

Alienation, the Social Individual, and Communism: Marx in the 21st Century

Roberto Nigro

In some well-known pages of the *Grundrisse*, Marx writes: "The theft of alien labour time, on which the present wealth is based, appears a miserable foundation in face of this new one, created by large-scale industry itself."¹ In the context of the actual crisis, it could be interesting to reflect on the use of this word: "theft" (*Diebstahl*), that is at the backdrop of the analysis of Marx, not only in the *Grundrisse*, but in his whole work.

To put the question in terms of theft (of alien labour time) has the advantage of revealing that capitalistic relations of production rest intrinsically upon forms of exploitation. This approach can shed a different light on the (financial) crisis we have been experiencing for several years now. In reality, we should acknowledge that the crisis is permanent. It is the horizon of our existence. Crises take different names; their phenomenology varies and, accordingly, the forms of our fear also change. But we were never in a situation relieved by crises. No single moment of our existence was exempt from one or another crisis. And we will never overcome crises or be drawn from them.

This peremptory statement is not the result of pessimism; it is rather the acknowledgment that the crisis is the mode of government of contemporary capitalism.² The crisis is the form that *civil war* takes today. And we must acknowledge that we are in a social war. This social war is not the generic war of all against all, as we could understand it with reference to Thomas Hobbes' *Bellum Omnium contra omnes*. On the contrary, it is the war of the rich people against the poor ones, the war of the owners against those who do not possess anything, the war of the rulers or masters against the proletarians.³ Civil war or social war is one of the forms of the class struggle. In neoliberal capitalism, this class struggle has become asymmetrical: on the one hand, there is one class that leads the struggle: this is the class recomposed around finance, the class that has reconstituted itself around the power of money or credit;⁴ on the other hand, we have a class that is no longer one, we have a multitude that is fragmented and hardly able to resist the process that is going on.⁵ Finance, i.e. the class of the rulers and of the masters, leads the class struggle today.

Capital does not seek a general balance, as many economists tell us. Capital does not look for peace or for the end of conflict, as we could wrongly imagine; capital works through a continuous overturning of the mode of production and reproduction. No branch of production, no area of society is spared. The perpetual imbalance, the permanent asymmetry, the inequality as basis for development is the law explaining the functioning of capital. That's the reason why we have to understand the crisis not as an exception, but as the rule of capital: crisis is the normal mode of functioning of capital. Its development is filled with crises, since

capitalism is a mode of production that cannot but function through recursive structural crises. Crisis is the form through which the irreversible antagonism between the production of wealth and its unequal appropriation explodes.⁶

What does the unequal appropriation of wealth mean? Let us turn towards the Marxian *Grundrisse*.

The *Grundrisse* is a lengthy, unfinished manuscript, composed by Marx in 1857–1858. This work was composed during the period following the defeat of the European revolutions of 1848–1850. Marx reflected a great deal upon the reasons of the defeat. In 1849, after being successively expelled with Engels by the governments of Prussia, France, and Belgium, since they were the major exponents of the League of the Communists, Marx fled to London, where he lived in exile until his death in 1883. In London, he lived with his family in a condition of extreme poverty. There are some very beautiful letters Marx wrote to his correspondents during this period, in which he describes the daily difficulties he was experiencing in London. If, on one side, Marx was reflecting on the defeat of the European revolutions, on the other side there was an event at the horizon attracting his attention. Marx was very excited about the possibility of a global economic crisis that was about to explode. The reason for his excitement came from the fact that he associated the crisis with the possibility of revolution. In a situation of crisis, the possibility that the development takes unforeseen trajectories cannot but increase.

