propounds that a "new humanism"—a substantive humanism grounded in socialist development, in opposition to the formalistic and apologetic humanism of bourgeois society—takes shape in the very necessity of the struggle for decolonization, specifically in the creation of a national culture, and not merely as an ideological exhortation. Fanon is very clear about this matter, though today we might be tempted, in the face of what was once referred to as the "postsocialist condition," a period of capitalist restoration and a "skeptical mood or structure of feeling that marks the post-1989 state of the Left," to regard Fanon as rejecting revolutionary humanism and universalism.⁴⁶⁶ Thus, "the building of a nation is of necessity accompanied by the discovery and encouragement of universalizing values," since only in this way can *internationalism* and a *universally willed freedom embodied in the struggle itself* become the striven for objective. And though antihumanist perspectives draw on Fanon to critique the Marxist emphasis on production and universal humanism, Fanon, like other socialist anti-colonial revolutionaries, clearly recognized that "If conditions of work are not modified, centuries will be needed to humanize this world which has been forced down to animal level by imperial powers."⁴⁶⁷ Concrete human needs

the legacy of chattel slavery. And this also explains why Wilderson belabors the point that "Black positionalilty" is entirely incommensurable in terms of "civil society's junior partners (i.e., workers, white women, and immigrants)" (20). Socialism is, of course, equally off the table, as it can only aid the cunning of the Enlightenment discourse of "productivity," progress, and reproduce that illusion of "historical self-awareness" (22).

⁴⁶⁶ Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 1.

⁴⁶⁷ Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 100. For superb treatment of Fanon's universalism, see Ato-Sekyi Otu *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). For other notable analyses, see Christopher J. Lee, *Frantz Fanon: Toward a Revolutionary Humanism* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 2015); Ng, "Humanism: A Defense"; Magali Bessone, "Fanon's Critical Humanism: Understanding Humanity Through its 'Misfires'," *European Journal of Philosophy* 30, no. 4 (2022): 1583-1590; Deepa Jani, "Frantz Fanon: Postcoloniality and New Humanism," *The Routledge Companion to Humanism and Literature*, ed. Michael Bryson (London: Routledge, 2022): 31-49.

cannot be ignored. The socialization of the labor process, so that it reflects the needs and consciously pursued goals of social labor itself, is the *sine qua non* of revolutionary socialism.

At the heart of Fanon's revolutionary vision, in short, lies that inner necessity of self-emancipation, a notion whose importance I have sought to foreground throughout. This conception, notably, also informs Che's arguments as to the importance of substantive participation in the revolutionary process not only as a value commitment, but as the living substance socialist self-emancipation.⁴⁶⁸ Socialist freedom, as we saw in Chapter IV, can only be meaningful for those who see themselves *internally reflected* in the unfolding of the objective changes—socioeconomic, cultural, political, pedagogical. And this becomes concretely embodied in the reciprocal commitment to human freedom immanent to the process as a whole. Our case, in short, is not merely a theoretical one.

In the final two chapters, my aim was twofold. First, the reader will have noticed that I criticized Marxist theorizing whose impatience towards “moralism” and “transcendental critique” leads to a hasty rejection of normative considerations as impediments to a historically determinate critique of political economy and, further, to grasping the specific vicissitudes of the class struggle. Though I could not provide but a sketch, I mentioned that these contentions are not by any means new; they characterize real tensions and conflicts in the history of socialist and communist struggle (whether reformist or revolutionary). It should be clear from my arguments, however, that I find this dualism unappealing and unnecessary, both on a philosophical and a political level. My view on this matter can be stated rather simply: We lose sight of the ultimate aims of the substantive content *universal human emancipation*, the guiding thread of socialist freedom and struggle, if we simply abandon the task of clarifying our philosophical and

⁴⁶⁸ See footnote 267.

normative commitments, including but not limited to our visions of substantive freedom, self-determination, and non-alienated, because ecologically sustainable, relations to the natural world. What is more, such perspectives refuse out of court that universal values can be derived from particular struggles that challenge the dominant, falsely naturalized universality of capitalist domination, whereas I would argue we need a vision that more adequately contends with the dialectical reciprocity between the particular and the universal.

