

CAPITAL AS “AUTOMATIC SUBJECT” AND THE CLASS STRUGGLE ON THE FORM-DETERMINATIONS OF WORKING- CLASS POLITICAL ACTION IN THE CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

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ABSTRACT

This article develops a reading of the precise form in which Marx introduces the class struggle in his dialectical presentation in *Capital* and argues that, in its *simplest* form-determination, the class struggle is the most general *direct* social relation between *collective personifications of commodities* through which the *unity* of the *indirect* relations of capitalist production asserts itself. More specifically, it shows that the class struggle is the necessary concrete form taken by the purchase of labourpower at its full value and, therefore, by the attainment of the *socially-constituted normal* material reproduction of the productive attributes of wage-labourers in a capitalistic “exploitable shape”, i.e. *in the conditions demanded by the valorisation of the total social capital*. In this sense, the class struggle is a necessary *form* in which the valorisation of capital realises its own immanent determinations. The reason for this does not lie in the abstract methodological principles of structuralism. Rather, it is an expression of the concrete development of the historically specific alienation inherent in the generalised commodity form; in the form of the *total social capital*, the materialised social relation between private and independent individuals *becomes determined as the concrete “automatic subject” of the movement of modern society*. Thus, the article argues that the class struggle must be grasped as a necessary mediating form assumed by the very “automatism” which governs the movement of the objectified form of capitalist social relations. It goes without saying that this does not imply the denial of the transformative powers of human practice personified by waged workers. But it does imply that whatever transformative powers their political action might have – whether capital-reproducing or capital-transcending– must be an immanent determination begotten by the movement of the valorisation of capital and not external to it.

KEYWORDS

Capital; Automatic Subject; Class Struggle; Form-determination; Value of labour power

The nexus between the automatism of capitalist social relations and the antagonistic class subjectivity of waged workers arguably is among the thorniest issues which have concerned Marxist controversies since their emergence until contemporary times. Indeed, this constituted one of the key elements of classical Marxist debates in the early 20th century, specifically as part of the polemic over the so-

called theory of capitalist breakdown¹. However, in that particular intellectual context the automatism of the capital-form tended to be taken at face value, rather unreflectively. Thus, the objectivity of the laws of capital accumulation were for the most part grasped in a “naturalistic” sense, without an explicit effort at an inquiry into its alienated social constitution². Furthermore, the great bulk of the discussion tended to revolve mostly around the *revolutionary* mode of existence of the class struggle. In a nutshell, the question was conceived of as a matter of the connection between the “objective” and “subjective” conditions for the abolition of capital³. But the class struggle remained somewhat undertheorised as a necessary form of capital's reproduction⁴. Be that as it may, the class struggle was not seen as *form-determined* but as an independent “factor”, whether in the determination of the value of labour power (*via* the so-called historical and moral component, on which more below), or in the revolutionary transcendence of the capitalist mode of production.

In reaction to this allegedly “naturalistic objectivism” of classical Marxism, currents associated with so-called Western Marxism tended to focus on the problem of the fetishistic social constitution of capital's automatism. However, despite their emphasis on the inquiry into the genesis of objectified forms of social mediation, they tended to neglect the form-determination of the corresponding modes of human subjectivity itself, specifically when it came to account for the class struggle. Or when they did, as in Lukács treatment of the commodity as a totalising “structuring principle”⁵, they did not ground it in a systematic-dialectical categorial development⁶. *In extremis*, subjectivity ended up deliberately represented and extolled as abstractly autonomous from form-determinations; paradigmatically, for

¹ R. Jacoby, *The Politics of Crisis Theory: Toward the Critique of Automatic Marxism II*, in «Telos», 1975, n. 23, pp. 3–52; G. Marramao, *Theory of the Crisis and the Problem of Constitution: Notes in the Margin to the Konstitutionsproblematik*, in Id., *The Bewitched World of Capital*, Leiden, Brill, 2023, pp. 161–190.

² R. Jacoby, *Towards a critique of automatic Marxism. The politics of philosophy from Lukács to the Frankfurt school*, in «Telos», 1971, no.10, pp. 119–146.

³ G. Caligaris, *Desarrollo económico y acción política revolucionaria. Una evaluación crítica del debate marxista sobre el ‘derrumbe’ del capitalismo*, in R. Escorcia Romo, G. Caligaris (eds.), *Sujeto Capital - Sujeto Revolucionario. Análisis Crítico Del Sistema Capitalista y Sus Contradicciones*, Ciudad de México, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana / ITACA, 2019, pp. 181–210.

⁴ Partial exceptions could be found in the debate between Grossmann and Luxemburg-Bukharin on the determination of the value of labour power and the empirical upward trend in the real wage (N. I. Bukharin, *Eine Ökonomie ohne Wert*, in «Neue Zeit Wochenschrift der deutschen Sozialdemokratie», 1914, n. 32, pp. 806–816; H. Grossmann, *La ley de la acumulación y del derrumbe del sistema capitalista*, México, Siglo XXI, 1979; R. Luxemburg, *Introduction to political economy*, in Eadem, *Complete Works*, vol. 1, London, Verso, 2013, pp. 89–300).

⁵ G. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, London Merlin Press, 1971.

⁶ G. Starosta, *Scientific Knowledge and Political Action: On the Antinomies of Lukács' Thought in “History and Class Consciousness”*, in «Science&Society», 2003, n. 67, pp. 39–67.

instance, in Italian *Operaismo* and even more so in its anglophone reception⁷. In a more nuanced and methodologically more rigorous way, the issue has been characterised as involving the “contradictory” constitution of the class struggle in Bonefeld’s *Open Marxism*, a “dialectical continuum” between reproduction and transcendence⁸.

In my view, perhaps the most accomplished and deliberate recent attempts at addressing the form-determinations of the class struggle can be found in the works of Postone⁹ and Kurz¹⁰. However, their conceptualization of class subjectivity as form-determined is confined to its mode of existence as mediation for the reproduction and development of the capitalist mode of production. By contrast, as argued elsewhere¹¹, when it comes to grounding its emancipatory figure, and despite explicit claims against its “transcendental” or “ontological” rooting in the case of Postone¹², revolutionary subjectivity nonetheless ends up represented as abstractly free from immanent social determination by the capital form¹³. More importantly for the theme of this article, we shall point out later that even as a form of the reproduction of capital the systematic/categorical treatment is still defective: class subjectivity and antagonism is (correctly) seen as constituted in accordance with the commodity form of social relations (rather than being its abstract opposite), but the precise systematic role of the class struggle in the reproduction of capital as an “automatic subject” remains undertheorised.

Against this backdrop, my contribution aims at offering a systematic unfolding of the form-determined constitution of the class struggle as a necessary mode of motion of capital’s automatism (i.e. rather than as its abstract opposite or an “independent subjective factor”). Although as fleshed out elsewhere this applies to both capital-reproducing and capital-transcending class forms of subjectivity and

⁷ H. Cleaver, The inversion of class perspective in Marxian theory: From valorisation to self-valorisation, in W. Bonefeld, R. Gunn, K. Psychopedis, (eds.), *Open Marxism*, Vol. II, Theory and Practice, London, Pluto Press, 1992, pp. 106-144; A. Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx. Lessons on the Grundrisse*, New York, Autonomedia, 1991.

⁸ W. Bonefeld, Capital as Subject and the Existence of Labour, in W. Bonefeld, R. Gunn, J. Holloway, K. Psychopedis (eds.), *Open Marxism*, Vol. III, Emancipating Marx, London, Pluto Press, 1995, pp. 183-212. For a critique, see: G. Starosta, *Fetishism and Revolution in the Critique of Political Economy: Critical Reflections on some Contemporary Readings of Marx’s Capital*, in «Continental Thought & Theory», 2017, no.1, pp. 365-398.

⁹ M. Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

¹⁰ R. Kurz, *The Substance of Capital. The Life and Death of Capitalism*, London, Chronos, 2016.

¹¹ G. Caligaris, G. Starosta, *Subjetividad y objetividad en el límite histórico del capital: Reflexiones Entorno al debate sobre el “derrumbe” del capitalismo y su reconsideración reciente por Robert Kurz*, in «Ápeiron. Estudios de Filosofía», 2024, no. 20, pp. 99-135.

¹² Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, cit., p. 38.

¹³ G. Starosta, *Marx’s Capital, Method and Revolutionary Subjectivity*, Leiden, Brill, 2015, pp. 164-5; Idem, *Rethinking Marx’s Mature Social Theory. Editorial Introduction*, in «Historical Materialism», 2004, no. 12, pp. 43-52.

action¹⁴, in this article I shall confine the discussion to the simpler form-determinations of the class struggle as a concrete form of existence of the reproduction of capital¹⁵.

1. THE CAPITAL-FORM, THE AUTOMATISM OF THE SOCIAL RELATIONS OF PRODUCTION AND HUMAN SUBJECTIVITY

1.1. The constitution of capital as the “automatic subject” of the process of circulation of social wealth

As Micaloni¹⁶ observes, Marx’s most explicit textual reference to the *automatism* of capitalist social relations in *Capital* can be found in chapter 4 on the transformation of money into capital. The point of departure of Marx’s analysis of the capital form is the result of the circulation of commodities, namely, money. The question arises, then, as to why it is necessary to start the exposition of capital with the money form. The reason can be found in the fact that Marx, as in the analysis of the commodity, starts the analysis of capital with an immediate observation, i.e. with capital “as it appears at first sight”. On a formal level, this point of departure reflects Marx’s structuring principle of the different chapters around presentational nodes, with the capital form constituting a new stage in an exposition which, again, takes the immediate appearance of the social form under consideration as its starting point¹⁷. And in its simplest manifestation capital presents itself as money. What needs to be investigated is, therefore, the specific nature of money as capital in contradistinction to money simply as such. Through this investigation, Marx presents the *analytic* moment of the exposition.

