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'Capitalism' as False Consciousness¹

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Abstract

The assertion on which this paper is based is that Capitalism has been superseded by Corporatism. I put forward an argument as to why Marxist scholars can and should abandon the idea that Capitalism still exists based on Marx's approach to understanding political economy. Further, I argue that Marx's method can be deployed to better understand and change the corporatist system in which we are currently living first by understanding what it means to be "labour" in a system governed by complex structures of debt.

Overview

The central assertion I wish to defend in this paper is that capitalism no longer exists as a social relation of production and that it has been superseded by a corporatist system. The question I am asking of Marx's work is therefore largely methodological. The Marxian concepts of 'labour' and 'consciousness' provide a focus on what I perceive to be a flaw in much contemporary analysis of global political economy, Marxian or otherwise. That flaw is the insistence that we continue to live in some form of capitalism or other. I argue that the system of political economy currently exerting the most force on contemporary social change is corporatist, and therefore technically fascist (if we take Mussolini's definition).

What I want to show here is that Marx's method of analysis, especially evident in his earlier work, remains useful for political economic analysis in corporatism and any subsequent systems that emerge from it. I proceed by framing conceptions of labour and consciousness within what I understand to be the most relevant aspects of Marx's approach for understanding contemporary political economy: namely, his dialectical method and historical materialist framework. I argue that it is unhelpful for Marxians to retain the terms and tenets of Capital for understanding a system that flourishes primarily by propagating impostures of capitalist behaviours. Further, by holding fast to discussions about capitalism in the current context, the overall effect is to obscure the corporatist character of the system and its historical meaning.

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“Labour” and its referent

In classical political economy, labour is a factor of production, a variable cost. What supposedly distinguishes labour in capitalist relations is its status as a commodity. I have had a number of discussions with fellow Marxists who insist that as long as labour is a commodity we must accept that we are still ensconced in a capitalist form of political economy. I disagree that this is necessarily the case.² As far as I see it, Marx's definitive comments on the essence of labour are the following, if for no other reason than they contain a specific element that changed very little throughout the course of his scholarship: what is called “labour” in *Capital* is essentially an historically specific designation for the mediating relationship between humans and the rest of nature:

[1] workers can create nothing without nature, without the sensuous external world. It is the material in which labour realizes itself, in which it is active and from which, and by means of which, it produces. (Marx, 1844/1972)

Quote [1] is from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844), one of Marx's earliest works in political economy. Later, Marx emphasises that labour not only realises itself in nature but is a force of nature:

[2] Labour is *not the source* of all wealth. Nature is just as much a source of use values ... as labour, which itself is only the manifestation of a force of nature, human labour power. (Marx, 1875/1972: 382)

Quote [2] is from Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program*, written thirty years after the *Manuscripts*. Again, labour is both a part of nature, as well as the subjective (by which I mean active) aspect of human existence in relation to the rest of nature. Later, in volume three of *Capital*, he criticises the bourgeois economists' conception of labour because it is

[3] nothing but an abstraction and taken by itself cannot exist at all, or, if we take *what is actually meant here*, [labour is] the entire productive activity of man, through which his metabolic interchange with nature is mediated (1981: 954 my emphasis).

Marx is critical of this conception of labour in the context of *Capital* because it is unhistorical and permits no analysis of social relations in respect of *Capital* which *is* an historically specific relation of production. Throughout his work, Marx suggests that the essence of “labour”—its universal referent—transcends class and historically specific social relations however defined because it is nothing less than humanity's interactions with each other and the rest of nature. Marx's distinction between productive and unproductive labour made in

Capital (1976) and elsewhere is based on whether surplus value is extracted from particular types of labour. Given the orientation of my argument here—that capitalism no longer exists—a more “universal” definition of human-nature interactions delineates a particular aspect of humanity through which to analyse what *was* “labour” in Capital *has become* in global Corporatism. Moreover, the widespread talk of “a global knowledge economy” indicates that the entire spectrum of human energies has been subsumed under systemic appropriation regimes, thereby giving all human energies the character of universally productive labour. From the “audience labour” of mass mediated societies (Smythe, 1981), to the “hard labour” of mining and building industries, to the “cheap” piecework of low-paid factory workers throughout the developing world, to the “leisure” industries, to exercise factories, to legalised prostitution and corporate childcare systems, the entire spectrum of human activity now exists within corporatist frameworks of value extraction. It is conceivable that such a comprehensive system of appropriation could exist within Capitalist social relations. But there are three main features of corporatism that delineate it from capitalism: the dispersion of ownership through a generalised savings system (pensions and retirement funds, superannuation, equity markets); the separation of ownership from control; and a generalised credit system that extends from individuals to whole nations.

