

Redefining the Common Causes of Social Struggles: An Examination of the Antinomies of Value, Labor and Subsumption

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Abstract. In the global contemporary political context, diverse social struggles are being alienated from each other to the point that the illusion of capitalism as the only possible socio-economic system is blurring all horizons of social change. In this article, we will aim to redefine the common causes of social struggles, by demonstrating their intersectionality and interdependence. In order to do so, we will engage with a number of concepts from Marx's philosophy. In the introduction, we will examine the notion of value, claiming that Marx's value theory is not simply a labor theory of value, but that it rather reflects the parallax structure of production and circulation, crystallized in the ultimate value-form of money. Having obtained these preliminary insights, we will go back to the phenomenon of labor in capitalism, to reinterpret, in the first section of the article, the Marxian distinction between productive and unproductive labor. From this will follow the first concrete examples of the intersectionality of social struggles against the abstraction of capital: namely, showing that gender and racial struggles have certain common causes, rooted in the Gramscian hegemony. In the second section, we will examine the distinction that Marx establishes between the formal and the real subsumption. The latter, we will claim, is decisive for understanding how capital structures the quasi-totality of our social relations. Following an interpretation of Maren Ade's film *Toni Erdmann*, we will propose some possible means of intersectional struggle against real subsumption, that will find their theoretical backing in the concept of subversive universals. The concluding remarks will address the nuclear logic of the distribution and accumulation of capital, a symptom that survives throughout history preserved and driven by the omnipresence of ideology, and stress again implicitly the importance of common struggle in the unfreezing of emergence of a new revolutionary subject.

Keywords: Karl Marx; Antonio Gramsci; Ideology; Value; Labor; Capitalism.

[es] Redefinir las causas comunes en las luchas sociales. Un análisis a las antinomias del valor, el trabajo y la subsunción

Resumen. En el contexto político global contemporáneo, las diversas luchas sociales se están alienando entre sí hasta el punto de que la ilusión del capitalismo como único sistema socioeconómico posible está difuminando todos los horizontes del cambio social. En este artículo, trataremos de redefinir las causas comunes de las luchas sociales, demostrando su

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interseccionalidad e interdependencia. Para ello, nos ocuparemos de una serie de conceptos de la filosofía de Marx. En la introducción, examinaremos la noción de valor, afirmando que la teoría del valor de Marx no es simplemente una teoría laboral del valor, sino que más bien refleja la estructura paralela de la producción y la circulación, cristalizada en la forma de valor última del dinero. Una vez obtenidas estas ideas preliminares, volveremos al fenómeno del trabajo en el capitalismo, para reinterpretar, en la primera sección del artículo, la distinción marxiana entre trabajo productivo e improductivo. A partir de ahí, se darán los primeros ejemplos concretos de la interseccionalidad de las luchas sociales contra la abstracción del capital: a saber, mostrar que las luchas de género y las raciales tienen ciertas causas comunes, enraizadas en la hegemonía gramsciana. En la segunda sección, examinaremos la distinción que Marx establece entre la subsunción formal y la real. Esta última, afirmaremos, es decisiva para entender cómo el capital estructura la cuasi-totalidad de nuestras relaciones sociales. Tras una interpretación de la película *Toni Erdmann* de Maren Ade, propondremos algunos medios posibles de lucha interseccional contra la subsunción real, que encontrarán su respaldo teórico en el concepto de universales subversivos. Las observaciones finales abordarán la lógica nuclear de la distribución y la acumulación del capital, un síntoma que pervive a lo largo de la historia preservado e impulsado por la omnipresencia de la ideología, y subrayarán de nuevo implícitamente la importancia de la lucha común en el descongelamiento de la emergencia de un nuevo sujeto revolucionario.

Palabras clave: Karl Marx; Antonio Gramsci; Ideología; Valor; Trabajo; Capitalismo.

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The claim that capitalism is not simply an economic system detached from the rest of social relations is certainly no breaking news (Barria-Asenjo, Žižek, Pavón-Cuéllar, Salas, Cabezas, Huanca, Aguilar, 2022). To say that, today, the market logic of capital has penetrated all the pores of our social tissue isn't groundbreaking either. Already in 1944, Karl Polanyi showed how the *economy is always embedded in society* (and not the other way around), by dismantling the liberal idea of a disembedded, "self-adjusting market" that he saw as a "stark utopia" (2001, p. 3). Yet, providing concrete, present-time theoretical arguments for this seemingly simple assertion is always a tricky thing to do. The ever-changing modes of capitalist domination always required new, historically updated critiques of political economy. And indeed, in different historical epochs of capitalism, its critics saw rather differently the ways in which the capitalist economy tended to impose itself as the abstract universal of all social relations. Nevertheless, from classical economists, through Marx and onwards, there exist a certain number of notions that remained constant focal points, around which those differences took place in critical (and affirmative) approaches to capitalism. One of them is certainly the notion of *value*. The way in which different theories consider value seems to determine, more or less obviously, the whole architecture of their argumentation – it suffices to think of the cleavage in political economy between the (classical) labor theory of value on the one hand, and the (neoclassical) utility theory of value, on the other. While the latter sits out of the scope of this article (if not only as its implicit object of critique), questioning the status of the labor theory of value in Marx's writings will represent the starting point of our analysis, whose overall aim will be to show the decisive importance of the intersectionality of struggles against capital.