All that our immediate observation can tell us about this specificity is that it resides in the *form of its circulation*. Whereas the circulation of money as means of circulation can be represented with the form “C–M–C, the transformation of commodities into money and the re-conversion of money into commodities: selling in order to buy”, money that is transformed into capital circulates in the form of “M–C–M, the transformation of money into commodities, and the re-conversion of commodities into money: buying in order to sell”¹⁸. However, behind these two distinct *forms* of circulation a difference of *content* lies hidden¹⁹. In

¹⁴ Starosta, *Marx’s Capital, Method and Revolutionary Subjectivity*, cit.

¹⁵ Besides obvious space restrictions, revolutionary subjectivity has constituted the focus of much of my recent work.

¹⁶ L. Micaloni, *Automatic Subject*, in R. Bellofiore, T. Redolfi Riva, (eds.), *Marx: Key Concepts. New Directions in Modern Economics*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, 2024.

¹⁷ G. Starosta, *The Commodity-Form and the Dialectical Method: On the Structure of Marx’s Exposition in Chapter 1 of Capital*, in «*Science&Society*», 2008, no. 72, pp. 295–318.

¹⁸ K. Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1., Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1976, pp. 247–8.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 248.

the case of the simple circulation of money within the framework of the circulation of commodities, the content of the process is given by satisfaction of needs, that is, by individual consumption. In other words, the use value of the commodity is what constitutes the immediate object of the circuit²⁰. In this sense, the aim of the cycle is external to the process itself. In the other case, on the contrary, the circuit "proceeds from the extreme of money and finally returns to the same extreme. Its driving and motivating force, its determining purpose, is therefore exchange-value"²¹. This has a twofold consequence. In the first place, insofar as both extremes of the cycle M-C-M are identical, this process as such simply appears meaningless. Consequently, the extremes must be distinguished from each other in order for the circuit to acquire a purpose. Inasmuch as they are *qualitatively identical*, the only possible difference (and hence that which must become the aim of the process) is the *quantitative increase*. Thus, the adequate form of this process of circulation must necessarily be M-C-M' where the initial sum of money (value in its concrete form of appearance) produces through its movement a larger amount of value, that is, a *surplus value*²². Money which circulates according to this form becomes determined as *capital*²³. Secondly, and in contradistinction to what happens in the circuit C-M-C, the aim of the process is not external to it. The motive force - i.e. the valorisation of value - is internal to the process; it derives from the movement of circulation itself. Once the circulation of money as capital is complete, we return to the same point of departure: a quantitatively limited sum of money. And if the latter is to act as capital it must be thrown back into circulation. This means that the process of valorisation of value carries within itself the necessity of its own renewal, giving the process the character of being *formally boundless*²⁴.

The exposition started with the circulation of capital as it appears in its immediacy and found the production of surplus value to be its content. The following point that needs to be accounted for is the source of the necessity of that movement. In other words, the phase of analysis still needs to go on in order to discover what sets into motion this process of multiplication of value. As with the analysis of the commodity, Marx presents his argument by first looking at apparent paths that the dialectical investigation could follow. Thus, it might seem that this process originates in the abstractly free activity of the possessor of money. However, as already shown by the analysis of commodity fetishism, through their free conscious and voluntary action the owners of commodities cannot but act as the personification of the social powers inherent in their commodities. Inasmuch as they are an alienated human being, the capitalist only realises through their appar-

²⁰ Ivi, p. 250.

²¹ Ibidem.

²² Ivi, p. 251.

²³ Ivi, p. 252.

²⁴ Ivi, p. 253.

ently free action the immediate necessity of their capital²⁵. The movement of value, although *mediated* by the subjectivity of the capitalist, is not *grounded* in their consciousness and will. Thus, Marx discovers that *the necessity of the process of circulation of money as capital comes from the automatic movement of value itself*²⁶. In becoming capital, value – the objectified social relation which mediates the metabolic life process of private and independent individuals – turns into the concrete *subject* of the process of circulation of social wealth. In turn, the commodity and money, the particular and the general mode of existence of mercantile wealth, become determined as transitory forms which value takes in its process of self-expansion. As Marx states,

[V]alue is here the subject of a process in which, while constantly assuming the form in turn of money and commodities, it changes its own magnitude, throws off surplus-value from itself considered as original value, and thus valorises itself independently. For the movement in the course of which it adds surplus-value is its own movement, its valorisation is therefore self-valorisation [*Selbstverwertung*]²⁷.

The alienation of the human individual, which has its *simplest* expression in the commodity form of social relations²⁸, reaches a new stage. It is not only about a process of social production mediated by the value form of the product (hence by the merely “*formal* automatism” of social relations). Not even about one that simply has value as the direct purpose and finality of the process of exchange. The objectified abstract labour represented as the exchangeability of commodities has taken possession of the powers of the process of circulation of social wealth itself. This moment of the human life process turns into an attribute of the life cycle of capital, which has the production of more of itself, i.e. its quantitative increase, as its only general qualitative determination²⁹. This is where the formal specificity of capital as an *indirect*, hence *materialised or objectified*, social relation resides. Thus, the production of human life has ceased to be the content of the movement of social reproduction and has become the unconscious outcome of the production of surplus value, that is, of the *only* (alienated) content presiding over the movement of modern society³⁰.

In my view, this is probably the most important *critical* insight of the fully developed Marxian critique of political economy and also the link with the so-called

²⁵ Ivi, p. 254.

²⁶ Ivi, p. 255.

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ G. Starosta, The Role and Place of ‘Commodity Fetishism’ in Marx’s Systematic-dialectical Exposition in Capital, in «Historical Materialism», 2017, n. 25, pp.101–139.

²⁹ J. Iñigo Carrera, 2019. Del capital como sujeto de la vida social enajenada a la clase obrera como sujeto revolucionario, in R. Escorcia Romo, G. Caligaris (eds.), Sujeto Capital – Sujeto Revolucionario. Análisis Crítico Del Sistema Capitalista y Sus Contradicciones, Ciudad de México, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana / ITACA, pp. 147–180.

³⁰ The emphasis on “only” will become clear in the discussion below.

“early writings”: the discovery of the social constitution of capital as an autonomous and self-moving subject amounts to the concretisation of the young Marx’s account of alienated labour. Thus, unlike its first manifestation at the level of the commodity form, the activation of the autonomised regulation of social life no longer has the private individuals’ apparently free decision to engage in the organisation of their production as its premise. Furthermore, it is not extinguished upon the completion of its mediating role in the cycle of metabolic exchange – that is, once the commodity leaves circulation and enters the sphere of personal consumption. Upon reaching the capital form, the automatism of the general social relation between private and independent producers becomes the constantly renewed *premise and result* of the social metabolic process itself. The social relation between humans, existing in the form of the social attribute of a thing, becomes *self-activating* and sets the “human exchange of matter” into motion by itself, with the only aim of boundlessly expanding its magnitude.

Now, as Marx puts it in the *Grundrisse*, this “twisting and inversion [*Verdrehung und Verkehrung*]” of the general objectified form of social mediation into the self-moving subject of the process of human metabolism is “not merely a *supposed one* existing merely in the imagination of the workers and the capitalists”³¹. On the contrary, it is a “*real phenomenon*”³², unconsciously or spontaneously posited as “socially-valid objectivity” by the human brain itself, when the general social character of labour is established behind the back of the privately undertaken activity of individuals. Several important questions follow from this.

In the first place, this means that capital, as self-valorising value, is not simply an “abstract social structure of impersonal *domination*” over human beings through the coercive imposition of “labour” as the substance of social life.³³ It certainly is such a form of objective or impersonal subjection, but only as the concrete form taken by its essential character as a mode of “articulation” of the social division of labour, i.e. a specific form in which society resolves the establishment of the material unity between social production and consumption, i.e. the mode in which human beings reproduce the materiality of their existence as a part of nature (i.e. their species-being) through the organisation of the expenditure and development of their productive powers, i.e. through labour³⁴. That the social form of capital

³¹ K. Marx, *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973, p. 831, original emphasis.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ Cfr. R. Kurz, *The Substance of Capital*, cit., pp. 17ss.; M. Postone *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, cit. p. 30. These authors explicitly reject the determination of labour as the species-being of human beings and hence its “transhistorical” constitutive role in the changing social forms of existence of human subjectivity. For a critique of these authors, see, respectively, G. Starosta, G. Caligaris, A. Fitzsimons, *Value, Money and Capital: The Critique of Political Economy and Contemporary Capitalism*, London, Routledge, 2024, chapter 1 and G. Starosta, *Labour*, in A. Toscano, S. Farris, B. Skeggs, (eds.), *Sage Handbook of Marxism*, London, Sage, 2022, pp. 118–134.

³⁴ Starosta, *Labour*, cit.

taken by this process entails its inversion into a *means* for an *alien purpose* does not change the matter. At stake here is first and foremost the material reproduction of human society and not simply a “system of power or domination”³⁵.