The basic premise of Marx’s analysis of Capital is that it is a system unique in being geared solely towards commodity production in pursuit of increased exchange-values. It is therefore a system of self-valorising values. It is divided into two great classes: the owners of the means of production (Capitalists) and those who work for them (Labour). Universal commodity circulation through various media of exchange is the presupposition of Capital. Workers are reduced to the status of commodities because their mode of participation in this system entails them selling their energies to capitalists thereby creating systemic antagonism between the two classes. Commodity consciousness—the ceaseless pursuit of exchange-values in exchange for human life force—pervades the consciousness of workers and capitalists alike. This is of course a great simplification of Marx’s analysis. However, the point I wish to make is this: Marx proceeds from the assumption that the way we produce, which includes our motivations for doing so and the social character of *what* we produce, defines who we are in relation to the system in which we produce. Simultaneously, the relationships that characterise an historically specific system of production imbue its constituents with the tenets and terms of that peculiar system, thereby making the system seem universal and immutable.

From wage labour to debt serviceability

Given that Marx's approach was useful for understanding the character of capitalism, let us consider the relationships that constitute the current system. It is my contention that the corporatist system is premised on the production of exchange-values in the future tense, or put simply: *debt*. Corporatism is characterised by a system in which the production, distribution, circulation, and exchange of indebtedness dominates the consciousness of its constituents. Debt consciousness has begun to pervade societies and their constituents throughout the world at every level. Credit underpins the corporatist system's feudal character because it provides the basis of loyal "service" and is the realisation of corporate benefice for that service. Marx describes the moral basis of the credit system:

[4] Credit is the economic judgement on the morality of a man. In the credit system man replaces metal or paper as the mediator of exchange. However, he does this not as a man but as the incarnation of capital and interest ... Human individuality, human morality, have become both articles of commerce and the material which money inhabits. The substance, the body clothing the spirit of money is not money, paper, but instead it is my personal existence, my flesh and blood, my social worth and status. Credit no longer actualizes money-values in actual money but in human flesh and in human hearts. (Marx 1844 [1975]: 264)

In a universalised credit system, "labour" is no longer a commodity, it is literally "human capital"—people are exchange values set in the future tense so that we are worth only what we owe.

The rise of consumer credit, national and international systems of credit, the proliferation of privately issued money, and the means of global communication linking these systems of debt provide the basis of a system that was unthinkable in Marx's day. The historical movement of money-as-medium has resulted in humanity making *itself* the expression of exchange values. Consequently the credit system (which is many systems more or less closely linked) is a systematic claim upon massive amounts of future human life. Trade in abstract forms of money constitutes roughly 99.9% of *all* "trade", and new forms of tradable debt continue to proliferate at an astonishing rate (cf. Hart 1999; Saul 1997; Graham, 2006). The bulk of transactions that occur within the globally mediated system that has cynically been called "the knowledge economy" is constituted of nothing less than claims on future life. It is the mass "monetisation" of past and present human life and its subsequent mortgage against some imagined future based on actuarial calculation. The result is a mass indenture of future human life to the service of corporatised debt. The movement from

capitalism to corporatism is in large part an achievement of expert discourse, particularly the languages of law, finance, policy, and econometrics.

Credit is money in the subjunctive mood; it is the future-in-present expression of potential human life calculated in terms of exchange-values. In Marx's description of credit [4], we see a recognition that the credit system contains in embryonic form the total colonisation of social values – spiritual, cultural, social, economic, and moral – by monetary values. The credit system transforms people into mere *materials of commerce and the material which money inhabits*. In *all* its future tenses, money infuses *human flesh and human hearts*, and with these, human imaginations. With the emergence of a more or less generalised credit system, money values are no longer expressed in the alien, objectified forms of paper, gold, or silver, but in *personal existence, flesh and blood, social worth and status*: today, “human” and “social” capital have very literal meanings. But the movement does not stop at the colonisation of individuals.