Marx wrote to Engels on 13 November 1857: “The American crisis, which we foresaw, in the November 1850 issue of the review, would break out in New York is fantastic. [...] Even though my financial situation is disastrous; I have never felt so ‘cosy’ since 1849 than with this outbreak.” “I am working like a madman for whole nights in order to coordinate my work on economics, and to get together the *Grundrisse* before the deluge.” (To Engels, December 12, 1857.) “I am working like a condemned man. Sometimes until 4 o’clock in the morning. It is a double work: 1) the elaboration of some fundamental aspects of the economy [...] 2) the current crisis.”⁷

Marx was working like a madman in order to coordinate his economic studies. He was coordinating his economic analyses on capitalism. In order to do that, he regularly visited the library of the British Museum. There he could grasp the classical economy from Adam Smith to David Ricardo and coordinate his studies as quickly as possible, in order to make them available for the working class. There was an extreme urgency that led to the birth of this first great political synthesis, that is the writing of the *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*.

As already mentioned, Marx characterizes the whole capitalist system as a system based on theft. But what peculiar form does the “theft” take? We have to understand that it is a *structural* dimension of the capitalist mode of production and not a *moral* dimension depending on the specificity of human relations.

In order to disentangle these aspects, let us start from the opposite point of view, that is to say let us start with a first objection against the idea of capitalism as a system of theft. Instead of immediately accepting Marx’s thesis, let us raise a doubt against it.

At first glance, the wage system seems to be based on an equal exchange. The wage system can be defined as an exchange system: a worker brings to the job market his or her work or, put in a more appropriate way, his or her *capacity to work*. (At this stage of the analysis I do not need to make a distinction between material or immaterial work, material or immaterial production.) He or she brings to the job market himself or herself, that is to say his/her body. It is this work capacity, this capacity to work, that will be *alienated*. The worker offers his/her

capacity to work and, by the same token, the product of his/her work. His/her capacity to work means literally a capacity to produce something. (S)he will offer the product of her/his work to somebody else. In that sense (s)he will separate the product of his/her labour from him/herself. In this sense, (s)he *alienates* her/himself.⁸

But one could also ask: why employ such a strong word as “alienate”? Why can’t we simply say that we are exchanging on the job market our capacity to work *on an equal basis*? The exchange we are referring to is the exchange between labour and salary. We offer our capacity to work, and we earn a salary in exchange. The worker earns a salary for the work he/she is providing. Therefore, we are confronted with a simple exchange occurring on an equal basis. What is the function of salary? Salary pays for what the worker sells on the market. Put differently, salary pays for the fact that the worker is hired for a certain time. He/she accepts to be *used* for a while. Of course, we can also say (and this is not a tiny difference, as we will see later) that he/she is “obliged” to sell him/herself on the job market, or put differently, (s)he is obliged to sell her/his capacity to work.

But in order to simplify the analysis here, let us put aside the issue concerning the obligation, that is to say the fact that the worker is “obliged” to sell her/himself on the job market, and only admit that (s)he accepts to sell her/his capacity to work.

In the same way one can rent a car in order to use it, one could say that one can hire someone’s capacity to work. Salary should pay this upkeep. When you rent a car, you also pay for the upkeep of the car. It is the same when someone hires a worker: (s)he is paying for the upkeep, for the maintenance of the worker. The salary must allow the regeneration of the labour force. And not only that: it must also allow the survival both of the worker and of his/her family, his/her children.

If the capacity to work was paid correctly, that is to say according to the laws of supply and demand in a specific conjuncture, then we would be faced with a normal exchange, one that cannot be formally called into question. Then, why would the bearded philosopher of Trier insist on speaking of theft?

It is because we cannot stop at this simple description. First of all, we should remark that if the exchange must take place, or if the exchange takes place, one needs that some interests come into play. Between the contracting parts there should be interests. The interest of the seller is of course very clear. The worker, i.e. the seller, sells his/her work in order to earn a salary. The worker alienates the use of his/her labour force in exchange for a salary. (S)he needs a salary which will permit him/her (and his/her family) to survive. But concerning the buyer, the purchaser who wishes to use the labour force he/she is buying, things are different. The capitalist purchases something that he/she pays according to its value, and by the same token claims to exploit it. But he/she pretends to exploit it in order to earn from it a *surplus* of value, that is to say a profit, something that can improve the production or his/her wealth. Then, there is an anomaly in the form this exchange takes. If, actually, the worker does not lose anything in this exchange, on the other hand, one cannot say that he or she wins something either. The salary he/she earns should be used in order to reproduce his/her own existence. And if it happens that the salary of the worker is higher than the real needs of his reproduction, the rectification will be effectuated automatically, and the salary will decrease. (Of course, the capitalist does not need to directly decrease the salary; (s)he can

intervene on several other connected elements that assure the reproduction of life and can decrease the purchasing power of salaries.)