In the second place, insofar as from Marx’s materialist perspective this social production process is not simply “the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals”, but a “definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part”³⁶, there can be absolutely no aspect of human existence that does not become determined as an instance of this metabolic interaction inverted as an attribute of capital. However inverted in its form, this *is* the mode in which the materiality of human life exists. Consequently, there can be no exteriority to its movement. The upshot of the constitution of capital as alienated subject is that *all* the determinations of the human life process will *really* prove to be material bearers of the former’s self-expansion. From this point onwards, the exposition will show that individuals, *precisely* for being the *material* subjects of this process (rather than “in spite of”), shall become fully *form-determined* as *personifications* of different determinations emerging out of the movement of value’s self-valorisation.

In this sense, a third corollary of this is that Marx’s systematic-dialectical investigation of the capital form unfolds the different forms both of *objectivity* and of *subjectivity* which characterise the contradictory motion of capitalist society. As a matter of fact, and as argued in greater length elsewhere³⁷, it is possible to trace in some of the Marxian texts methodological insights into the way in which the genesis of different forms of subjectivity should be materialistically investigated, namely: as necessary mediations of the “automatic” self-movement of forms of fetishised objectivity assumed by the general social relation in the capitalist mode of production³⁸. This, I think, is the only method which allows us *immanently* to ground forms of consciousness and will (i.e. subjectivity) within the movement of present-day social relations. Crucially, my central claim is that if we want to stay true to this materialistic approach, this method must be also used to comprehend the specificity of the *form-determined constitution* of the class struggle in the capitalist mode of production. In other words, insofar as the fetishistic subsumption of human subjectivity under capital is *total*, the class struggle must be grasped as a necessary mediating form assumed by the very “automatism” which governs the movement of the different objectified forms of capitalist social relations. It goes without saying that this does not imply the denial of the transformative powers of

³⁵ Cfr. J. Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power. The Meaning of Revolution Today*, London, Pluto Press, 2002; S. Mau, *Mute Compulsion. A Theory of the Economic Power of Capital*, London, Verso, 2023, pp. 5-8; 128-30.

³⁶ K. Marx, F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, in K. Marx, F. Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5., London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1976, pp. 19-539, p. 31.

³⁷ Starosta, *Fetishism and Revolution in the Critique of Political Economy*, cit.

³⁸ See, K. Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in K. Marx, F. Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 29, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1987, pp. 371ss.

human practice personified by wage-workers. But it does imply that whatever transformative powers their political action might have – whether capital-reproducing or capital-transcending– must be an immanent determination begotten by the movement of the valorisation of capital and not external to it.

Lastly, although at this stage of Marx's argument there are already elements which allow the reader to *infer* that capital turns into the alienated subject of human life *in its totality*, this unity is still to be concretely *posited* by the dialectical exposition. Certainly, the unfolding of the commodity and money forms reached a point in which, in the form of the movement of simple circulation as a whole, a first expression of such social unity became manifest. But that unity was only abstractly posited. As Marx states in those pages, that "the scattered elements" comprising "society's productive organism" attained "qualitative and quantitative articulation" into "the system of the division of labour" appeared as entirely haphazard³⁹. On the other hand, as the exposition moved on to the inversion of simple circulation of commodities into the circulation of capital, that abstractly posited unity fell apart. In effect, Marx immanently discovers the general determination of capital as self-valorising value by reproducing in thought an *individual cycle* of money-as-capital. Both the fact that capital subsumes the content of social (re)production in its unity and the concrete form in which that unity is formally and materially established as its own alienated attribute, have not been systematically posited by the dialectical presentation. As a matter of fact, the gradual unfolding of this progressive subsumption of the materiality of the human life process under the movement of capital is what the rest of the three volumes of *Capital* are all about. At that stage, however, Marx only encountered the most abstract appearance of this total social process, which is the constitution of individual capitals as the subjects of their apparently autonomous respective cycles of valorisation in the sphere of circulation. Let us resume Marx's exposition from that point.

Having discovered the generic essential determination of capital as self-valorising value, Marx's exposition turns to follow the concrete form in which this content, i.e. the production of surplus value, is realised. The analytic phase of the exposition thereby gives way to the synthetic stage, which consists in positively unfolding by means of thought the previously discovered self-movement of capital as the alienated subject of that process.

As the dominant subject [*übergreifendesSubjekt*] of this process, in which it alternately assumes and loses the form of money and the form of commodities, but preserves and expands itself through all these changes, value requires above all an independent form by means of which its identity with itself may be asserted ... Value therefore now becomes value in process, money in process, and, as such, capital. It comes out of circulation, enters into it again, preserves and multiplies itself within

³⁹ Marx, *Capital*, cit., p. 203.

circulation, emerges from it with an increased size, and starts the cycle again and again⁴⁰.

At this point, the exposition seems to face an impasse: the determinations developed thus far are revealed to be impotent to account by themselves for this process of multiplication of value. The law that governs the movement of the sphere of circulation – that is, the exchange of equivalents – is incapable of explaining the generation of a surplus value⁴¹. Although having circulation as its point of departure and hence with this sphere as one of its moments, the process of value's self-expansion pushes beyond circulation itself. The movement of capital shows the necessity to find within the circulation of commodities a commodity whose *form-determined use* value for capital is to produce more value than it costs. The existence of the doubly free worker provides capital with this requirement⁴². As an independent human being, this worker can freely dispose of their individual productive powers⁴³. However, insofar as they are deprived of the objective conditions in which to externalise their free subjectivity, they must give their labour power the form of a commodity to be sold on the market to the immediate personification of capital⁴⁴.

What are the determinations of the commodity in its concrete form of the labour power of the doubly free worker? As any other commodity, labour power is a unity of value and use value. The former is thus determined by the socially necessary labour time required for the production of this commodity which, in this particular case, resolves itself into the production of the means of subsistence necessary to reproduce the physical and mental powers of the labourer⁴⁵. The latter is nothing other than the actualisation of the productive capacities of the worker, i.e. labour⁴⁶. As stated above, it is through the appropriation of the use value of this peculiar commodity that capital is able to valorise itself. The exposition must therefore develop the determinations of the process of consumption of labour power, which takes place “outside the market”⁴⁷. In this way, we will see in the next section how capital not only becomes the subject of the process of circulation of social wealth, but also turns into the subject of the immediate process of production.

⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 255-6.

⁴¹ Ivi, chapter 5.

⁴² Ivi, p. 270.

⁴³ Ivi, p. 271.

⁴⁴ Ivi, p. 272.

⁴⁵ Ivi, pp. 274-6. Marx's account of the determination of the value of labour power has generated some controversies among his followers, which I briefly discuss in a later section.

⁴⁶ Ivi, p. 270; pp. 274-5.

⁴⁷ Ivi, p. 279.

1.2. *The constitution of capital as the subject of the immediate process of production*

In order to valorise itself, then, capital has to take possession of the material powers of the human labour process. Through the movement of material production that at the same time produces the reified general social relation – value – capital is able to carry out its real valorisation, which, before this point, was only potential. At this stage of the presentation, in which capital takes the materiality of the labour process as a given presupposition (the *formal subsumption* of labour in capital), the only possibility to actualise capital's valorisation is to expand the amount of labour power productively consumed by extending the working day of the labourer beyond the hours of labour socially necessary to reproduce the value of labour power (which therefore becomes determined as necessary labour)⁴⁸. Thus, the secret of the immediate source of surplus value is revealed: its origin lies in the surplus labour that the labourers perform under the control of the capitalist to whom they freely sold their labour power at its value. Consequently, this surplus value becomes materialised in the product of labour which takes the form of the rightful private property of the capitalist⁴⁹. In other words, the valorisation of capital takes concrete form through the exploitation of the productive powers of living labour. In this way, it determines the production of use values in the commodity form as a concrete form of the production of surplus value. From now on, the labour process becomes determined as the material bearer of the process of value's self-valorisation. In this unity, the immediate process of production becomes a process of production of capital⁵⁰.

Although capital is essentially determined to be indifferent to any qualitative distinction other than the production of its quantitative increase, its material embodiment in the labour process produces its qualitative differentiation. It is clear that the production of use values, through which the production of surplus value takes place, necessarily involves the organic unity of labour power and means of production in order to put the labour process into motion⁵¹. However, the only portion of capital able to change its magnitude is the one that is materialised in labour power, which thus becomes determined as *variable capital*⁵². The portion materialised in the form of means of production lacks this capacity and hence negates the essential determination of capital of being an inherently variable magnitude. The value of the means of production is transferred by living labour to the product and just reappears in the same magnitude⁵³. Capital is thus negated simply

⁴⁸ Ivi, pp. 301-2.

⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 292.

⁵⁰ Ivi, p. 304.

⁵¹ Ivi, pp. 283-90.

⁵² Ivi, p. 317.

⁵³ Ivi, pp. 314-6.

as such to affirm itself as *constant capital* which, however, constitutes a necessary condition for the affirmation of its power of self-valorisation⁵⁴. In short, the valorisation of capital can only take concrete form through its qualitative differentiation between variable and constant capital.