From student loans and credit card debt; from consumer debt to household debt to national debt; from partisan political debts to personal financial favours, the oppressive character of debt now fills the imaginations of people everywhere. Rather than working for one's living, people in advanced and developing societies now work to “service”, “manage”, or “retire” their debt. This holds as much for entire nations as it does for individuals. Listen to Australia's Prime Minister, John Howard:

[5] Well [the treasurer] has unveiled a larger than expected surplus. It just shows how well the economy is growing and how well it's being managed by the Government. ... Self evidently we are very keen to retire debt. We inherited a mortgage of \$96 billion from Mr Beazley and we're very happy to have been in a position of repaying almost \$53 billion dollars of that by the end of this financial year. (Howard, 2000)

There is a significant systemic shift evident in such utterances. The nation has become an entity to be *managed*. It has a *mortgage*, a debt owed to someone or something, though to whom or what is almost always unspecified. In corporatism, excellent national management will *retire debt*, remain creditworthy, and create a *surplus*. In this view, civic institutions of the “welfare state” become an impediment, and the governance of entire nations takes the form of a Harvard Business School case-study. The administrative unit (nation, state, province, or municipality) is viewed by its management as a corporate entity that must operate efficiently. But what it is that must be done so “efficiently” is rarely specified.

Managing the Corporatist State

The following is from George W. Bush's *The President's Management Agenda* (2001) and further indicates that capitalist era institutions of governance are becoming an encumbrance to effective administration of corporatism because they lack the flexibility of "private" institutions:

[6] Federal managers are greatly limited in how they can use available financial and human resources to manage programs; they lack much of the discretion given to their private sector counterparts to do what it takes to get the job done. Red tape still hinders the efficient operation of government organizations; excessive control and approval mechanisms afflict bureaucratic processes. Micro-management from various sources—Congressional, departmental, and bureau—imposes unnecessary operational rigidity. (Bush, 2001: 5)

And, from Britain, the corporatist and feudal character of the current system is evidenced in the Blair Government's development of a National Asset Register, British government's first effort to estimate the fiscal worth of everything it "owns" since 1086:

[7] The government will this week publish its National Asset Register – the "Domesday Book" of all the assets owned by the government with their monetary values. [...] The Treasury, hopes the register can be a key tool in improving the efficiency of the public sector, by making it possible to calculate whether government departments are getting good value for money out of property and other assets. [...] A Treasury official said "Departments now have the tools, the information and the incentives they need to improve the productivity of their assets". (Crooks 2001)

The historical implications of such statements are far reaching. Governments at all levels now see themselves as management teams, and the domain over which they exercise authority is reduced to the status of a corporation. They are agents of productivity, owners of assets, and the promoters of managerially defined efficiencies.

Marx notes that within the capitalist class, specifically in the domain of financial control, a 'further division of labour' develops, 'both a division into various branches independent of one another, and the development of the workplace within these branches (large offices, numerous book-keepers and cashiers, and far-reaching division of labour)' (1981: 433). His definition of labour includes the intermediaries of capital, such as managers (1981: 506-9). He makes a qualitative distinction on the basis of social function and possessive antagonism between managerial labour and 'social labour' more generally (1981: 509):

[8] This work of management and supervision, in so far as it is not simply a particular function arising from the nature of all combined social labour ... arises from the *opposition* between the owner of the means of production and the owner of mere labour-power - whether labour-power is bought with the worker himself, as in the slave system, or alternatively the worker sells his own labour-power, so that the production process appears at the same time as a process of consumption of labour by capital. (1981: 509).

This definition is worth some consideration given the political utterances and initiatives I have cited above. It goes to the very definition of capitalism itself. For the purposes of my argument regarding the passing of capitalism, the key concept here is the notion of "owners of the means of production". This is a core element in Marx's definition of capitalist relations (1973, 1970, 1976, 1981) and is the basis of his theory of the 'two great classes' that characterise capital as a system of social relations: owners of means of production and wage-labourers.

Ownership, labour, and the production of corporatist consciousness

In the current system ownership is not identical to control. Ownership of the most influential systems of production is now dispersed among, or invested in, corporate "persons", or corporations, or combinations thereof. They are fictions of law whose appointed representatives now overtly exercise direct influence in the course of human affairs. The utterances of political leaders from throughout the world, such as those quoted above in [5], [6], [7], and [8], indicate that government administrations see themselves as owners of productive assets, with administration being responsible for the assets' "productivity". These "assets" consist of debt-burdened people, whether directly indebted or paying for national debt through poverty, homelessness, ill-health, organised violence, or early death. An often repeated dictum of corporatist political representatives is that the "property" of governments is public property, but that such property is better off being "privatised", by which is meant placing public infrastructure under corporate control—per the doctrine of "privatisation"—to create increased efficiencies (Saul, 1997). Transfers of massive public infrastructure—jails, transport, health, education, and warfare—to corporate interests continues throughout the world at an accelerating rate. This has an unusual effect on the composition of labour, even in the most extreme of circumstances

[9] Private corporations have penetrated western warfare so deeply that they are now the second biggest contributor to coalition forces in Iraq after the Pentagon, a Guardian investigation has established.