But in the dynamic of this exchange, it happens that the buyer not only pretends to get back his/her investment, that is to say that he/she doesn't want to lose anything, but he/she also pretends to increase his/her profit or wealth. But if he/she pretends to increase his/her possessions, his/her wealth, this means that the apparent exchange on an equal basis hides something; it conceals a process that changes the equality to an inequality without violating the apparent legitimacy of the exchange law. What happens then?

We are faced here with a process resting upon three elements or moments: to give, to receive, and to return. If, on the one hand, we say that the donor, that is to say the worker, brings to the job market his/her labour force, his/her body, his/her brain and sells them in order to earn a salary in exchange (a salary that should satisfy his/her needs), on the other hand, what the capitalist returns in the form of salary cannot be compared with what (s)he received from the worker. This is the reason why the exchange on a formal equal basis leads to a form of inequality. Put differently, what the capitalist seizes by paying a salary is not precisely the same thing that is sold by the worker in exchange of a salary. The capitalist purchases something that he/she will exploit at his or her mercy. Here a difference or a division emerges that is very important. A dissociation, i.e. a division, occurs within the concept of the labour force; the labour force entails two aspects: one of them can be referred to what the seller gives in the process of exchange; it concerns the worker and what he/she offers; on the other side, there is the aspect that concerns what is received by the buyer, by the capitalist. It is because of this dissociation that an apparently equal exchange comes to rest upon the form of inequality. It is on that basis that an apparently equal exchange generates profit only on one side.⁹

But this is possible if and only if we add to this description a further element. This exchange takes place within the framework of a power relation, where the seller, i.e. the worker, occupies the position of the dominated individual and the purchaser the dominant position, which enables him/her to let his/her interests prevail. The wage regime can produce its effects only if the worker is placed in the position of a split subject; that is to say that (s)he is master of his/her labour capacity, on the one hand; but, on the other hand, and simultaneously, (s)he can alienate its utilization. This presupposes that this labour force can be separated from its utilization.

Therefore Marx initiates an incredible break when he introduces in the analysis of the wage system the concept of labour force instead of only speaking of labour. If the seller, i.e. the worker, or employed person alienated his/her work and, by the same token, his/her work was paid according to its value, as the classical economy until David Ricardo sketched out, the capitalist, i.e. the purchaser, would earn nothing. But we should also remark that under those conditions, the exchange would also not take place for the simple reason that it would not imply any interest for the capitalist. But if we presuppose that what the sellers, i.e. the workers, bring, that is to say give or offer, is their *labour force* or the possibility to employ it for a certain time, it happens that what is transmitted or received at the end of the exchange is not exactly the same thing that was brought at the beginning of the exchange. What is received is the possibility to employ the labour force *beyond* its real or actual value. One could also say that the capitalist buys a *promise* of work (that is to say a promise of valorisation). (S)he buys the possibility of getting

back a profit by using it. This profit is reserved only for the one (i.e. the capitalist) who bought this right to employment at its value, that is to say at the value of the worker and for the needs of his/her reproduction. But it is not bought at the value *that it can produce*. When the worker accepts to be hired, (s)he undergoes a mysterious transformation: (s)he stops being her/his singular body and becomes a productive subject, a subject bearing a labour force, whose performance, since it refers to social work, is submitted to a communal evaluation. This subject (i.e. the worker transformed into labour force) is, in the genuine meaning of the term, a “subjected” subject.