The differentiation of the total capital advanced into constant and variable capital reveals to us that, on condition that a part of capital does take the concrete shape of means of production in the right proportion, the actual change of magnitude in which the valorisation process consists immediately springs from the part of capital materialised in the form of labour power⁵⁵. The inner measure of the degree in which capital self-valorises thus becomes determined by the ratio of the surplus value produced to the variable capital⁵⁶. This is what Marx terms the rate of surplus value. From the perspective of its material content, the rate of surplus value expresses, in a specifically capitalist form, the relation between surplus labour and necessary labour⁵⁷. The latter is the part of the working day necessary to produce the means of consumption which allow the reproduction of the labour power of the workers. The former is constituted by the labour expended during the part of the working day which goes beyond the labour time necessary for the reproduction of labour power.

With the determinations unfolded thus far, the value of labour power – hence the magnitude of variable capital – is a given quantity for capital's process of valorisation⁵⁸. In effect, with the productive subjectivity of the wage labourer and the material forms of the objective conditions of the process of production as an external presupposition, the means of subsistence which enter into the consumption bundle of the labourer and the productivity of labour constitute a given condition for capital's production of surplus value. Thus, if we look at the circuit of capital's valorisation in its purity – i.e. assuming that the law of equivalence regulates exchange – the value of labour power appears to constitute an external limit to the realisation of capital's essential determination as self-expanding value. Under these circumstances, the degree of capital's valorisation depends on the length of the working day, which, unlike the value of labour power, appears in its immediacy to be a variable quantity with no inherent limit to its extension apart from the absolute one constituted by the 24 hours of the day⁵⁹. However, this appearance vanishes as soon as we consider the materiality of the process of consumption of labour power; the physical determinations of the expenditure of labour power already pose a limit to the prolongation of the working day. In addition, the very reproduction of labour power in the conditions determined by what Marx calls “the

⁵⁴ Ivi, p. 317.

⁵⁵ Ivi, p. 323.

⁵⁶ Ivi, p. 324.

⁵⁷ Ivi, p. 325.

⁵⁸ Ivi, p. 340.

⁵⁹ Ivi, p. 341.

general level of civilization” – and which, again, are external to capital at this stage of the presentation – requires that a part of the day is spent on the satisfaction of the “intellectual and social requirements” of the labourer⁶⁰.

It is only at this juncture that Marx, for the first time in the dialectical exposition of the critique of political economy, shows the necessity of the class struggle as a capitalist social form. In Marx’s exposition, the class struggle is presented only as the necessary concrete form in which the physical and social limits to the extension of the working day are set. However, we shall see that a closer scrutiny of Chapter 10 of *Capital* makes clear that its essential *simplest* determination is actually more general: *the historically specific determination of the class struggle in the capitalist mode of production consists in being the necessary concrete form of the purchase of the commodity labour power at its full value, i.e. by the attainment of the socially-constituted normal material reproduction of the productive attributes of wage-labourers in a capitalistic “exploitable shape”*.

2. CAPITAL’S SELF-VALORISATION AND THE CLASS STRUGGLE: ON THE CONTENT AND FORM OF THE *UNITY* OF SOCIAL REPRODUCTION IN ITS ALIENATED CAPITALIST FORM

2.1. The systematic place and determinations of the class struggle under the formal subsumption of labour to capital

In order to address the simplest form-determination of the class struggle, it is fundamental to highlight an aspect of Marx’s presentation which could otherwise appear as capricious and extrinsic to the concrete determinations we had before us, namely, the calculation of the *daily* value of labour power, which is the one that ensures the reproduction of labour power throughout the whole of a worker’s working life⁶¹. What Marx intends to show by means of that calculation is that the excessive prolongation of the working day actually involves the payment of labour power below its value. Hence, the resistance to that extension in the productive consumption of labour power beyond a socially determined “normality” is only a concrete manifestation of the broader question about the realisation of the full value of labour power. This is illustrated by Marx through the words of that fictional average wage worker who, in giving the reasons for their refusal to let the capitalist impose their will on the determination of the length of the working day, claims: “I demand a normal working day because, like every other seller, I demand the value of my commodity”⁶².

⁶⁰ Ibidem.

⁶¹ Ivi, p. 343.

⁶² Ibidem.

In this sense, the resistance of workers to the extraction of surplus value does not immediately express the absolute opposite of the general social relation through which they reproduce their lives, namely, the valorisation of capital. On the contrary, I think that Marx's discussion of the length of the working day in Chapter 10 of *Capital* implies exactly the opposite: it presents the struggle of wage-workers as a concrete form of the movement of alienated social life as any other form of their life activity. In other words, though clearly an "endemic" reality of the capitalist mode of production, the class struggle is not *ontologically* but *socially* constitutive of capitalism, since capitalist and worker, *as owners of commodities* (not as embodiments of ontologically different principles of social reproduction), personify social determinations of the process of valorisation of capital whose realisation is antagonistic⁶³. Let us return to Marx's text in order to substantiate this point.

Marx's starting point in his presentation of the determinations of the class struggle over the length of the working day is the individual direct relationship between capitalist and worker, whose antagonistic character, far from constituting the abstract negation of the indirect social relations regulating the production and circulation of commodities, springs from the realisation of those laws themselves. The capitalist, acting as the personification of the necessity of their capital, wants to extend the length of the working day as much as possible. As a rightful buyer of commodities, they want daily to extract as much use value as possible from the commodities they buy⁶⁴; among them, the labour power of the wage labourer. As a matter of fact, they're forced to do so by the competition from other individual capitals that mediates their determination as personification of the most immediate necessity of capital: the production of surplus value⁶⁵. The worker wants to limit that daily extraction. Actually, they are compelled to do so if they want to preserve their productive attributes in the conditions needed to be able to sell their labour power in the future. In other words, if they want to get paid the *full value* of the latter throughout the course of their productive lifetime⁶⁶. Thus, Marx concludes, the very operation of the *indirect* laws of commodity exchange leads to

⁶³ It could be argued, following Shortall (F.C. Shortall, *The incomplete Marx*, Aldershot, Avebury, 1994, Chapter 5) – building on insights originally developed by Negri in *Marx Beyond Marx* (1991, cit.) – and Lebowitz (M.A. Lebowitz, *Beyond capital: Marx's political economy of the working class*, New York, Palgrave, 2003), that my reading of Marx's presentation of the class struggle in *Capital* is perfectly accurate but only because Marx's account itself is one-sided and/or incomplete, leaving the struggles of wage labourers which go beyond their determination as "variable capital" out of the picture. Although these authors also give the class struggle an ontological foundation, they recognise that was not Marx's formulation, although it should have been.

⁶⁴ Marx, *Capital*, cit., p. 342.

⁶⁵ Ivi, p. 381.

⁶⁶ Hence, we can see now that every circumstance affecting the reproduction of labour power – such as the intensity of labour, the wage, health and safety of working conditions, and so on – is a concrete expression of the question of the buying/selling of labour power at its full value.

equally rightful but antagonistic stands on the length of the working day. The resolution of this antinomy makes the valorisation of capital take the concrete form of a *direct* social relation of *force*: "a struggle between collective capital, i.e. the class of capitalists, and collective labour, i.e. the working class"⁶⁷.

The point to note here is that although Marx claims that that direct social relation is actually a class relation, the determinations unfolded thus far do not show any necessity for such transition from the individual antagonism between capitalist and worker to its constitution as *class* struggle. In reality, that observation is at this stage of an external character, an anticipation of the actual presentation of the determinations of the valorisation process that make it take the form of an antagonism between social classes. Marx unfolds this presentation of the essential determinations of the class struggle through a very long "historical sketch" of the particular forms through which the former acquired concrete existence. Here, I shall concentrate on the general aspects of the determinations at stake, that is, I shall attempt to capture from Marx's account the contradictory tendencies of capital's valorisation process as such without reference to the concrete forms taken in the history of England as described by him⁶⁸.

Marx organises his exposition by sketching out the way in which opposing tendencies regarding the length of the working day asserted themselves in the course of the movement of the history of the capitalist mode of production. Initially, he shows that a tendency to the brutal extension of the working day, which overstepped all traditional limits inherited from pre-capitalist social forms, made its way through history. In its general determination, this roughly corresponds to unchecked imposition of the will of the immediate personifications of capital in their voracious search for the utmost valorisation of their individual capitals, before "the working class, stunned at first by the noise and turmoil of the new system of production, had recovered its senses to some extent" and "began to offer resistance"⁶⁹. In other words, the realisation of that tendency in its purity manifests

⁶⁷ Ivi, p. 344.

⁶⁸ On the dialectical-methodological significance of the notion "historical sketch", see the seminal contribution by Müller and Neusüss to the so-called "German State Derivation Debate" (W. Müller, C. Neusüss, *The Illusion of State Socialism and the Contradiction between Wage Labor and Capital*, in «Telos», 1975, no. 25, pp. 13–90). Marx himself concisely presents the general determination at stake "in its purity" – i.e. without its particular realisation in the course of the history of capital accumulation in England – in the preparatory Manuscripts of 1861–3 (K. Marx, *Economic Manuscript of 1861–63*, in K. Marx, F. Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 30, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1988, pp. 180–5). As a matter of fact, the addition of a historical narrative to illustrate the systematic exposition of the general determination already developed by 1861–3 was not part of Marx's original plan. Thus, in a letter to Engels from 10 February 1866, he reports that he decided to elaborate "the section on the 'Working Day' from the historical point of view, which was not part of my original plan" because his poor health conditions prevented him from making progress "with the really theoretical part" (K. Marx, *Letter to Engels*, 10 February 1866, in K. Marx, F. Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 42, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1987, p. 224).