While the official coalition figures list the British as the second largest contingent with around 9,900 troops, they are narrowly outnumbered by the 10,000 private military contractors now on the ground (Traynor, 2003)

Private contractors have become so entangled in US-led military operations that the military can literally not do without them (Traynor, 2003). This is Lewis Mumford's theory of "organisation man" writ large.

Corporatist modes of ownership and the mobilisation of future labour

Corporatist modes of ownership are of great significance in understanding corporatist social relations. We can begin to do so by focusing our investigation at the institutional level. For example, there has been much made in recent times of mutual funds and their influence on "the economy", especially in respect of poor (if not criminal) corporate governance. Legal malfeasance aside, corporations have been key in the dispersion of ownership, the centralisation of control, and the separation of control from ownership. The practical effect of corporatised pools of funds, in combination with compulsory savings policies throughout the developed world (e.g. superannuation, 401K plans, etc) and myriad "off balance-sheet" financial instruments, has been to mobilise a vast pool of personal savings that provides the basis of a system in which circulation of exchange values becomes the primary determinant and measure of economic "success" and productivity. In turn, by exercising control over the bulk of exchange-values, and by being charged with the continual increase in the value of these exchange-values, these types of corporations help to disperse ownership to the point at which, at any given time, it is often impossible for individual persons to know where or in what their savings are invested, or for how long.

The hoard that people put aside for their future, either through taxation or enforced pension plans, is now used by mutual funds, banks, and other financial institutions as gambling stakes in the global market for shares, derivatives, bonds, and manifold forms of debt and insurance. The direct result of this is that people often have no idea what they own or what their savings actually mean in terms of real ownership. We therefore have no possibility of exercising control in the entities and projects in which our monies may be invested. The institutional points at which public savings are pooled and mobilised are the points at which ownership and control are separated. Simultaneously they are the points at which control becomes more centralised as ownership becomes more dispersed, anonymous, ephemeral, and socialised.

From a Marxian perspective it is ironic that the institutional mechanisms that have enabled the closest approximation of "social ownership of the means of production" have simultaneously enabled the separation of ownership from any meaningful function in the control of political economic conditions. For the relatively few corporate persons that exercise control over the bulk of exchange-values, the pool of "assets" they control provide a means through which power can be "leveraged" at a hitherto unprecedented scale and scope. For example, Rupert Murdoch can exercise control over a global media empire by owning less than 15 percent of the company's equity. That is the notion of a "controlling interest" in corporate governance. Here is how changes in such arrangements are communicated to the public in official terms, and how a relatively small share in one corporation can be translated into a larger share of another (the mechanism is debt):

[10] This page provides information on the joint application filed by General Motors Corporation ("GM"), Hughes Electronics Corporation ("Hughes") and The News Corporation Limited ("News Corp." and, collectively with GM and Hughes, the "Applicants") to the Commission seeking consent to transfer control of various Commission licenses and authorizations, including direct broadcast satellite ("DBS") and fixed satellite space station, earth station, and terrestrial wireless authorizations held by Hughes and its wholly- or majority-owned subsidiaries to News Corp. ("Application"). The proposed transaction involves the split-off of Hughes from GM, wherein Hughes will become a separate and independent company, followed by a series of transactions where News Corp., through its majority-held subsidiary, Fox Entertainment Group, will acquire a 34% interest in Hughes. The remaining 66% interest in Hughes will be held by three GM employee benefit trusts (managed by an independent trustee), which combined will hold an approximately 20% interest in Hughes, and by the general public, which will hold an approximately 46% interest in Hughes. (Federal Communications Commission, 2003)

Note the complex combination of interests expressed here. Three corporate persons, News Corporation, General Motors, and Hughes Electronics Corporation, have proposed an arrangement that gives a single person control over a global, extra terrestrial media system—the sole purpose of which is to produce forms of consciousness on a global scale—by mobilising employee benefit trusts and the money of "the general public".³ Such an arrangement would not have been possible a mere 25 years ago.