Did Marx ever formulated his own 'labor theory of value', as we can read in textbooks on economy and summaries of Marx's philosophy? One thing is certain: he never uses this formula and speaks instead about value in the wider terms of *value theory*. The labor theory of value can be rightfully ascribed to Adam Smith and David Ricardo, but Marx is not simply following the lineage of classical economists. As Michael Heinrich underlines, "Marx is not predominantly criticizing the conclusions of political economy, but rather the manner in which it *poses questions...*" (2004, p. 34). And Marx himself states that: "Political economy has indeed analyzed value and its magnitude, however incompletely [...]," in order to pose a crucial question: "[...] why labor is expressed in value, and why the measurement of labor by its duration is expressed in the magnitude of value of the product" (1992, p. 173-74)? His answer can be summarized in the following manner: in capitalism, considered as a social formation, the "process of production has mastery over man, instead of the opposite" (Marx, 1992, p. 175). There lies one of the great lessons of Marx: only *in* the specific circumstances of capitalist exploitation can labor be understood as the substance of value.

Yet, Marx's value theory is not simply a substantialist one, since exchange-value comes to complicate the classical, substantialist hypothesis of labor-value. So, while incorporating some important aspects of the labor theory of value, he transforms its initial scope and drives it beyond its limitations. Marx knew very well that substance appears always as an intensity, that beyond quantity or magnitude, there is also a *specific social weight* inscribed in the commodity as a social hieroglyph, an intensity which it gains once it is plunged into circulation. Therefore, only with the upcoming of exchange-value (once the commodity is brought by its owner to the market), does value become the "definite social manner of expressing the labour bestowed on a thing" (Marx, 1992, p. 176). Value *will have been* what it was (precisely in this form of *future antérieur*), only once labor-value has become exchange-value. In other words, for Marx, commodities gain through concrete labor only a potential, use-value. This value is not even an economic value properly speaking. It is only by being brought to the market and in relation with all other commodities that products gain exchange-value and become commodities. Simultaneously, the concrete labor needed to produce them is turned into abstract labor, which will determine the newly acquired actual value. Thus, it is the pair *abstract labor - exchange-value* that is *valorizing the value* in capitalism, that is turning concrete labor as a substance of potential value into abstract labor as an intensity of actual value. In onto-axiological terms: if a product has value that is only *in-itself* (and thus not

a value properly speaking), a commodity has value that is *in-itself-for-itself*. In this manner, Marx's value theory *is* and *is not* substantialist, that is to say: it is both at once, because "value has to originate outside circulation, in production, and in circulation" (Žižek, 2006, p. 51). For the sake of clarity, and in order to summarize what has been proposed above, we shall cite one passage from Žižek's *The Parallax View*:

The tension between production and circulation processes is again that of parallax: yes, value is created in the production process; however, it is created there, as it were, only potentially, since it is actualized as value only when the produced commodity is sold, and the circle M-C-M' is thus completed. This temporal gap between the production of value and its actualization is crucial: even if value is produced in production, without the successful completion of the process of circulation, there *stricto sensu* is no value [...] In production, value is generated "in itself," while only through the completed circulation process does it become "for-itself." (Žižek, 2006, p. 52).

What does this parallax *tension* of value tell us about its ontological status? On the one hand, value finds *substance* and *content* which is *in-itself* – in labor and production. On the other, it finds *intensity* and *form* which is *for-itself*, in exchange and circulation. The relation of substance and intensity in value,⁸ is for Marx, the one of dialectical progression. The *impossible synthesis* of value transforms both labor from concrete to abstract, and particular commodities and their utility into universal equivalents of exchange – the latter being the process from which money is necessarily crystalized (Marx, 1992, p. 181). It is noteworthy to mention here that in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre ontologically defines value as 'in-itself-for-itself' (*en-soi-pour-soi*), as an impossible synthesis of 'in-itself' (object) and 'for-itself' (subject; and we can add for our own needs without being mistaken: *society*). For Sartre, "value is beyond being" and "the being of value as value, is the being that has no being" (1976, p.131-32, our translation). Value *is* and it *isn't* – somehow similarly to Kafka's *Castle*, that is geographically given, but still unattainable. Furthermore, in *Cahiers pour une morale*, he will write, in a synthesis that Marx would only reverse, that value is the sacred "idea-object" (*idée-objet*) (Sartre, 1983, p. 121). The adjective 'sacred' is here of greatest importance, because it anchors the ontological construction of idea-object, i.e. value, in the religious and thus social field; analogous to the fetishist character of commodity, which grounds its mystical elements in social relations. But what could be the equivalent of Sartre's ontological category of sacred idea-object in political economy? Money, without any doubt. *Fiduciary money*, to be precise. Not in the sense of liquidity (coins and paper bills), nor of bullion (ingots of gold and silver), but in the sense of *fiat* or *credit money*; meaning money as a fundamental institution of social trust.