⁶⁹ Marx, *Capital*, cit., p. 390.

the determinations of the valorisation process as they take shape without the constitution of the sellers of labour power as a class, i.e. through the individual antagonistic relationship they establish with the buyers of the only commodity they own, as discussed above. Under these circumstances, the respective power of buyer and seller of labour power is systematically biased towards the capitalist. Thus, if between equal rights, force decides, there will be a systematic tendency for the immediate personifications of capital to impose their will regarding the duration of the working day⁷⁰. Whilst the capitalist could survive without buying the labour power of any particular labourer, the latter faces the sale of their labour power, which is their only general social relation, as an immediate necessity. Thus, in the desperate attempt to establish their general social relation, the worker faces the competition from other individuals who can only personify the commodity form of their labour power. Although at this stage it cannot but be an external remark, Marx points out that even immediate observation suffices to see how the very movement of the alienated regulation of social life engenders the existence of a surplus population relative to the needs of capital's valorisation process, thus making evident that not all workers will be able to sell their labour power and thereby placing them in a relation of exacerbated competition. Hence the capitalist knows that they will always find a worker willing to sell their labour power, however long the working day might be⁷¹.

Marx then goes on to show the consequences of the pure operation of this tendency for the lengthening of the working day when the fixation of its limits is left to the unilateral action of the immediate personifications of capital, namely, the impossibility of workers to reproduce their labour power in the very conditions that the valorisation of capital demands from them, which means, sooner or later, the impossibility of reproducing labour power as such⁷². More generally, this implies that when considered at the level of the individual antagonistic relationship between capitalist and worker, the valorisation of capital inevitably leads to a tendency for labour power to be sold *systematically below* its value. However appealing this might be to the voracious appetite for an extra surplus value of the individual capital, this *immediate* necessity goes against the *mediated* necessity of the reproduction of the valorisation of capital as such to prevent the productive attributes of labour power, the one and only *direct* source of surplus value and hence of self-expansion, from exhaustion⁷³.

It is this other necessity of the valorisation of capital that takes shape through the antagonistic will of the worker, who tries to limit their conscious and voluntary subjection to the will of the capitalist in the immediate production process. And

⁷⁰ Ivi, p. 375.

⁷¹ Ivi, p. 380.

⁷² Ivi, p. 376.

⁷³ Ivi, p. 377.

this is what gives rise to the opposite tendency of the valorisation of capital regarding the length of the working day, whose concrete realisation takes the form of the struggle of workers as a class. Marx illustrates this by showing how only the long and protracted resistance of workers eventually led to the intervention of the capitalist state, which, in the alienated form of a law, imposed the direct general regulation of the extensive quantitative limit to the productive consumption of labour power by individual capitals. Seen from the perspective of the worker, this appears as the only way of securing their material and social reproduction in its capitalist form, that is, of getting paid the full value of labour power. And they can only succeed at this – on average, through the cyclical oscillation of the wage around the value of labour power – by establishing a relation of conscious co-operation with the rest of the workers to sell their labour power as a directly collective force. The general relation of *competition* among sellers of labour power is thus realised in the form of its self-negation, i.e. by taking the form of a relation of *solidarity*. Hence the social constitution of antagonistic *class* wills or the necessary concrete form of *class struggle* taken by the reproduction of the alienated existence of social life.

For “protection” against the serpent of their agonies, the workers have to put their heads together and, as a class, compel the passing of a law, an all powerful social barrier by which they can be prevented from selling themselves and their families into slavery and death by voluntary contract with capital⁷⁴.

As the above quote makes clear, in its simplest and most general form, the class struggle carries no content other than the establishment of the conditions for the normal preservation and reproduction of the productive attributes of workers as wage labourers. In the systematic context of chapter 10 of *Capital*, this involves the legal sanctioning of the duration of the working day. Note, however, that according to Marx’s account class antagonism is not the *self-determining* process that contingently establishes the extensive magnitude of capital’s productive absorption of labour power. By contrast, it is the *mediating social form* that forces the capitalist state to set legal limits to its extension beyond its *normal* length. But the *content* of this normality is not undetermined (or only partly determined), although it *appears as* such at first sight at the beginning of the presentation in the respective chapter, when seen from the point of view of the individual juridical relation between capitalist and waged worker that mediates the purchase of labour power as a commodity. But as the exposition unfolds, it emerges that the normal duration of the working day is *materially determined* by the conditions in which labour power is consumed by capital in the process of production. *A normal working day is therefore that which allows the maximum extraction of surplus value without leading to the premature exhaustion of the reproduction of labour power.* In other

⁷⁴ Ivi, p. 416.

words, it is that which allows the *normal degree* of exploitation of the working class by capital. In this way, it gives shape to the payment of labour power at its full value.

Now, since at the systematic expositional stage of chapter 10 the material forms of the labour process are an external presupposition vis-à-vis the self-movement of capital as automatic subject, Marx does not need to say much about the specific determinations that generate the necessity for the shortening of the working day beyond a general reference to overwork and premature exhaustion of labour power caused by capital's "voracious appetite for surplus labor." However, as the systematic exposition progresses to the real subsumption of labour to capital, the material foundation of that alienated social necessity is brought to light: the shortening of the working day is the necessary concrete form that mediates the increase of the *intensity* of labour that large-scale industry brings about⁷⁵. Thus, we shall see in what follows the importance of grasping the determinations of the class struggle in the unity of its determinations; both those springing from the *formal and the real subsumption of labour to capital*. Before that, let us discuss some further implications of the mere existence of labour power as a commodity and its necessary mediation through the class struggle.

2.2. Class struggle and the concrete subject of the movement of capitalist society: further reflections on automatism and class subjectivity

The form of class struggle taken by the movement of capitalist society evidently implies the obstruction of the ceaseless movement of valorisation that constitutes the most general determination of capital as the alienated subject of that process. This could raise the question as to whether this determination entails the absolute negation of capital as the subject of the valorisation process, thus reducing the latter to a concrete form of the class struggle⁷⁶. Or, as commented above, it could lead to the conclusion that since workers' struggles press in the opposite direction to the immediate necessity of capital personified by the capitalists, they must be expressing a different principle of social reproduction from the valorisation of capital. Thus, although it might be true that capital is the subject of the valorisation process, this does not exhaust the "logic of capitalism as a whole", which is said to comprise the antagonistic unity between the political economy of capital and the political economy of wage labour⁷⁷. Each pole of that unity in opposition is seen as the concrete subject of its own production process and the realisation of their respective goals is seen as repelling the other – hence their antagonism. However,

⁷⁵ Ivi, p. 536. This means that the distinction between formal and real subsumption is systematic rather than historical.

⁷⁶ Cfr. W. Bonefeld, *Capital as Subject and the Existence of Labour*, cit.

⁷⁷ M. Lebowitz, *Beyond capital*, cit., chapters 4 and 5.

each side needs the mediation of the other for its own reproduction – hence their unity⁷⁸.

There is no doubt that the interruption of the valorisation process constitutes the immediate negation of the simplest necessity of capital as subject. However, as my reconstruction of Marx’s argument has shown, the form of class struggle taken by the movement of society actually is a determination of the *affirmation* of capital as subject, albeit through *its own negation*. In other words, my point is that the social form of class struggle does not abstractly negate capital’s condition of alienated subject, but only expresses the necessarily *contradictory* character of its own movement as one of *affirmation through self-negation*. What the class struggle does negate is the condition of subject of the process of valorisation to what up to that point *appeared* to be the bearer of that social determination, namely, the *individual* capital. The fact that the actions of individual capitals undermine the reproduction of the very direct source of their self-expansion thus makes clear that the production of surplus value is an attribute that exceeds the former’s potentiality as particular private fragments of social labour. However, this does not reveal the class struggle as the self-determining force behind the movement of capitalist production, nor does it unveil the emergence an antagonistic principle of organisation of social life other than the valorisation of capital, which would be, in turn, incarnated in the working class⁷⁹. Rather, it only shows that the production of surplus value is a potentiality of the alienated existence of social labour in *its unity*. In other words, Marx’s exposition of the social form of class struggle evidences, for the first time in the pages of *Capital*, that the concrete subject of the process of valorisation – and hence of the movement of alienated social production – is the *total social capital*⁸⁰.

⁷⁸ Ivi, pp. 75-6.

⁷⁹ M. De Angelis, Beyond the Technological and the Social Paradigms: A Political Reading of Abstract Labour as the Substance of Value, in «Capital&Class», 1995, no. 19, pp. 107-134.