To emphasise the complexity of ownership expressed here, it is worth noting that it is not News Corporation that owns a controlling interest in Hughes Electronics. It is to be owned by

Fox, a subsidiary of News Corp. Murdoch owns a controlling interest of *less than 15 percent* in News Corp. As the above example demonstrates, a “controlling interest” in one major corporation can be leveraged to exercise ownership of more and more subsidiary corporations with larger and larger shareholdings by piling mortgage upon mortgage at arm’s distance through corporate structures and the deployment of debt.

In this situation, debt is revealed as the oppressive weapon that it is. The following is a report of a hostile move on the Murdoch “empire”:

[11] With 48m voting shares – some bought in the open market – and 210m non-voting shares, Liberty now has an total equity stake of 17pc, making it the biggest single shareholder. The Murdoch family owns 13pc of the equity, but retains 30pc of the votes. [...]

The surprise deal raised questions over the future of the News Corp empire. Theoretically, Mr Malone could swap more of his non-voting stock for shares with voting rights, thus increasing his influence on the company. But he would find it difficult to wrest control from the Murdoch family.

At present they are protected by a number of “poison pill” defences, including one stating that all of News Corp's \$8.7billion debt falls due if there is a change of control at the company. (Litterick, 2004)

Here corporate control and debt are revealed as key levers in the new political economy. News Corp’s debt is Murdoch’s protection over his personal control. The threat is that Murdoch’s deferred debt will become *real* debt, due *now* if he or his family loses control. This is how, at each step in the corporate process of leveraging “controlling interests”, an increasing number of relatively minor shareholdings gets transformed into control over larger and larger amounts of labour, by which I mean human activity in general.

Universal labour and the emergence of corporate consciousness

It is in this very general sense that Marx provides a useful distinction that is perhaps best seen as a distinction between synchronic and diachronic aspects of labour. It is the distinction between

[12] universal labour and communal labour. Both kinds play their role in the process of production, both flow one into the other, but both are also differentiated. Universal labour is all scientific work, all discovery and invention. It is brought about partly by the

cooperation of men now living, but partly also by building on earlier work. Communal labour, however, simply involves the direct cooperation of individuals (1981: 198).

In his definition of 'universal labour', Marx includes the productive forces of people throughout history, their intellectual and cultural activities, their technologies, and the various modes of relatedness through which they have passed. As Marx points out, the distinction between universal and communal labour is somewhat problematic because it is clear that these two broadly defined forms of labour are intimately entangled at any time—they are literally two different views of social relatedness at any particular time: synchronic and diachronic. Such a distinction is especially problematic in the presence of a "knowledge" or "information" economy, in which even certain forms of thinking and representing are counted as productive forces.

While any neat division between "manual" and "intellectual" labour is patently false (Schiller 1996: 20-1), it is worth seeing the difference between diachronic and synchronic views of labour in terms of social knowledge, especially in what is being widely touted as a knowledge economy. In one view, the diachronic, we see that all knowings, all expertise, all techniques have their social and historical provenances. In the other view, the synchronic, we see how specific interactions instantiate, comprise, and transform the communal (or social) production and reproduction of universal labour at any particular time. The two views are inseparable in characterising a system of social relations. A knowledge economy, for example, is an economy that presupposes more and less valuable ways of knowing. Such ways of knowing are produced in rarefied contexts (such as universities, banks, or corporate board rooms), distributed, valorised, and exchanged in various forms of language "made" for and by different groups of people.⁴ A corollary to this, considering the 'division of intellectual labour' (Jarvis 1998, pp. 87-88) that knowledge of varying values presumes, is that certain dialects—or ways of representing—are more readily valorised than others, largely because of their institutional context of production. To clarify: valuable knowledge is *necessarily* the product of valorised institutional contexts, and vice versa (Bourdieu, 1991). Throughout history, valorised dialects have played an important role in creating 'knowledge monopolies' and socially dominant classes, as have other technologies that the "owners" of sacred knowledge deploy (cf. Innis, 1950). Such dialects have, at various times, included those of politicians, scientists, priests, lawyers, economists, kings, and so on (cf Lemke, 1995: chapt. 4). The inalienably political character of such dialects converges with their social and historical origins:

[13] The fact is, therefore, that definite individuals who are productively active in a definite way enter into ... definite social and political relations. Empirical observation must in each separate instance bring out empirically, and without any mystification and speculation, the connection of the social and political structure with production. The social structure and the State are continually evolving out of the life-process of definite individuals ... The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourses of men [*sic*], the language of real life ... The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics etc. of a people. ... If in all ideology men [*sic*] and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process (Marx & Engels, 1846/1972: 123-124).