Finally, we come back to the initial question of how the capitalist economy imposes itself today as the mute, abstract universal of all social relations. The answer we propose is: through the peculiar ontological status of value sublated in money. Money is a *knot* in which all relations of social trust tightly intertwine. We can provocatively assume, in a Lacanian fashion maybe, that this knot *is nothing*, a form without content. The figure of the *knot*, as a fastening of social relations, *is*: it *exists*; but we propose that this knot is also *nothing*. The idea-object 'knot' *is nothing*. Nevertheless, knot is also the outcome of *knotting* – the action of making knots – and is thus a pure intensity. Following this wordplay, we can propose that money is a *quasi-object-quasi-subject* pertaining to the realm between *being* and *nothingness*. The nothing of the knot engendered in money, constitutes thus a fundamental lack in the big Other, an ontological gap which emerges as a black hole – irreversibly sucking in all social trust.

To return to our initial context, in Marx's critique of political economy, on the opposite pole from concrete labor stands money as the ultimate value-form. Marx himself wrote in the Preface to the first edition of *Capital*: "I have popularized the passages concerning the substance of value and the magnitude of value as much as possible. The value-form, whose fully developed shape is the money-form, is very simple and slight in content. Nevertheless, the human mind has sought in vain for more than 2,000 years to get to the bottom of it..." (Marx, 1992, p. 89-90).

What could be the task of our analysis in this respect? Should we try to offer an interpretation of Marx's monetary theory of value? An important number of such interpretations already exist and the importance of money as a primordial contemporary tool of capitalist domination has been widely recognized (cf. Aglietta & Orléan, 1998; Aglietta, 2018). Thus, we shall not try to add to these theories, but rather reinvest and revisit the conceptual path of value formation, from production onwards, that we have been initially proposed here. We shall do so in order to provide fresh arguments for understanding the intersectionality of struggles against capital. We intend to do that by analyzing the relation of two dichotomies that are to be found in Marx's work: 1) productive/unproductive labor; and 2) formal/real subsumption. We will claim that an advanced understanding of those categories is necessary for recognizing the crucial role of unproductive labor in the abstraction of capital, and decisive for countering the universality of real subsumption that leaves no social space uncolonized, by the means of subversive universals. We shall thus invest a path that will implicitly lead us to sketch an adapted, more materialist modality of Nietzschean transvaluation of values, that could counter the usual valorization of value, produced by capital and crystalized in money.

Productive and Unproductive Labor as a New Way of Understanding the Intersectionality of Struggles Against Capital

How to understand the current political struggles in terms of the contributions of Marx and Gramsci? Various texts have been written on the subject: from the notion of alienated/exploited labor to that of communist revolution,

⁸ For a more detailed onto-axiological account on 'value as substance' vs. 'value as intensity,' cf. Perunović (2020).

passing through the concepts of passive revolution, hegemony, ideology, etc. In this section of our paper, we would like to focus on the problem of current social struggles from the Marxian distinction between productive and unproductive labor.

To understand this difference, it is necessary to define what we call “capital.” It is not about a thing, but about a social relationship. Unlike other modes of production, capitalism introduces a new modulation of social reality that goes beyond the division between owners of private property and workers without property, of the existence of exploitation and the evidence of social inequality (Barria-Asenjo, 2022). First, what capitalism produces are commodities and thereby redefines it the entire reality. Labor-power (*Arbeitskraft*) acquires a duality in capitalism: it is both concrete labor (*konkrete Arbeit*) and abstract labor (*abstrakte Arbeit*) (Marx, 1904; Marx & Engels, 1961). What does this mean? That is, before, when a person worked, what was relevant was the particularity of their action that, as irreducible to others, produced a singular utility in an object, that is, it produced a use-value (*Gebrauchswert*). This could be exchanged through barter and/or other mechanisms, in which the quantitative accumulation of wealth was meaningless because the only thing that could be accumulated were goods with their respective utilities. The latter, which was an episodic and accidental issue in pre-capitalist economies, was called by Aristotle χρηματιστική as opposed to οικονομία (Aristotle, 1998).