⁸⁰ From a textual point of view, Marx does not name the total social capital at this stage. Instead he refers to an abstract “society”, acting through the state as the representative of its general interests (standing as an external force over the particular interests of social classes), and more specifically as the subject that compels capital to take “account of the health and life of the worker” (Marx, *Capital*, cit., p. 381). However, as Caligaris (G. Caligaris, Clases sociales, lucha de clases y Estado en el desarrollo de la crítica de la economía política, in G. Caligaris, A. Fitzsimons, (eds.), *Relaciones Económicas y Políticas. Aportes Para El Estudio de Su Unidad Con Base En La Obra de Karl Marx*, Buenos Aires, Facultad de Ciencias Económicas de la Universidad de Buenos Aires, 2012, pp. 72-91, p. 80) remarks, for Marx “society” in the abstract is a meaningless entity. For him, society always exists in a specific historical form. On the other hand, in its general determination, society is not an abstraction existing over and against human beings but is the general social relation through which the immanent social unity of their individual actions is posited. But insofar as this unity in capitalism operates behind the backs of individuals (hence of social classes), it appears as an external power vis-à-vis human beings. In the chapter on the Working Day, this alienated social unity is posited in its directly political form as the state. But its economic content (material reproduction in its value form) is not yet fully posited. A first instance of this positing eventually occurs in the chapter on simple reproduction. In my view, this is why Marx decides at that particular stage explic-

The class struggle, then, is the concrete form of development of the antithetical social necessities generated by this alienated total social subject in its process of valorisation. The fact that the most *immediate* necessity of capital is the *formally boundless* quantitative expansion of the surplus value produced does not imply that the limitation to that expansion is not a necessity of its own reproduction. However, we have seen that the latter is a *mediated* necessity, this being the reason why it cannot be realised through the actions of capital's *immediate or positive* personifications – i.e. the capitalists – and why it can only be *negatively or mediately* personified by the working class in its struggle against the bourgeoisie. Hence, when the workers struggle, they do not cease to be subsumed to the movement of reproduction of alienated social life. On the one hand, their subjectivity does not act according to an abstractly different “logic” from that of capitalist commodity production. As we have seen, the relation of conscious solidarity established by workers in their opposition to the positive personifications of capital is in complete accord with the specific form of their social being, that is, with their determination as private and independent individuals and, more precisely, as commodity sellers. Their conscious co-operation in the form of a collective action is not the unmediated expression of a relation of solidarity between *human beings as such*. Rather, it is such a solidaristic or co-operative relation mediated by the workers' condition as alienated human beings, that is, as *personifications*. In acting in this way without being aware of their determination as attributes of the total social capital – i.e. *in seeing themselves as naturally free* but under an external compulsion which thwarts the affirmation of that personal freedom – they unconsciously personify a necessity of the *reproduction* of their alienated general social relation, albeit one which is evidently antagonistic to that personified by the capitalists⁸¹.

In sum, the class struggle is the most general *direct* social relation between *collective personifications of commodities*, which develops as a necessary form of subjectivity that mediates, albeit through the conflict-ridden permanent deviation

itly to name the total social capital as the concrete alienated subject of material reproduction in its unity. Retrospectively, it then becomes clear that the “society” of Chapter 10 was actually the total social capital, and the state was the latter's general political representative (Caligaris, *Clasessociales, lucha de clases y Estado en el desarrollo de la crítica de la economía política*, cit.; J. Iñigo Carrera, *El capital: determinación económica y subjetividad política*, in «Crítica Jurídica», 2012, no. 34, pp. 51–69).

⁸¹ It follows from this that the distinction between capital-reproducing and capital-transcending class subjectivity does not revolve around that between “trade union” or “economic” consciousness, and “political” or “socialist” consciousness. It is a matter of whether wage workers are conscious of their own alienation in the totality of its determinations, or whether they fall prey to the appearance of natural personal freedom taken by their subordination to the total social capital (J. Iñigo Carrera, *The Historical Determination of the Capitalist Mode of Production and of the Working Class as the Revolutionary Subject*, in «Critique. Journal of Socialist Theory», 2014, n. 42, pp. 555–572; G. Starosta, *Fetishism and Revolution in the Critique of Political Economy*, cit.).

from the norm, the establishment of the normal conditions for the reproduction of the automatic self-movement of the valorisation of capital. The latter, in turn, has its ground in the essentially *indirect* nature of the social relations of capitalist production. In this sense, class struggle is not to be conceived of as an independent, autonomous or self-subsisting force or factor that externally modifies, influences, or interacts with, the purely automatic workings of the “law of value”. Instead, it is constituted as the necessary mode of motion through which the contradictory dynamics of the valorisation of capital further unfold beyond both the objectified forms of social mediation and the juridical relation between individual personifications of commodities and money. In other words, automatism and struggle are not abstract opposites but, respectively, the *content* and *form* whose unity comprises the contradictory movement of alienated social life inverted as an attribute of capital. Various ramifications stem from this.

In the first place, this means that this form-determination of the class struggle does not boil down to being “embedded within” a “social context” structured by the “commodity-determined mode of social mediation”, as argued by Postone⁸² in an otherwise broadly similar take on the nexus between antagonistic forms of working class subjectivity and capital as a self-moving objectified social relation. Thus, Postone rightly observes that “in the case of labor power as a commodity, the relationship constituted by the commodity form cannot be realized fully as one between individuals”, so that the chapter on the Working Day precisely demonstrates that the realisation of the “formal determination of workers as commodity owners”, i.e. “effective commodity ownership”, can only take place “by means of collective action”⁸³. However, whilst correct, I think this formulation falls short of fully grasping the real content and unity of the form-determination at stake. For Postone simply infers from this that “it is generally only through collective action around issues such as working conditions, hours, and wages that workers actually gain some control over the conditions of sale of their commodity”⁸⁴. But in my view this formulation is too vague and still leaves the establishment of the *norm* that constitutes the working day (and, *a fortiori*, the value of labour power) in the realm of the contingency of power relations between social classes, indifferent to any concrete *determination* grounded in the *materiality* of the direct production process subsumed under capital. More broadly, and from another angle, Postone’s discussion fails to show that the class struggle is not simply necessary to realise the form-determination of waged workers as commodity owners, i.e. to realise the value of labour power. As fleshed out above, the latter in turn is determined by the *normal* material requirements of the unity between social production and consumption subsumed under capital. In other words, when wage-

⁸² M. Postone, *Time, Labour and Social Domination*, cit., pp. 317-8.

⁸³ Ivi, p. 318.

⁸⁴ Ivi, p. 275.

workers struggle as a class in pursuit of their own interest as commodity-owners, they act, albeit “behind the back” of their consciousness and will, as vehicles for the establishment of the unity of the reproduction of the total social capital⁸⁵. This is the *material basis* for both potentialities and limits immanent in the political power of wage-workers in the class struggle over their conditions of reproduction.

In the second place, by virtue of this character as a consciously organized collective action, the class struggle becomes determined as a *political form* of social relations, which mediates the general indirect relation through the value form, which in turn becomes determined as the *economic form* of social relations. The social constitution of the class struggle and the distinction between individual capitals and the total social capital are therefore at the basis of the historically specific differentiation of capitalist social relations of production into economic and political forms⁸⁶. Furthermore, although the antagonistic character of the class relation is a necessary form taken by the reproduction of the total social capital, it disrupts the fluidity of the latter’s valorisation. The establishment of the general unity of social labour must therefore take shape through a further objectified form of social mediation, the state, which confronts commodity owners (the personifications of money-as-capital and of the commodity labour power) as an apparently external and impersonal public authority with the power to establish the overall direct regulation of their antagonistic social relations as *citizens* by means of the law and public administration. The state thus develops as the most concrete political form that embodies the direct organisation of the *unity* of the *normal* conditions of social reproduction in its alienated capital form. As an expression of this immanent con-

⁸⁵ Surely this must be what Marx had in mind when bluntly stating in the chapter on Simple Reproduction that: «The individual consumption of the worker, whether it occurs inside or outside the workshop, inside or outside the labour process, remains an aspect of the production and reproduction of capital ... The fact that the worker performs acts of individual consumption in his own interest, and not to please the capitalist, is something entirely irrelevant to the matter ... The maintenance and reproduction of the working class remains a necessary condition for the reproduction of capital. But the capitalist may safely leave this to the worker’s drive for self-preservation and propagation...From the standpoint of society, then, the working class, even when it stands outside the direct labour process, is just as much an appendage of capital as the lifeless instruments of labour are», Marx, *Capital*, cit., pp. 718–9.

⁸⁶ This is the rational kernel of the best contributions to the so-called “German State Derivation Debate” (E. Altvater, Notes on some problems of state interventionism I, in «Kapitalistate», 1973, n. 1, pp. 96–108; Id., Notes on some problems of state interventionism II, in «Kapitalistate», 1973, n. 2, pp. 76–83; Müller and Neusüss, *The Illusion of State Socialism and the Contradiction between Wage Labor and Capital*, cit.), and to its reception within the Conference of Socialist Economists in the UK (S. Clarke, *The State Debate*, London, Macmillan, 1991; Idem, *Keynesianism, Monetarism and the State*, Aldershot, Edward Elgar, 1988). My own views on the nature of the state are more directly informed by Iñigo Carrera (*El capital: determinación económica y subjetividad política*, cit.), insofar as he grounds the differentiation of economic and political forms of the capital relation in a manner which is consistent with the determination of the total social capital as the alienated immediate subject of the movement of capitalist society.

tent that constitutes it, the state is determined as the *general political representative of the total social capital*, i.e. the institutional embodiment of the political management of the general conditions for the normal modes and degree of exploitation of the working class. Far from enjoying “autonomy” (relative or otherwise), state actions are, through an apparently “trial and error” policy-making and conflict-ridden political process, a more mediated mode of realisation of the contradictory content of the economic mode of existence of capitalist social relations.