This much-cited view is a synthesis of universal and communal labour, as described above. Apart from identifying the social and historical links between labour and consciousness, Marx and Engels identify the obfuscatory nature of valorised dialects and their relationship with other forms of social production and reproduction, including the links between historically specific forms of social consciousness and historical context. Valorised dialects, when viewed as materially enacted, socially embedded products, take on the appearance of objective “things”. That is because language is ultimately entangled in the labour of conscious distinctions: ‘Language *is* practical consciousness’ (Marx & Engels, 1846/1972: 124). Therefore a critical examination of how consciousness is actively produced implies a perspective grounded in a critical analysis of which meanings are most influential and how such meanings are produced and reproduced. Such an approach, I argue, is at the core of Marx’s analytical framework. Furthermore, I believe it to be as useful for understanding the debt-laden consciousness of corporatism as it was when Marx used it to analyse nineteenth century capitalist relations.

Marx, social analysis, and critical method

Norman Fairclough and I (2002) have detailed elsewhere an argument for understanding how Marx’s dialectical method can be seen as a form of what is now called “critical discourse analysis”, among other things. More broadly, Marx’s is a socially grounded, historically informed method of critical language analysis designed to challenge and change orthodoxies. Some have suggested that Marx lacked a systematic ‘theory of language’ (e.g. Cook, 1982: 530; Lepschy, 1985). But that is to entirely overlook the foundations of nineteenth century scholarship. Marx’s contribution to qualitative social analysis, especially

his contribution to critical language analysis (however named), cannot be understood without taking into account the enduring influence of classical scholarship throughout most of the nineteenth century (Bloom, 1943). Nor can we grasp the centrality of critical language analysis to Marx's method without taking into account Marx's philosophical and juridical education in Germany at a time when Hegel's philosophy was considered to be a revolutionary intellectual force (cf. Bloom, 1943; Colletti, 1975: 46; Hook, 1928a,b: 114; Tucker, 1972: xvii-xviii). An understanding of language was central to scholarship during the time Marx studied. It was, in fact, the foundation of nineteenth century classical scholarship (Adorno, 1973: 56, 1994: 18-21, 116-118; Cook, 1982: 530; Grote, 1872).

Fairclough and I identified three conceptual elements that are central to understanding the "critical linguistic" aspects of Marx's method of analysis. The elements we highlight are: the doctrine of *abstraction*, the nineteenth century conception of Aristotle's *dialectic*, and the late-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century conceptions of *ideology*, the philosophical counterpart of post-revolutionary political economy in France and Germany. When we trace these themes out in their historical context, what we find in Marx's formulation of dialectics is an intense mixture of naturalism and humanism intertwined with a discursive and relational approach to analysing social phenomena (Fairclough and Graham, 2002). I only have time here to touch on what I think is the most relevant and overt aspect of Marx's method for understanding the changes that we are going through: dialectics.

As developed in the classical system, dialectical arguments have 'for their province words and discourse; they are ... powers or accomplishments of discourse' (Grote, 1872: 384). Dialectical arguments are therefore primarily concerned with language. Dialectic focuses on *Endoxa*, 'premises, propositions and problems' that are 'borrowed from some one among the varieties of accredited or authoritative opinions' – from 'a particular country', 'an intelligent majority' or from 'a particular school of philosophers or wise individuals' (1872: 383). *Endoxa* are found 'exclusively in the regions of ... received opinions', and dialectical argumentation proceeds upon the assumption that in 'every society there are floating beliefs, each carrying with it a certain measure of authority' (385-6). Dialectics assumes that the beliefs and propositions common to a given community will often contradict each other. But they are an important focus for precisely for this reason—*Endoxa* form the basis of what we call "common sense". Each individual, as they mature, 'imbibes of these opinions and beliefs insensibly and without special or professional teaching' (385). Consequently, they 'carry with them more or less authority, and it is from them that the reasonings of common life ... are supplied' (385).