In capitalism, this changes radically, because labor is no longer taken in its specificity, but rather all content is abstracted from it to establish a general interchangeability norm where the most dissimilar works, which produce the most varied objects, are equivalent. It no longer matters if one works with their fingers, body, or thought; what matters is that, based on a general quantitative equivalence, working time (*Arbeitszeit*) determines the value (*Wert*) of every commodity. Thus, everything becomes interchangeable and comparable. However, the value produced by working time must be expressed in a phenomenal way: exchange-value (*Tauschwert*) thus arises. Therefore, capitalism produces commodities in the sense that it produces entities that have two factors: use-value and exchange-value (Marx, 1992; Marx and Engels, 1962), which are produced by concrete labor and abstract work. This does not mean anything other than that the foundation of value is the labor of the living subject (*lebendiges Subjekt*), so that all merchandise consists of objectified labor (*vergegenständlichte Arbeit*) (Marx, 1973; Marx and Engels, 1983). Capital can be defined, then, as the valorisation of value (*die Verwertung des Werts*), that is, as that social activity which seeks only to produce incessantly, through the exploitation of abstract labor plus exchange-value, to produce from one value a higher value, that is, a surplus-value (*Mehrwert*). However, phenomenally, capitalist relations elude the human labor basis of economic relations, so that social relations appear as relations between things, as if the fact that they possess an exchange-value were natural and timeless (Marx, 1992; Marx & Engels, 1962). Thus true class struggles are hidden in commodity fetishism (Žižek, 1994, 2009).

For this reason, one characteristic of capitalism is that every social relationship is mediated by abstract labor, in the sense that all exchange involves commodities, which are produced through the abstraction of labor (Postone, 2003; Ayala-Colqui, 2021, 2022). Furthermore, this abstraction of the commodity form organizes all human activities to the extent that everything is defined in quantitative terms and as part of the logic of accumulation (Sohn-Rethel, 1978). In other words, there is a kind of unconscious that dominates and shapes all social action: “the elusive network of implicit, quasi-‘spontaneous’ presuppositions and attitudes that form an irreducible moment of the reproduction of ‘non-ideological’ (economic, legal, political, sexual...) practices” (Žižek, 1994, p. 15).

It is in this context that we can reinterpret the Marxian distinction between productive labor (*productive Arbeit*) and unproductive labor (*unproduktive Arbeit*). According to the above, productive labor is considered to be that activity that produces exchange-value and, therefore, surplus-value; on the other hand, labor that does not produce exchange-value and does not contribute to the appreciation of capital is called unproductive labor: “Productive work is as such that which for the worker reproduces the previously determined value of his work capacity; however, as a value-creating activity [*Werthschaffende Tätigkeit*] it valorizes [*verwertet*] capital, confronting the worker with the values for himself created in the form of capital” (Marx, 1988, p. 112, translation ours). Marx (1988) is careful not to essentialize activities as productive and unproductive, that is, the same activity (for example, an activity in the services category) can become productive and unproductive depending on the context in which it is and if it really serves to valorize capital.

However, we would be mistaken if we saw unproductive labor as a distant area of capitalist exploitation where abstract labor does not operate and, even more so, there exists the abstraction of the commodity form. Indeed, there is a whole range of social struggles that go beyond the sphere of production in the strict sense and that take place in the sphere of the non-productive. In the seventies, Mariarosa Dalla Costa put the question of “reproductive” work at the center of the discussion; namely, the activity that women generally carry out at home that allows the male worker to preserve and maintain himself for a new day of work (Dalla Costa & James, 1975). For this author, the heterosexual family is nothing more than a necessity imposed by the sexual division of labor where one gender is assigned productive wage labor in the factory (men) and the other the unproductive non-wage labor in homes (women). However, this work of women is functional to capitalism, since without it, productive working activities would not even be possible. Leopoldina Fortunati clarifies this issue when she points out that, at a formal level, reproduction does not appear as reproductive labor when, at a real level, it produces and reproduces a very specific commodity, labor-power:

The process of consumption of labor-power is the production process of commodities and of surplus-value not only when it takes place within production but when it takes place within reproduction too. Therefore, the double consumption within reproduction is also doubly productive. In terms of the individual male worker’s consumption, it is productive because it

produces and reproduces the individual as a commodity. In terms of the consumption of housework labor-power, it is productive because the process of its consumption is simultaneously a process of production of commodities and surplus-value. (Fortunati, 1995, p. 70).

This same reflection on gender can be extrapolated to the field of race. Indeed, just as there was an original accumulation based on the trafficking of women and their unpaid labor (Federici, 2004), in the case of Latin America and Africa, there was an original accumulation based on the brutal exploitation of black and indigenous people (Mariátegui, 1971; Quijano & Ennis, 2000). That the issue of non-labour, or of being non-productive, which is the issue of race, appears now, according to our previous considerations, is also an issue that can be subsumed by the abstraction of capital. If there had not been, in colonial times, the exploitation of the free labor of indigenous people and blacks, the modern and European development of capitalism would have been impossible; and, even today, without the precarious work that takes place in the peripheries (in the Coltan mines in the Congo, in the industries of China, for example) the most “modern” phenomena of capitalism, such as technological merchandise, would disappear (Dyer-Witheford, 2015).