The labour force we are referring here to is not something already encapsulated in the worker, as if it were inscribed into his or her nature. In the capitalist system, this capacity to work is constantly produced. That is the reason why we can connect Marx’ analyses here to Foucault’s historical analyses on technologies of power. If the economic take-off of the West began with the techniques that made possible the accumulation of capital, it might perhaps be said that the methods for administering the accumulation of men made possible a political take-off in relation to the traditional, ritual, costly, violent forms of power, which soon fell into disuse and were superseded by a subtle, calculated technology of subjection. In fact, the two processes—the accumulation of men and the accumulation of capital—cannot be separated; it would not have been possible to solve the problem of the accumulation of men without the growth of an apparatus of production capable of both sustaining them and using them; conversely, the techniques that made the cumulative multiplicity of men useful accelerated the accumulation of capital. At a less general level, the technological mutations of the apparatus of production, the division of labour, and the elaboration of the disciplinary techniques sustained an ensemble of very close relations. Each makes the other possible and necessary; each provides a model for the other.¹⁰

The role played by disciplines is at the core of the functioning of a capitalist society. But how shall we understand the function of discipline and also the fact that the worker accepts the condition of such an unequal contract?

Why does the worker give way freely to the conditions of such a strange contract, that seems to be equal, but is only so formally, since only one part wins? What brings him or her to accept it, if the reciprocity is only apparent? The worker is obliged to accept the inequality of the relationship. At the beginning of the exchange, there is the labour force of the worker, that is to say there is his/her labour force, his/her personal labour force. But once the exchange has been accomplished, one can remark that the personal labour force does not exist anymore in this form. It has become a generic labour force that can be exploited under conditions that are no longer those of an activity pertaining to the individual work, or referring to the capacity of the person effectuating the work. This labour force has become a general productive activity subjected to common norms. The worker ceases to be the person who is and becomes an operator involved in an operation going beyond the limits of his/her own existence. The worker enters the form of social work, or of the work that takes place in the form of social cooperation. In social cooperation, the work of the individual is no longer his/her own work, but “some” generic work that has to be effectuated under conditions that do not depend any more on the individual.

What characterizes the capitalist mode of production is that the labour force is treated as if it were a two-sided reality. It is not the same for the worker or for the capitalist. The secret of the exploitation consists in the fact that the worker

remains master of his/her force while he/she steps aside from its utilization, as if its utilization were no longer part of this force and as if this force were independent from him/herself. Here resides also the force of the concept of alienation, which should not be referred to human nature, as if it were human nature that is alienated or lost during the process of production.

So, we can also say that the labour force is invented. It is the result of an associated technical creation. Marx explains that the worker alienates his/her capacity for labour, his/her creative force, which is subsumed by capital under the appearance of an equal exchange relation: in the process of production, capital puts this creative force to use for itself and pays a price for it independent of the result of the activity of labour. At best, to the conceded price (wage), the worker succeeds in restoring his/her own use value: (s)he responds to the necessity of his/her own reproduction—but even this price must be ceaselessly taken under control. All the rest of the worker's activity is now in the hands of the boss.

But let's go a step further and analyze what is at issue in this question of the productive subject or of labour force. And let us do it from another, yet still connected, standpoint. This concerns the question of exploitation, that is to say the question involved in the use of the word "theft." Marx gives the question of exploitation a very particular form. This involves a radical call into question of the topic of the theory of value.