True, it will not suffice to elaborate the “correct” values—and one must wonder here whether anyone really makes this claim—but revolutionary transformation *requires subjective motivation*, and our view is that such motivation cannot be an entirely arbitrary or contingent matter. Nor should we simply assume that normative commitments are merely “instrumental,” that is, that they pertain only to achieving whatever prudential objectives we set for ourselves. Indeed, a particular harm can only be made intelligible against the background of universal claims about the needs, capacities, and the necessary conditions or material premises of human historical life. Emancipatory struggles against, for example, contemporary forms of privatization and dispossession, presuppose the need for a different relation to the land and between human beings. First and foremost, such struggles necessarily imply that economic imperatives that deprive people of environmental security and control over their inorganic can be judged as irrational insofar as they subordinate *qualitative social questions about how we want to live* to the particularistic interests of the beneficiaries of the expropriative and alienated imperatives of capitalist social relations. The fact that such relations are *systemic*, structurally entrenched, and determined by abstract compulsions to which even capital’s beneficiaries are subject does not obviate the critical point that *particularistic and irrational interests* rule over social life and make a mockery of a potentially realizable universal freedom.

I have also argued that freedom should be understood not merely as the human capacity to produce the historical and social conditions of their existence, but also—and this is only another aspect of the same process—as that capacity to consciously recognize and practically apprehend themselves in the collective ends embodied in the mediations that define their mode of social being. The contributions of Heller, Márkus, and Mészáros, I believe, are united in tracing the necessary failure of capitalist forms of mediation to concretely actualize the need for universal human freedom, the need for the self-development of genuinely social individuals whose conditions no longer confront them as reified necessity, but as positive, because directly determined, conditions of their need for self-actualizing freedom. Radical needs, the human essence, and self-mediation constitute critical philosophical anthropological and ontological determinations conceptually expressed.

Yet their critical force does not derive from an appeal to an unchanging human nature. It is true that they posit certain determinations of historical life without which the latter cannot be comprehended in properly materialist terms. There is a world of difference between a position that takes the normative notions of the prevailing social order at face value and seeks only to realize them and a materialist critique that takes aim at the *substantive material conditions of social life*—the form of appropriating the products of labor, the modality of control over the labor process, and the mediations which validate, satisfy, and develop human needs and powers. These are the first order mediations, to speak with Mészáros, without which a critique of capital cannot proceed. For it is the task of socialist emancipation to reconstitute our social and natural life on the basis of mediations exhibiting a new rationality. The elaboration of this new rationality makes requisite modes of valuation, incentivization, and commitments that can only be assumed internally—freely—by the protagonists of socialist transformation—the associated

producers—and thus prove inimical to the reified dispositions required by everyday life under the rule of capital. It will not suffice, therefore, to stress that we revalue our normative commitments in light of our consciousness of our temporal finitude. We are equally corporeal, material, spatially embodied beings. There is no realm of “spiritual freedom” which floats above our corporeal determinations and in which the highest form of human freedom—activities as ends in themselves—blossoms. Rather, a communal mode of production must strive sublimate the very antithesis which obtains between labor and enjoyment, necessity and freedom, activity and consciousness, life and art, science and life. This vision, in my view, persists as a real possibility, a necessary albeit unfinished “concrete utopia,” to use Ernst Bloch’s formulation.⁴⁶⁹ Socialism and communism must also take on the historical task of elaborating a new moral imagination, uniting the present with an ideality striving to be realized, avowing at every turn that the class struggle, the struggle for socialism, as E. P. Thompson writes, cannot but “find its own guarantees only by *reason* and through an open *choice of values*.”⁴⁷⁰

I wish to conclude this dissertation by emphasizing that we never theorize from an indeterminate standpoint. For this reason, it has become fashionable to argue that to make universal claims—philosophical anthropological, ontological, or otherwise—is not only theoretically undesirable but also politically pernicious, since it attempts to imperialistically impose models and concepts of development and freedom on dominated peoples, erasing cultural specificities through an appeal to ostensibly universal concepts which amount to no more than parochial expressions of US and European domination and hegemony. Such views declare that cultural particularity alone counts, since humanism and universalism are merely “a set of discourses enunciated by agents who identify themselves as humans and who project their self-

⁴⁶⁹ Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 223.

⁴⁷⁰ E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory & Other Essays* (London: Merlin Press, 1978), 171.

fashioning ontology to a global scale.”⁴⁷¹ Thus we are told, for example, that socialism, liberalism, and conservatism are all part of the same totalizing discourse of “Modernity” (it is no longer capitalism and its relations of production that constitute the central object of critique, as it once was for many Third World socialist revolutionaries, but an indeterminate, largely idealized “Western logic”). No longer, therefore, is a universal alternative to capital imaginable. Indeed, this view maintains that universality is *intrinsically* a category of European and North-Atlantic domination. The chimerical effort to destroy the possibility of universal claims by arbitrarily forcing them to coincide with their (wrongly) stipulated provenance subverts the very possibility of a universal alternative, allowing these theorists to make the ultimately conservative pronouncement, in line with that old wisdom that there is no alternative (TINA): “Neither Capitalism Nor Communism, But Decolonization.”⁴⁷²

No doubt, we never “enunciate” critical claims from an outsider’s perspective. To be immanent to one’s context means one always stands within that context. On the other hand, to remain within that total context without a critical perspective as to its necessary transcendence—and, in my view, the totality which makes *our* context intelligible is capitalism—is to obfuscate matters, for it concedes, in the face of the prevailing socioeconomic order, that universal socialist emancipation is an illusion we would do best to forget. The need for a form of qualitatively oriented human development grounded in meaningful planning responsive to self-determined needs in accordance with global inequalities, for a labor process that reflects and embodies

⁴⁷¹ Walter D. Mignolo, “The Invention of the *Human* and the Three Pillars of the Colonial Matrix of Power,” *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018): 153-176, 171.