For this reason, even in unproductive regions (where oppressions specific to gender or race occur), the abstraction of capital operates. Therefore, we postulate that *the commodity form unconsciously shapes both productive and unproductive labor; both economic and non-economic activities*. This is the meaning of the “reinterpretation” that we want to offer around the pair of productive/unproductive labor. Now, given that unproductive labor involves precisely those non-economic social struggles, such as those related to gender or race, among others, then we can, in turn, take a new look at social struggles based on Marx, including both economic struggles and “cultural” struggles. The struggles against infrastructure and the struggles against superstructure are not different struggles, but one and the same class struggle (Ayala-Colqui, 2022, 2023a, 2023b) that fight against the abstraction of the commodity form. In other words, the thesis that we would like to sustain here is the following: the intersectionality of current struggles (in the field of work, gender, race, disabilities, species, ecology, etc.) is not a mere strategic addition or a conjunctural conjunction of different social demands, but the real movement that fights against the abstraction of capital.

Here, we can add and reinterpret Gramsci’s notion of hegemony: the moral and intellectual leadership that the proletariat has to give to the labor movement, and which can then be taken as the intersectional struggle that the “class” (not the worker as such, but every subject subsumed by abstract labor and exchange-value) enacts against capital. If Gramsci points out that hegemony goes beyond the merely economic, it is precisely because it requires the intervention of those “non-economic” factors that are also dominated by capital: “Though hegemony is ethico-political, it must also be economic. This must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 161). As Mouffe (1979) reminds us, “hegemony is defined as the ability of one class to articulate the interests of other social groups to its own. It is now possible to see that this can be done in two very different ways” (p. 183). Therefore, this intersectional articulation is hegemonic only when it achieves a unified strategy against capital, a “transversal” strategy for all struggles (Ayala-Colqui, 2022). That is, in our opinion, reinterpreting Marx and Gramsci, an intersectional struggle against the commodity form must develop a hegemony that deposes the real abstractions that dominate the totality of social reality.

Real Subsumption, Subversive Universals, and *Toni Erdmann*

Another way to describe the difference between concrete labor and abstract labor is through Marx’s differentiation between *formal subsumption* and *real subsumption*, which can then help in formulating an intersectional challenge to the domination of real abstractions. Marx’s “Results of the Immediate Process of Production,” written in 1865 but not first published until 1933, and gaining widespread notice in the 1960s, was originally written to connect the first and second volumes of *Capital* and is now most well-known for its development of the difference between formal and real subsumption. For Marx, *formal subsumption* signifies the way that labor, which might have only been aimed at self-sustenance or artistic development, is taken over by capital to generate a profit for those other than the laborer herself:

When a peasant who has always produced enough for his needs becomes a day labourer working for a farmer; when the hierarchic order of guild production vanishes making way for the straight-forward distinction between the capitalist and the wage-labourers he employs; when the former slave-owner engages his former slaves as paid workers, etc., then we find that what is happening is that production processes of varying social provenance have been transformed into capitalist production. The changes delineated above then come into force. A man who was formerly an independent peasant now finds himself a factor in a production process and dependent on the capitalist directing it, and his own livelihood depends on a contract which he as commodity owner (viz. the owner of labour-power) has previously concluded with the capitalist as the owner of money. (Marx, 1992, p. 1020).

Here, one important aspect of formal subsumption is that it makes at least possible for labor to be outside the system of profit (a farmer producing just enough for their needs). Such labor, to use a Kantian term, is *disinterested* (Kant, 2007, p. 41) to the wealth it could generate, meaning that the means of production were on a small enough scale that workers could afford to be self-sufficient without being beholden to a factory structure or crediting agency. On the other hand, *real subsumption* takes place when the means of production are at such a large scale that

they can only function in the context of a large factory or business, and the worker is only one of many in the service of the greater machine (Marx, 1992, p. 1022). In this way the forces of labor become *socialized*, they “come into being through co-operation, division of labour within the workshop, the use of *machinery*, and in general the transformation of production by the conscious *use* of the sciences, of mechanics, chemistry, etc. for specific ends” (p. 1024).

For Marx, the inclusion of science and technology in production results in production’s abstraction, in the expansion of production from the workplace into the “*social forces of production*” (1992, p. 1035). It is this expansion into the social sphere what underlies the hegemonic nature of capital. In other words, in going from formal to real subsumption changes the influence of the structure of capital from local intervention into a global principle, for “we move from an organizing principle which, through exploitation and subordination, is grafted onto the logic of semi-autonomous worlds, to a principle that actively structures the very material reality of production, exchange, and circulation” (Žižek, 2006, p. 235).