In the Marxist tradition, the theory of value takes two forms. On the one hand, it is known as the theory of abstract labour. This means that work is the unit present in all commodities, since work is the common substance required in order to produce something. Each form of work is referred to abstract labour. The importance of this approach resides in the fact that it allows one to show that behind each particular form of work there is a global social labour force that can indifferently produce this or that. The Marxist tradition deduces from this approach a second aspect, which is the question of the theory of value orbiting the question of the measure of the value of labour. One can define a unit of simple labour as a basis for measuring each form of labour production. The theory of value becomes in this connection a law of general balance, allowing for a measure of value by going from the simplest units to the more complex ones. The law of value gives the system a certain degree of rationality.¹¹

However, in Marx the question of the law of value has a different form. One never stops to say that Marx took the theory of value from the classical political economy, from authors like Steuart, Smith, and in particular Ricardo. One thinks that the classical political economy elaborated a theory according to which the value of commodities depends on the socially necessary labour time in order to produce them. One thinks that Marx simply took this theory from the classics without transforming it. But this genealogy is false, because it misunderstands the different use that Marx makes of such a theory.¹² Marx uses the theory of value not in order to clarify how values are transformed into prices or how profit is produced. Marx intends not only to explain how the bourgeois economy functions, but he also wants in particular to show how structural the process of exploitation is in capitalism. Therefore, he introduces into this theory an important discontinuity. In Marx' view, labour, that is the ground of the value in the capitalist system, is labour become abstract; what is exchanged between the capitalist and the worker is not – as the classical economists thought – labour, but labour-force. Once the notion of labour is understood in its abstract form, one can also understand how daily work can be divided into two parts: on the one hand, there is the part (that is the

salary), which is paid to the worker; on the other hand, there is a part of which the capitalist takes possession. In this connection, the exploitation becomes structural. Exploitation is the appropriation of other people's work; capitalist accumulation proceeds on that basis. The second implication of this relationship is that the relationship between capitalists and workers, on which surplus-value is created, is genuinely political. How much work will not be paid is not a question pertaining to the functioning of economy, but it is a *political* question: the power relations between classes decide on these proportions and not the market.

The theory of value takes the form of an antagonism in Marx's account. It is the motor of a constitutional imbalance. In fact, so-called necessary labour is not a fixed quantity, but it depends on the class struggle led by the working class. It is the result of struggles against wage labour. It is the result of the continuous attempt to transform the form of labour in order to remove it from its misery. The law of value must be thought within the more general theory of surplus value. Within the whole capitalist development, this law constantly produces crises: crises are provoked by struggles, by the impossibility to limit the growth of demand (that is to say of the material and immaterial needs of subjects, of their desires, aspirations, affects...).

The first form of the law of value to which I referred, by saying it worked in the Marxist tradition, extinguishes itself for several reasons. The first one is that it presents internal contradictions. The first contradiction is the opposition between simple work and qualified or complex work. The fact is that the second cannot be reduced to a multiplication of simple work, as if simple work were the basis, the unit of measure, starting from which the complex forms of work could also be calculated. The second contradiction comes from the opposition between productive and unproductive work. Productive work is the one producing capital. But this definition cannot be applied anymore, since productive labour is inscribed in the form of social cooperation. The productive character of labour depends on cooperation. The third contradiction resides in the fact that the productive labour of the intellectual labour force cannot be reduced to the simple sum of simple labour; by the same token it cannot be reduced to social cooperation either, for the simple reason that intellectual and scientific labour includes creativity. We can sum up all of this by saying that if the distinction between productive and unproductive labour applies to manufacturing (to some extent to pre-capitalist forms of production) and becomes aporetic already in the phase of development of capitalism linked to great industry, then this distinction will become absolutely inadequate in post-industrial society. In post-industrial society, intellectual and scientific labour becomes hegemonic. The global labour force, that Marx names the social individual in the *Grundrisse*,¹³ compels capital to a constant reorganization of the exploitation; it compels it to extend its domination in a more global way. However, on the other hand, it is precisely in this process that communism takes shape. Communism springs forth from the intensity of the contradictions that are contained in the concept of world market: at once a moment of maximum capitalist integration and a moment of maximum antagonism. Marx refers to two concepts in order to describe these transformations: he mentions the formal subsumption and the real subsumption of society to capital.¹⁴ But this process should not be interpreted as a linear process towards the greatest level of integration. If the concept of value is conceived as a temporal measure of productivity, the question that can be raised is how the productivity of social labour can be measured. If social labour coincides with the whole time of existence and includes all sectors of society, how could time measure the totality in which it is involved? When the time of existence is entirely the time of production, who measures whom? When exploitation reaches these forms, the production of value can no longer be measured. The law of value can no