Endoxic propositions carry with them an assumption of 'probability', precisely because of their status as authoritatively received or common opinion within a given social context (389-90). Endoxa have 'support from the mass of opinions and beliefs floating and carrying authority at the same time', and dialectical analysis 'is carried on within this wide field of floating opinions' (389-90). The method is to search 'for a "counter syllogism" of which the conclusion is contradictory' (an antithesis) to the Endoxa it is investigating (390). Such a method does not proceed from first principles; rather, the purpose of deploying dialectics is to 'open a new road to the first *principia* of each separate science' (391). In any case, first principles 'can never be scrutinized through the truths of the science itself, which presuppose them and are deduced from them' (391). Such principles can only be challenged from outside a particular science, and dialectical argumentation is designed precisely for this purpose. Its most useful function is that of 'dissipating the false persuasions of knowledge' based on contradictory principles or taken-for-granted, commonsense beliefs and assumptions (391).

The primary category of classical dialectics is *Relation*. Considered in the most comprehensive sense, all the dialectical categories 'are implicated and subordinated to Relation' (115-20). Relation, 'understood in the large sense which really belongs to it, ought to be considered as an Universal, comprehending and pervading all the Categories' (120). Consequently, new relations 'may become predicable of a thing, without any change in the thing itself, but simply by changes in other things' (122). As a method of inquiry dialectics can be described as a *relational* and *social* theory of language, a theory of *language in use* that is drawn from 'common speech', and which is inalienably bound up with social consciousness and relationships in a world which is assumed to be wholly social and material in its determination. The *relational* aspect of dialectical categories is therefore its most important. The relational aspect of dialectic is 'not as one amongst many distinct Categories, but as implicated with all the Categories' (Grote, 1872: 126).

The primacy of the relational in classical dialectics can be seen throughout Marx's early texts. The relational aspect of classical scholarship is organised around the concept of *Relata* (100-104). *Relata* are 'said to be *of other things*, or are said to be in some manner *towards something else*' (100). Thus, *Relata* are 'so designated in virtue of their relation to another *Correlata*; the master is master *of a servant* – the servant is servant *of a master*' (1872: 101; cf. also Hegel, 1807/1966: 228-40). Therefore 'the *Relatum* and its *Correlate* seem to be *simul naturâ*. If you suppress one of the pair, the other vanishes' (Grote, 1872: 102).

Throughout Marx's early work, through to the *Grundrisse*, we can clearly identify elements of the formal Aristotelian method modified by Hegel's introduction of the dialectic to the time element. Dialectical terms such as "subjects and predicates"; "Ens", "genus", and "species"; "differentia and semblances"; "accidents and errors in language" and so on, pervade the texts. Marx quite clearly deploys elements of the dialectical method. Yet it would be misleading in the extreme to say that Marx relied solely upon language, or fetishised it in any way. He and Engels make this quite clear in the introduction to *The German Ideology*:

[14] Since the Young Hegelians consider conceptions, thoughts, ideas, in fact all the products of consciousness, to which they attribute an independent existence, as the real chains of men ... it is evident that the Young Hegelians have to fight only against these illusions of consciousness. Since, according to their fantasy, the relationships of men, all their doings, their chains and their limitations are products of consciousness, the Young Hegelians logically put to men the moral postulate of exchanging their present consciousness for human, critical, or egoistic consciousness, and thus removing their limitations. This demand to change consciousness amounts to demands to interpret reality in another way, i.e. to recognise it by means of another interpretation. (1846/1972: 113)

Like the latter-day social constructivists, the Young Hegelians fought phrases with phrases. I read Marx's 'language of real life' as a many-sided metaphor for social *praxis*. His dialectical, historical materialist method recognises that meanings are produced in reciprocal relationship with the whole of social life and are expressions of the social relations in which they are produced.

Marxian futures in global corporatism

Nothing appears to irritate Marxists more than the suggestion that Capitalism is finished. Whether or not it is because without capitalism Marxians feel themselves to be irrelevant, or whether they are disappointed that a socialist utopia has not emerged from the womb of Capital, or whether I am entirely mistaken in announcing the passing of Capital, I honestly do not know. My reading of history leads me to believe that, as a social relation of production, Capital began rapidly vanishing from the end of the 1920s and that it had almost entirely disappeared by the mid-1950s. It seems to me that there have been more and less stable transitional systems in between Capitalism and Global Corporatism—State-Capitalism for example, perhaps even "hypercapitalism"—but that is not the point of my argument.