One of the major points of the first section of this article is that the real abstraction of capital can only be challenged on its own terms. Mario Tronti, perhaps most well-known for coining the term “the social factory” to describe the way that social space has become an expression of production, argues that: “At the highest level of capitalist development, social relations become moments of the relations of production, and the whole society becomes an articulation of production. In short, all of society lives as a function of the factory and the factory extends its exclusive domination over all of society” (qtd. in Cleaver, 1992, p. 137 n13). Yet one important aspect of the social factory for Tronti is not just that it denotes a problem, but also a strategy for change. For if the problem lies in the articulation of the social realm, then the social realm is one important area of battle, since a fight is “the only way in which the working class can acquire strength for itself and indeed recognize its strength, as the only living, active, productive element of society, as the hinge of social relations, as the fundamental articulation of economic development” (Tronti, 2019, p. xxv).

The rearticulation of social space as a challenge to its reconfiguration by capital has been taken up in several important ways. Two are discussed here: the industrialization of the home and the socialization of the spaces of work. In an interview that Michel Foucault conducted in 1981, called “Friendship as a Way of Life,” the philosopher wonders if the question of “Who am I?” that is often forced upon homosexuals can be redirected toward the social sphere, in the form of “What relations, through homosexuality, can be established, invented, multiplied, and modulated?” (Foucault, 1997, p. 135). Here Foucault takes homosexual relations as the basis for thought about new kinds of social relations, thinking of an alternative pathway to challenging the real subsumption of life outside of work. This thought is extended by Jack Halberstam in his *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, in which the normalization of “family time,” meaning “the normative scheduling of daily life (early to bed, early to rise) that accompanies child rearing” (2005, p. 5), is denatured by something like Foucault’s friendship as a way of life. For Halberstam, one disruptive notion is that of “queer time,” which is about “the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing” (p. 2). The most important takeaway from thinking about Foucault and Halberstam together is that they fight real abstraction on an important level, the social, rather than the local. And by abstracting some of the strategies for living from homosexual life into every form of life, there is a great potential to enact a traversal strategy (Ayala-Colqui, 2022) aimed at changing life rather than merely by piecemeal.⁹

One cultural example of changing the social rather than the local is found in Maren Ade’s 2016 film *Toni Erdmann*. Ines Condradi (Sandra Hüller) is a German, working on an outsourced oil industry project in Bucharest. When her father, Winfried (Peter Simonischek) comes to visit, he finds that his daughter’s life is completely consumed by work, with no room for any non-work social relations. She is a figure of real subsumption, absorbed in a process which “requires the valuation and evaluation of everything, even of that which is spectral, epiphenomenal, and without value. Real subsumption leaves no aspect of life uncolonized. It endeavors to capture, and to put to work, even those things that are uneconomical, or ‘not part of the mechanism’” (Shaviro, 2013; cf. Willems, 2008, pp. 74-75). Winfried tries to use his humor to intervene in his daughter’s life, to get her to take things less seriously, but he totally fails. His attempts at visiting Ines at work and getting to know her colleagues only cause his daughter more stress rather than lessening it. So, Winfried goes to the airport to return home and Ines continues her life just as it went on before.

If the movie ended there would be no reason to discuss it, except as an example of the impenetrable armor of the real abstractions that dominate reality. This is a world defined by Sohn-Rethel’s conception of real abstraction, in which even the ability to think rationally about a situation and try to change it, is born out of the world of capitalist commodification (Sohn-Rethel, 1978, p. 20). Therefore, when Winfried’s initial attempt at changing Ines’ way of seeing things fails, he takes a direct, single-pronged approach that is itself born from the entity it is trying to change. What is needed is a more oblique strategy, something more akin to the approach of Foucault and Halberstam, one which is intersectional in that “there are multiple and enmeshed forms of both identity and oppression that need to be addressed simultaneously” (May, 2015, p. x).

⁹ Another approach to rethinking the capitalist structure of home life through an address to “the whole” is through architecture. In “The Significance of Standard” from 1949, Italian architect and designer Ettore Sottsass describes how “A standard form is a work of art conceived and realized not by an individual but by a sum of individuals, by a people and humankind, when that people or that humankind manage to find a harmonious rhythm of life. This is to say when what we call civilization (in the sense of culture) is not a construction made by a few rulers and many other forgotten people” (Sottsass, 2020, p. 15).

Winfried takes an intersectional approach when he returns a few days later, but not as Winfried Conradi, but rather as the Toni Erdmann of the film's title. The change in character is signified by an obviously fake black wig and big false teeth. Toni does not try to change Ines' relationship to capital by attacking her work, but rather targets the way her work life is enmeshed in her social life. This is intersectional because it addresses the mesh rather than the node. Toni claims he is a life coach and starts becoming integrated into both Ines' social and work lives. His obvious absurdity is not a problem; in fact, it infuses the real abstraction of capital with a sense that it should not be taken so seriously. The culmination of this is that when Ines hosts a birthday lunch at her home, and she has trouble getting into her dress, she, perhaps inspired by Toni's absurdity, decides to host the lunch naked. When her work colleagues arrive, they also take off their clothes, with the result that, due to the absurdity of the situation, "Ines finds herself suddenly in command – even of her boss" (Ratner and Ade, 2017, p. 45).