In the third place, this means that the determination of the class struggle as a *political* action is not restricted to the conquest of state power or to an action involving demands explicitly directed at the state. The political determination of the class struggle springs from the *objectively general* scope of the antagonistic direct social relation between the collective capitalist and the collective worker. In other words, it should be clear that this determination of the class struggle as the form of the sale of labour-power at its full value does not simply involve its “trade union” organisational expressions. Concomitantly, neither does it imply that it will always be realised through the development of mere “trade union consciousness”. As a matter of fact, that determination may well manifest itself in *apparently* extremely radical or militant forms of the class struggle (which tends to occur in the upward swing of the cyclical oscillation of the capital accumulation process, when real wages usually rise)⁸⁷. In brief, what is at stake in this discussion is the simplest *content* of the class struggle regardless of its *concrete forms*.

Finally, all this implies that the determinations implicated in the mere existence of labour power as commodity (or the merely *formal subsumption* of labour to capital) do not give the class struggle the transformative potentiality to go beyond the capitalist mode of production⁸⁸. In this simple determination, the political action of the working class is merely determined as a concrete form of the *reproduction* of capitalist social relations. And yet, even in this simple form, the class struggle puts us before a determination which, although unable to account for the *content* of the necessity for the abolition of the capitalist mode of production, already sheds light on the reason why the latter can only have a political action of the working class as its *form*. I am referring to the fact that the class struggle is the most general form taken by the organisation of social labour through a conscious

⁸⁷ This statement merits a caveat, as the radicalisation of the class struggle over the value of labour-power can actually embody the opposite content. Thus, under certain circumstances, it can express the impotent desperate resistance to the deterioration of the conditions of reproduction of waged workers.

⁸⁸ In an earlier presentation of the argument which eventually appeared in *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, Postone made a similar point from his own idiosyncratic perspective. See M. Postone (*Necessity, Labour and Time*, in «Social Research», 1978, n. 4, pp. 739-788, pp. 781-3), where he refers to this determination as involving “class-constituting consciousness”, as opposed to properly revolutionary consciousness, which he terms “class-transcending consciousness”.

and voluntary *collective* action in capitalist society⁸⁹. This is because determining the value of labour power entails the determination of the way in which the total labour power of society is allocated into its different useful forms; in this case, the general division between necessary labour and surplus labour. And we have seen how this is resolved in the capitalist mode of production through the establishment of a direct relation of solidarity among workers in order to develop a consciously organised collective action. On the other hand, the annihilation of capital through the creation of the society of the consciously – hence concretely free – associated producers precisely consists of a social action of such a nature. Evidently, the latter is a social action which no longer expresses the total social capital's need for labour power being sold at its value. Rather, it expresses the historically determined necessity to move forward in the development of human productive subjectivity in a form which negates capital's existence as the general social relation reproducing human life, namely, by giving the materiality of social life the form of its *fully conscious* general organisation as an attribute borne by each of the associated individuals. But the point is that the *material content* of this transformation is achieved in the *form* of the political action of the (self-abolishing) proletariat, only because the latter already contains, within its simplest form, the potentiality of being the necessary concrete form taken by the general conscious organisation of social labour as a moment of the reproduction of the total social capital.

3. THE REAL *DETERMINATION* OF THE VALUE OF LABOUR POWER AND ITS *REALISATION* BY MEANS OF THE CLASS STRUGGLE

3.1. *The real subsumption of the "norm of consumption" under capital*

In a nutshell, the prior discussion allows us to infer a first conclusion concerning the form-determinations of the class struggle: the latter does not constitute the *content* of the determination of the value of labour power, which is constituted by the normal reproduction of the material conditions for the valorisation of capital in the production process, but is the necessary *concrete form which mediates its realisation*.

Of course, one could object that while this latter point might be valid for one particular dimension that affects the value of labour power (i.e. the length of the working day), it cannot be extrapolated to its broader determination as such; specifically not to its most immediate fundamental determinant, which, as I have already mentioned earlier, resides in the value of the consumption bundle of wage labourers. The qualitative and quantitative composition of this set of use values

⁸⁹ J. Iñigo Carrera, *El capital: razón histórica, sujeto revolucionario y conciencia*, Buenos Aires, Imago Mundi, 2013.

might be in part determined by the materiality of the qualitative forms and quantitative extent of expenditure of labour power in the process of production, but it must surely also be considered at least partly determined by the class struggle.

Indeed, this “two-factor” account of the determination of working-class consumption arguably is the “received wisdom” which dominates among most Marxists. This virtually universal consensus hinges on the distinction made by Marx in chapter 6 of *Capital* between the “physical” element of the value of labour power (“natural needs, such as food, clothing, fuel and housing”) and the “historical and moral” component (i.e., needs “which depend therefore to a great extent on the level of civilization attained by a country” and “in particular (...) on the conditions in which, and consequently on the habits and expectations with which, the class of free workers has been formed”⁹⁰). In addition, it is usually agreed that the first “physical” component is further compounded in the case of more complex forms of labour power by a “technical/educational element”, which could be necessary “to modify the general nature of the human organism in such a way that it acquires skill and dexterity in a given branch of industry”⁹¹. Against this backdrop, this view subsequently infers that the value of labour power has a peculiar two-fold co-determination, which involves the material (i.e. physical and technical) reproduction of workers and the class struggle as two *independent* factors that determine the number and type of “wagegoods”. The class struggle in particular plays its part by determining the content of the “historical and moral” element of the wage workers’ customary living standard.

Now, as argued elsewhere⁹², there are two main shortcomings in this “received wisdom”. On one hand, despite its widespread acceptance among Marxists, the two-fold “co-determination” perspective on the value of labour power has no solid textual basis on Marx’s major economic works. On the other hand, and more importantly, this reading rests on a problematic separation of the actual immanent unity between materiality and social form in the capitalist mode of production. In effect, once the qualitative and quantitative composition of the use-values that enter into the determination of the value of labor power is seen as *determined* (wholly or in part) by the power relations between social classes, working-class consumption is inevitably rendered external to the historically specific social form taken by the materiality of the metabolic process of humanity, i.e. capital. Consequently, the “two-factor” perspective on the consumption bundle of wage workers overlooks the material and social bases that *ground* the potentiality of working class struggles over the conditions of reproduction of labor power.

⁹⁰ Marx, *Capital*, cit., p. 275.

⁹¹ Ivi, pp. 275-6.

⁹² G. Starosta, A. Fitzsimons, Rethinking the determination of the value of labor power, in «Review of Radical Political Economics», 2018, no. 50, pp. 99-115.

In light of the shortcomings of the “received wisdom”, I would like briefly to flesh out an alternative approach to the determination of the value of labourpower that re-establishes the inner connection between the materiality of the process of production and consumption and their social form. Specifically, I would like to argue that the value of labourpower is determined by the value of the commodities that wagedworkers need to consume in order to reproduce the materiality of the *whole range of productive attributes* that capital demands from them at different times and places; including *both* the physical/technical component and what, in keeping with Marx’s terminology of the historical and moral component of the value of labour-power, can be referred to as “moral” attributes. In other words, the productive attributes of workers (and so their productive subjectivity), do not just include those that are strictly necessary for the labour process in a restricted physical and technical sense (the specific knowledge required for the performance of the determinate productive tasks under their individual responsibility). Additionally, they comprise those “moral” attributes as well. By this I mean the aggregate of determinate forms of consciousness, self-understanding, attitudes and dispositions that *also* need to be “set into motion whenever the workers produce a use-value of any kind”. These moral attributes are of course not natural but the product of history, and therefore vary with the “level of civilization” attained by society, i.e. with the historically-specific technical configuration of the production process that constitute the general material basis in each phase of capitalist development. Moreover, they differ for each partial organ of the collective labourer in accordance with the differences in the productive functions that each of them respectively undertakes under the command of capital.

At this juncture, it is crucial to throw into relief a methodological issue which underpins this discussion. Even the most methodologically-minded readings of *Capital* tend to consider that the content and definition of the value of labourpower are exhausted in chapter 6 of that book. However, those perspectives overlook the *systematic-dialectical* place and significance (i.e., the level of abstraction) of Marx’s discussion of the value of labourpower at that stage. More specifically, those readings miss the point that this initial exposition of the latter’s determination occurs in the context of the *formal subsumption of labour to capital*. However, the determination of the value of labourpower is not exhausted at that abstract level but involves further concretisation as we move from the formal to the *real subsumption of labour to capital*, and from the latter to the reproduction of the total social capital.

In effect, as capital takes possession and transforms the labour process to produce relative surplus value, it transforms its requirements of qualitatively different physical and intellectual attributes that need to be set into motion to produce a mass of usevalues “pregnant” with surplus value. In other words, with each cyclical renewal of the general technical basis of the valorisation process, capital revolutionises the kind of labourpower of the different organs of the collective labourer.

On the one hand, it thereby modifies accordingly the average normal combination of intensive and extensive magnitudes of the expenditure of labour-power in the direct process of production. On the other hand, this transformation can only result from, and be reproduced by, the mutation of the respective “norm of consumption”, and so of the conditions of *normal material reproduction*, of the various segments of the working class. The reason for this is that it is the consumption of those different means of subsistence that (re)produces “the muscles, nerves, bones and brains of existing| workers”⁹³ that materially bear “the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities which he sets into motion whenever he produces a use-value of any kind”⁹⁴.