⁴⁷² Walter D. Mignolo, “Neither Capitalism Nor Communism, But Decolonization,” by Christopher Mattison, [criticallegalthinking.com](https://criticallegalthinking.com/2012/03/21/neither-capitalism-nor-communism-but-decolonization-an-interview-with-walter-mignolo/), March 12, 2012, <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2012/03/21/neither-capitalism-nor-communism-but-decolonization-an-interview-with-walter-mignolo/>.

substantive human ends and purposes, for global solidarity and transformation in the face of the global ecological crisis—none of this can be solved by “epistemic delinking” alone.

At the risk of taking an unphilosophical stance, I want to suggest that we must be realists here. Or, at the very least, qualified realists. This means embracing the notion of an objectively discernible, albeit mediated, social and material world wherein we can meaningfully refer to the determinations that constitute the basis of our shared conditions, incorrigibly distorted by the capitalist present. Again, the vital need for a qualitatively oriented form of development and sustainable relations of production is, in the final analysis, made graphically evident by the unprecedented global inequalities and forms of immiseration perpetuated by a system which lives on not despite but in and through its accumulating contradictions.

For this reason, I have not shied away from identifying socialism as the necessary alternative to these contradictions. This kind of reasoning might appear unpalatable for perspectives that regard necessity as a category that constrains rather than enables our social and political imagination, eroding our sense of what is possible with the necessity of what must be done. Yet one would have a more difficult case on one’s hands in claiming that the capitalist mode of production does not exhibit contradictions which are systemic and necessary for its reproduction. In my view, it is precisely the necessity and persistence of these contradictions which legitimates socialist revolution—assuming the historical task of humanizing and substantively socializing our existence at every level. At the same time, it should be noted that the position I have outlined does regard the struggle for socialism—the communal system—as equally a moral necessity precisely because the rule of capital actualizes our social nature, our productive activity and cooperative engagements more generally, in an antagonistic and alienated form. Only a socialist form struggle which takes as its central task the transformation of the

necessary collective conditions which already determine our existence, and which will continue to do so for the foreseeable future—at present, to repeat, in an entirely negative manner—can become a motivating, consciously assumed project for the self-mediation of the social individuals involved.

In my view, Marx's philosophical anthropology continues to give us a powerful and compelling account of the universality of human freedom. This universal freedom is an expression, the very form, of the dynamic self-mediation of the human species, constituting our specific nature as beings whose particularity is precisely the capacity for universal activity. It is therefore a process that synthesizes praxis and consciousness, and always in a determinate form—form-giving activity capable of recognizing itself in the historical and natural reality of which it is both subject and object, free and determined, universal and particular, infinite and finite. Thus, it is not a return to a lost essence that animates our conception of human freedom or universal species-being, but the objective necessity of self-return occasioned by the immanent contradictions and irrationality of a given mode of reproducing our material and social existence, a conscious engagement with and re-appropriation of those conditions which, though they might appear external, hostile, and alien to the individuals reproducing these same conditions, remain the result of their activity all the same.

What makes this judgement possible at all lies in the universal freedom immanent to self-mediating activity, which is not limited in the same way as is the activity of other organic living beings. Of course, that is not to say human activity is not limited in a variety of ways. We mean only that this self-mediating activity can become socially conscious of itself in such a way as to transcend existing conditions of unfreedom and domination by recognizing them as results of self-alienation. The *locus classicus* of this conception, for Marx, is the labor process itself. The

reason for this lies in the fact that it is through the labor process, as the everlasting condition of the self-reproduction of the species, that human beings *mediate themselves* in mediating nature—their inorganic body—and thereby objectively express the universality distinctive of their purposive, autotelic activities. For Marx, the capitalist mode of production accomplished but an alienated integration of human beings, an abstract universality characterized by class domination and the subordination of human ends to the imperatives of capital accumulation. For individuals to become conscious of this state of affairs and to struggle to transcend it in a form adequate to their essence as social beings constitutes the overarching task of the socialist alternative, of true humanism.

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