The result of this change is not that Ines finds a new, more fulfilling life doing something more constructive. No, she goes back to the same job with the same people. Yet her world is fundamentally changed. There is now room for difference within the real abstraction of her life. One way to make sense of this change is through what Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams have termed *subversive universals*. Universals are not hegemonic, as hegemony turns difference into the same. Instead, the universalism of the real abstraction of capital is not about turning everything into the same thing but rather about subsuming every form of difference. The importance of *subversive* universals is that they act as empty, never finished placeholders within real abstraction for a wide range of ever-changing differences, rather than any kind of accepted truth (Srnicek and Williams, 2015, pp. 77-78). The nakedness at Ines' party functions in just this way. The result is not that everyone, after the party, is always naked. Or that Ines joins a nudist colony. Instead, the absurdity of the naked party (just like the absurdity of Toni Erdmann's disguise) signals that there is a place for difference within the overarching system. However, this difference is not a specific difference, but rather a location for difference itself.

A Provisional Closure: The Impossible Within the Interminable

It is possible to identify the logic of the distribution and accumulation of capital from the eighteenth century to the present twenty-first century, then, if its economic aspects are maintained through inheritance and increasing remain tied to the nuclear logic as a symptom that survives throughout history. It therefore becomes crucial to analyze the struggles against capital that take relevance today in the light of the slogans that, while on the one hand, discursively assure us a cynical progress, development, and growth, while on the other, in practice increase in intensity through ideological leaks that end up being translating into the appearance of new margins for inequality, ecological crisis, and a long list of phenomena that are reproduced in the core of societies.

The ontologies that sought to explain the logics at work in social struggles have a long history (Luxemburg, 1912; Lenin, 1917; Polanyi, 2001). The current situation is still focused on this debate, with distinctions in issues such as the economy, impoverishment, political polarization, oppression, inequality, and many other issues that in light of the ecological crisis that threatens the extinction of life as we know it so far (Kolbert, 2014), forces us to rethink both our time and the future.

The above forces us to think about the political constitution of everything around us; there is nothing that operates outside ideology and politics, and facing this general disjunctive the proposal of our article is to think about value in itself and for itself, and what work, production and real value have in the midst of the abstract produced as neoliberalized products. The present tension between production and circulation repeats the capitalist symptom, taking it to an infinite value for itself that expands the limits of the colonization of the neoliberal symptom.

Now then, Kuznets (1955) propitiated the trickle-down theory understood as a capitalist mode of production that, by expanding its limits at an advanced level of industrialized capitalism, would reduce levels of inequality; according to Barahona (2014), these premises were taken by the ideologues of the IMF and the World Bank during the 70s and 80s to inaugurate a new stage of economic policy that would expand worldwide. Yet the discourse goes astray since, according to Piketty (2014), history regarding the neoliberal boom has not produced evidence of the existence of a struggle against the most negative aspects of neoliberalism that threaten societies.

Neoliberalism has never had as a real project to overcome itself by focusing on welfare or eliminating poverty; the trickle-down to the popular strata is less and less, although some authors (Leff, 1998; Barkin, 2002; Polanyi, 2003; Barkin, 2004, 2002; Cartón de Gramos, 2004) propose local and alternative views, and even the possibility of a "non-capitalist accumulation" (Barkin and Rosas, 2006, p. 3) regarding alternatives of transforming or using a surplus in connection with new processes of exchange. The illusion of these proposals is sustained by the utopia of operating outside the ideological, a politics of depoliticization with ideological proposals that transcends current ideological processes (Žizek, 1989; Žizek, 1991, 1998, 2005).

It is this lack of mobilization and the need for expansion of the capitalist machinery that allows us to understand how the virus of capital survives and expands, reaching every level of the structure and superstructure of societies through repetitive movements that continue to leave blockages in the lower social layers? As the capitalist virus touches new levels and spaces, poverty, alienation, and segregation increase as a result of the spillover that occurs in the upper levels and the lack or vacuum that reaches the lower levels, can we think of diverse forms of organization outside the dominant hegemonic logics? What are the possible replacements of capitalist relations?

From the beginning, "partisan" formations (Orstrogorski, 1902; Sartori, 1980; Weber, 1922; Duverger, 1951; Marx and Engels, 1981) of politics was observed with suspicion (Olivé, 2010) since the 50s, there has been an in-

crease in attention to political parties (Gunter and Montero, 2002), and today, the critical view predominates towards the decline and crisis that politics and its parties have in our democracies (Daalder, 2002; Katz and Mair, 2002), meaning the crisis of legitimacy that has increased due to the logic of capital's violent expansion. In this complex scenario, the reinvention of organizational instruments and conceptual re-examination deserves attention.