The point I wish to reiterate is this: regardless of what we call the current system, Marx's method remains relevant. There are still social classes. There are still social relations of production. There are still sophisticated mechanisms of exploitation. There are – without a doubt – manifold new forces of production emerging every day, some that promise emancipation, some that threaten total annihilation, others that demand total obeisance. Yet if we cling steadfastly to the idea that Capital still exists as a social relation of production, we have to ask ourselves: on what grounds do we make such a claim? Where are the two great classes of capital, the owners of the means of production and the wage-labourers? Who should we put in those classes? And so on.

If Marx taught us nothing else, he taught us that the orthodoxies produced in any system blind us to our actual conditions; that social relations change continually throughout history; that one day capital would inevitably wither and die. Bleak writer that he was, he promised nothing utopian to me, except perhaps an abiding faith in human nature, and therefore in nature itself:

[15] Species-life, both for man and for animals, consists physically in the fact that man, like animals, lives from inorganic nature; and because man is more universal than animals, so too is the area of inorganic nature from which he lives more universal. Just as plants, animals, stones, air, light, etc., theoretically form a part of human consciousness, partly as objects of science and partly as objects of art — his spiritual inorganic nature, his spiritual means of life, which he must first prepare before he can enjoy and digest them — so, too, in practice they form a part of human life and human activity. In a physical sense, man lives only from these natural products, whether in the form of nourishment, heating, clothing, shelter, etc. The universality of man manifests itself in practice in that universality which makes the whole of nature his inorganic body, (1) as a direct means of life and (2) as the matter, the object, and the tool of his life activity. Nature is man's inorganic body — that is to say, nature insofar as it is not the human body. Man lives from nature — i.e., nature is his body — and he must maintain a continuing dialogue with it if he is not to die. To say that man's physical and mental life is linked to nature simply means that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature (PE notes).

Capitalism, it has been said over and over, has triumphed as *the* political economic system. It is the sole remaining alternative. Such a view is bolstered time and time again, and from every visible source. Whether claiming to be “left” or “right” leaning, scholars, politicians, and public pundits of all persuasions express the view that the political economic system we live

in can comfortably be called capitalism (Fukuyama, 1995; Harvey, 2001; Hutton & Giddens, 2000; Jessop, 2002; Soros, 2000). “New capitalism” (Fairclough, Giddens), “global capitalism” (Jessop), “hypercapitalism” (Graham), “postmodern capitalism” (Harvey)—the constant flow of descriptors claiming that capitalism, in some form or other, is alive and thriving comes from practically every sphere of public discourse. This has a number of unhelpful effects, the most deleterious of which is that it offers no alternative understandings of the system in which we live. In such a situation, all that is left to contention is whether capitalism is good or bad, whether it makes things worse or better, and so forth. So, depending on one’s attitude towards capitalism, when arguments about political economic systems are put forward, the scripted arguments “for” and “against” are trotted out and played, over and over, like a badly scratched record, leading to the inevitable conclusion that capitalism is unstoppable and universal, for better or worse, and that we must therefore embrace, fight, or adapt to the system.

The resultant lack of alternative understandings has been exacerbated by Marxians who have attempted to characterise the current system in terms of capitalism without realising that a) it is probably not at all capitalist, and b) even if it is, there are *no* critical arguments against capitalism that can have any beneficial effects in the current context because their function is to bolster a false ideal. That is to say: any arguments about capitalism—for or against—only serve to bolster the widespread notion that capitalism is a universal, global system of political economic relations when, in my assessment, nothing could be further from the facts.

Marx’s most valuable legacy, as I see it, is a very powerful analytical approach for understanding our social world that synthesises synchronic and diachronic views. It is an approach based on the analysis of social relations and focused on *what and how we produce*. It is therefore focused on *what we do*, which includes to some significant degree *what we say and mean*. The challenge for Marxians, from the inside of an almost incomprehensibly violent and complex system, is to understand what relations define this system, how it has been produced, and what we can do to change it for the better.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the Marxian Futures workshop held at Cornell University in 2004.
2. ‘though every capital is a sum of commodities — i.e., of exchange values — it does not follow that every sum of commodities, of exchange values, is capital.’ (Marx, 1847 – Wage Labour and Capital)
3. It is worth noting here the employees benefit trusts and the money of the general public are treated as separate. Also, no mention is made of the monies involved in the complex of ownership

of News Corporation and General Motors, the bulk of which also involves and represents the savings of “the general public”.

4. For the sake of convenience, I use the term language here in the broadest sense. I include computer languages, images, symbols, and sounds by which meaning may be exchanged. I recognise that a more formal definition of language would separate these forms of communication into various types.

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