longer measure the extension of the exploitation; it does not mean that exploitation disappears; on the contrary, the law of value continues functioning as political law, as order, as command. Capital exercises its command on society through political forms (through bureaucracy, administration, finance, monetary politics). Capital exercises its command on society by controlling communication, desires, affects, and so on. Here, Marx's analyses touch a maximum of intensity and shed light on historical developments in which our *own* and *actual* history is trapped. The return to Marx sheds a different light on our present.

Notes

1 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, Penguin Books, London, 1993: Notebook VII, p. 708.

2 Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man. Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles, 2012.

3 Michel Foucault, *La société punitive*, Cours au Collège de France 1972-1973, édition établie par Bernard E. Harcourt, EHESS/Gallimard/Seuil, Paris 2013, p. 14-15, 30, 33.

4 Christian Marazzi, *The Violence of Financial Capitalism*, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles, 2011.

5 On these issues, see A. Negri/M. Hardt, *Multitude. War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, Penguin Putnam, 2004. Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of Multitude*, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles, 2008.

6 Luciano Gallino, *Il colpo di stato di banche e governi. L'attacco alla democrazia in Europa*, Torino, Einaudi, 2013.

7 Letters also quoted in Antonio Negri, *Marx beyond Marx. Lessons on the Grundrisse*, Autonomedia Pluto, New York, 1991, p. 2. See this work for an in-depth analysis of the whole *Grundrisse* by Marx.

8 It is probably useful to point out that in English and German we can make the distinction between work (*Werk*) and labour (*Arbeit*). The first term would refer to the result or the product of the labour activity, that is to say the work once it has been accomplished. The second term indicates the process or the operation that brings the accomplished work. The issues involved in the following pages are deeply indebted to the unique analyses developed by Pierre Macherey in his book, *Le Sujet des normes*, Éd. Amsterdam, Paris, 2014, in particular ch.: *Le sujet productif: De Foucault à Marx*, p. 149–212.

9 See Paolo Virno, "Forza Lavoro", in *Lessico Marxiano*, manifestolibri, Roma, 2008 p 105–116.

10 See Karl Marx, *Capital. Critique of Political Economy, vol. I*, Penguin, London, 1990, chapter XIII. Cf. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, Penguin, London, 1991, section, 3, ch. 3. Also Sandra Mezzadra, "The Topicality of Pre-history. A New Reading of Marx's Analysis of 'So-called Primitive Accumulation'", in *Rethinking Marxism*, 23.3, 2011. See also Sandro Chignola, *Foucault oltre Foucault. Una politica della filosofia*, DeriveApprodi, Roma, 2014, p. 65–70.

11 A. Negri, *Marx beyond Marx*, op. cit., p 151–170.

12 A. Negri, "Crisi della legge del valore-lavoro", in *Lessico marxiano*, op. cit. p. 87–94.

13 *Grundrisse*, Notebook VII, op. cit.

14 See Karl Marx, *Results of the Direct Production Process*, Ch. 6 in MECW 34, 1863.

Since 2016 **Roberto Nigro** is full professor of philosophy, in particular continental philosophy at the Leuphana University Lüneburg (Germany). He is a program director at the Collège International de Philosophie in Paris. Prior to this he was a lecturer at the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK). Specialist in political philosophy, aesthetics, French and Italian contemporary philosophy, with a special focus on the thought of Foucault, Deleuze, Marx and Marxism, he was an archivist at the Centre Foucault (IMEC, Paris); a visiting scholar at the Center for European Studies at Harvard University, at the FU Berlin, at the University of Basel (center Eikones), an Assistant Professor at the American University of Paris and at Michigan State University; a visiting professor at the University of Paris X-Nanterre, at the ENS-Lyon and at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), Paris. Last Publication: *Wahrheitsregime* (2015).