In this sense, our work addresses concepts linked to productive/unproductive work to analyze historical debts such as the subjugation of race and gender towards the capitalist logic, therefore the words of Nathanael James Hastie Falkiner (2016), when he states that "The moments of rupture are nothing more than the expression of the accumulation of forces, of qualitative leaps (of regression) in the class struggle" (p. 43), constitute a basis to consider any live construction or approach to that which is presented as impossible, a new re-beginning.

Avoiding being the children of a given epoch, we have critically approached diverse movements and theoretical perspectives that are useful for analyzing in greater detail the wool that capital today pulls in front of our eyes and that disrupt the future panorama. We have to affirm that it is this political mixture, with the scarce conceptual distinction that has produced how global challenges and political projects end up in the abstract, how each struggle and each proposal is contaminated by the abstract, is why we affirm that political work first requires a conceptual re-appropriation. Yet how to articulate a way out of the neoliberal gears without recovering the discursive field of the left? Is it possible today to create a political project that can operate outside the dominant ideology?

In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx (1852) states the following:

The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin its own task before it has stripped itself of all superstitious veneration for the past. Previous revolutions needed to go back to the memories of universal history in order to be dazed about their own content. The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead, to become aware of its own content. There, the phrase overflowed the content; here, the content overflows the phrase (p. 78).

Traversed and blinded by the unconscious processes and the almost absolute colonization of the dominant ideology engineered by capitalism, our historical position reproduces without further ado many of the conditions that the current time of our culture and our society imposes on us. Thus it is up to us as a generation to retake and rethink some of the conceptual tools that both thinkers bequeathed us and redefine what is revolution in the 21st century, and what historical subject can claim this process in the present (Barria-Asenjo, 2022).

Wolf (1982) proposed that people without history would be those who would manage to build new social, cultural, and economic configurations against capitalism. This can show glimpses of certainty when looking at confrontations that in today's world have been triggered since the end of 2019 with greater frequency and visibility: the social dilemmas that afflict societies ceased to be a secret since moving to the public scene; however, everything becomes similar to the classic idea that they know what they do and yet they still do it: now we know that we are facing a limit, that the political crises and existence is at a crisis point, and yet we continue under the capitalist logic, feeding the accumulation of capital even with the viral repercussions as with the pandemic of COVID-19.

Gramsci (1917) already stated that the mixture between history and revolution has an objective, "he wants all men to possess spiritual and historical knowledge. That is why the proletarian revolution is social; that is why it must overcome unheard of difficulties and objections; that is why history demands for its good achievement monstrous pruning" (p. 1); the monstrous pruning, the removal of the weeds, those wastes that have corrupted everything that flourish, are important elements of the ramifications of the virus that the same dominant ideology is transmitting. Gramsci's call is acclaimed for a movement of history in which the roots themselves are burned (Barria-Asenjo, 2022).

Finally, let us recall that, according to Enzo Traverso (2017), everything observed is not a new challenge:

in the early 1980s, the irruption of memory in the field of human sciences coincided with the crisis of Marxism, which has been practically absent from the "memorial moment" characteristic of the dawn of the 21st century. The Marxist concept of history entails a memorative obligation: the events of the past must be inscribed in historical consciousness in order to be able to project themselves into tomorrow. It is a "strategic" memory of the struggles of the past, a memory oriented towards the future. The end of communism meant the rupture of this dialectic between past and future (p. 79).

For more than two decades, a sort of eschatological vision has been imposed regarding the link between capitalism and a representation of the future; this historical limit, as a conceptual and historical definition, was largely constructed by Perry Anderson (1992), for whom capitalism is a trans-historically imposed horizon for the future of the history of humanity and the species.

After the economic crisis of 2008, capitalism demonstrated one of its worst facets, and, in addition, this catastrophic historical antecedent helped to demonstrate that despite the extension and consequences that capitalist crises had been dragging for decades, the worst is still possible. One of the undeniable certainties is that the edges of the crisis can continue to spread and devastate more and more spheres of humanity and threaten our species with increasing power (Barria-Asenjo, 2022).

So, what is the radicality of our time, which makes it possible to think of the emergence of a new radicality, if in 1948, on the eve of the deplorable peasant conditions, economic crises, emigration, and cultural depressions, the advance of capitalism emerged a movement and social class according to the political conjuncture? In other words, what is it that freezes the emergence of a new revolutionary subject in our age? What do we understand by the revolutionary subject today? What is the confrontation we are waiting for in order to be able to see clearly the deep

crisis in which we find ourselves? What are the revolutionary aspects that capital has learned to hide in order to maintain its ramification under the slogan that there is no possible way out of the neoliberal logic?

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