Crucially, this transformation does not only involve the “physical/technical” component of the value of labourpower. In addition, it also entails the change in the aggregate of “moral” attributes that must be set into motion under the new conditions of production and, therefore, novel “requirements of life” and “manners of their satisfaction”. Thus, as the productive subjectivity of waged workers becomes progressively posited as the ever-purer result of the autonomised reproduction of the total social capital, the respective historical conditions of their genesis as free wage workers become increasingly residual for the determination of the value of labourpower. To put it differently, as capital undertakes the real subsumption of the labour process, it internalises the determination of the *moral* component of the value of labourpower as well, albeit in a distinct manner for the different types of labour power that compose the collective labourer as a whole.

In sum, the *material conditions* of the reproduction process of capital constitute the *content* of the determination of the value of labourpower, as more concretely posited by the *real subsumption of labour*. They do so by determining the differentiated forms of productive subjectivity that compose the collective labourer and, as consequence, the quantity and kind of means of subsistence that different workers need to consume to reproduce or develop those variegated technical and “moral” attributes of labour-power. In turn, the *class struggle* becomes the necessary *political form* that mediates the contradictory and antagonism-ridden establishment of the material unity between the productive and consumptive requirements of the normal reproduction of the total social capital. Note, however, that the necessary mediating role of the class struggle in concretely *fixing* (as opposed to *determining*) the customary living standard of workers does not only apply to the historical and moral component. It also pertains to the workers’ consumption bundle *as a whole*, i.e. including the physical and technical element. In other words, there is not a single usevalue entering the determination of the value of labourpower, whose consumption is not *secured through* the struggle of waged workers as a class. Conversely, the other side of the same coin is that there is not a sin-

⁹³ Marx, *Capital*, cit., p. 717.

⁹⁴ Ivi, p. 270.

gle use value consumed by wagedworkers which is not *determined by* the material requirements of the valorisation process of the total social capital (which, it goes without saying, we shall see that might clash with the immediate interest of individual capitals).

Now, although in *Capital* Marx's examination of the impact of the real subsumption in the value of labourpower mainly revolves around the analysis of the corresponding changes in the *productivity of labour*, there are elements of his exposition which implicitly point to the associated transformations of the patterns of working class consumption and the necessary mediation of the class struggle as their form of realisation. As I show in the next section, his discussion of the education clauses of the Factory Legislation in the chapter on "Machinery Large-scale Industry" is a case in point which can serve as illustration of this key issue⁹⁵.

3.2. The class struggle as mediation for the development of the universality of the wagedworkers' productive subjectivity

Marx presentation starts out by throwing into relief the twofold material specificity of machine-based production: it springs from the objectification of both the – however restricted – knowledge and manual skills and strength of the manufacturing labourer. On the one hand, capital strives to substitute the movement of the forces of nature for that of the human hand as the immediate agent in the transformation of the object of labour into a new use value. On the other hand, it attempts to displace the immediate subjective experience of the worker as the basis for the conscious regulation of the labour process, i.e. as the basis for knowledge of the determinations of the latter. The production of that knowledge turns into an activity which, whilst clearly remaining an inner moment of the organisation of social labour, nonetheless acquires a differentiated existence from the immediacy of the direct production process. Coupled with the need to objectify it as a productive power directly borne by the "dead labour" represented in the machine, that knowledge must necessarily take the general form of *science*. Thus, in (*tendentially*) doing away with the need for all specialised skills and knowledge of workers, the production of relative surplus value through the system of machinery gives the development of their productive subjectivity the concrete form of an *absolute degradation*. In this brutal way, and in opposition to the *particularism* of the subjectivity of the wage labourer of manufacture, large-scale industry begets, as its most genuine product, a *universal worker*, that is, a productive subject capable of taking part in any form of the human labour process.

⁹⁵ For an additional discussion which illustrates this approach with reference to the more recent past, see the remarks on the determinations underlying the so-called "Fordist" cycle of capital accumulation in G. Starosta, A. Fitzsimon, Rethinking the determination of the value of labor power, cit.

With this tendency to the production of workers who are capable of working with any machine, the simple material or technical necessity for the life-long attachment of individuals to a single productive function disappears⁹⁶. However, insofar as machines become specialised into certain particular productive functions, the persistence of the division of labour in the factory is still technically *possible*. Indeed, Marx argues, the exploitative relation between capitalists and workers that mediates the development of the material productive forces of social labour as an alienated attribute of its product, leads to the reproduction of the “old division of labour” in an even more hideous fashion⁹⁷. Large-scale industry’s tendency to produce an increasingly universal worker is thereby realised in the concrete form of its negation, that is, by multiplying the spaces for the exploitation of living labour on the basis of an exacerbation of “ossified particularities”. Thus, the individual capitalist could not care less about the disappearance of the technical necessity for a particularistic development of the worker’s productive subjectivity. Under the pressure of competition, their only individual motive is the production of an extra surplus value. If they can obtain it by attaching the worker to “the lifelong speciality of serving the same machine”⁹⁸, so they will. In effect, the reproduction of the division of labour under the new technical conditions implies that a lower value of labour power can be paid – since “the expenses necessary for his [the workers’] reproduction” are “considerably lessened”. In addition, it implies that a greater docility on the part of the exploitable human material is induced – since “his helpless dependence upon the factory as a whole, and therefore upon the capitalist, is rendered complete”⁹⁹. The capitalist multiplication of the productive powers of labour by means of the system of machinery is thereby ridden by a contradiction between the development of the universal and particular dimensions of human productive subjectivity.

The movement of “the contradiction between the division of labour under manufacture and the essential character of large-scale industry”¹⁰⁰ acquires a first expression in the establishment of compulsory elementary education for working children. As Marx points out, the unchecked exploitation of child labour by individual capitals led not only to the “physical deterioration of children and young persons”¹⁰¹, but also to an artificially produced intellectual degeneration, which transformed “immature human beings into mere machines for the production of relative surplus-value”¹⁰². Since “there is a very clear distinction between this and the state of natural ignorance in which the mind lies fallow without losing its capac-

⁹⁶ K. Marx, *Capital*, cit., p. 546.

⁹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 547.

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁰ *Ivi*, p. 615.

¹⁰¹ *Ivi*, p. 520.

¹⁰² *Ivi*, p. 523.

ity for development, its natural fertility”¹⁰³, these excesses of the capitalist exploitation of child labour power eventually reacted back on the very capacity of valorisation of the total social capital by jeopardising the existence of the future generation of adult workers in the “material and moral conditions” needed by capital accumulation itself.

Still, the total social capital’s necessity to produce universal workers is not exhausted by the obstacles to its valorisation posed by the division of labour within the workshop. As Marx remarks, “what is true of the division of labour within the workshop under the system of manufacture is also true of the division of labour within society”¹⁰⁴. In effect, inasmuch as the technical basis of large-scale industry is essentially revolutionary, it entails the permanent transformation of the material conditions of social labour and, therefore, of the forms of exertion of the productive subjectivity of individual workers and of their articulation as a directly collective productive body¹⁰⁵. This continuous technical change thereby requires individuals who can work in the ever-renewed material forms of the production of relative surplus value. “Thus”, Marx concludes, “large-scale industry, by its very nature, necessitates variation of labour, fluidity of functions, and mobility of the worker in all directions”¹⁰⁶.

With this discussion Marx unfolds the way in which the general necessities of the reproduction of the total social capital – in this case, workers bearing a universal productive subjectivity – clashes with its concrete realisation through the private actions of individual capitals, which strive for the perpetuation and exacerbation of the particularistic development of productive subjectivity. Crucially, this exposition shows how this contradiction moves by determining the working class as the personification of the mediated necessities of the valorisation of capital, the latter providing the material and social foundation for proletarian political power. In effect, the development of large-scale industry makes the possession of a universal subjectivity a matter of survival for the members of the working class, since only in that way can they be in a position to sell their labour power to capital, thereby turning the alienated necessities of social capital into an immediate need for their socially-determined material reproduction. Thus, workers must “put their heads together” again and, through their struggle as a class, force the capitalist state to “proclaim that elementary education is a compulsory pre-condition for the employment of children”¹⁰⁷. But what is elementary education if not a – certainly very basic – step in the formation of future *universal workers*? That is, in the development of technical and moral productive attributes that equip the labourer to work not in this or that particular aspect of the immediately social labour process of the

¹⁰³ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁴ Ivi, p. 615.

¹⁰⁵ Ivi, p. 617.

¹⁰⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁷ Ivi, p. 613.

collective labourer of large-scale industry, but in whatever task that capital requires from them?

More generally, a first corollary of this illustration is that elementary education is but an additional use value which must be incorporated into the “consumption bundle” which determines the value of labour power. Secondly, this necessity is not grounded in the abstractly human needs and aspirations of workers; instead, it is grounded in the development and reproduction of their productive subjectivity in the *normal* conditions which are *determined* by the total social capital’s production of relative surplus value. Finally, Marx’s discussion brings to view that this normality *can only be achieved by means of the class struggle*, which therefore acquires a more concrete form-determination as a necessary *mediating mode of existence and motion* of the reproduction of the *real* subsumption of labour to capital.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article I have developed a reading of the precise form in which Marx introduces the class struggle in his dialectical presentation in *Capital*. In addition, I offered a discussion of various implications that follow from that form-determined systematic place and significance of the antagonistic class subjectivity and action of waged workers. In contradistinction to many contemporary readings that tend to *ontologise* the class struggle, thereby turning it into the most general *content* of the movement of social life in its capitalist form, I have argued that it is a necessary *form* in which the valorisation of capital realises its determinations. The reason for this does not lie in the abstract methodological principles of structuralism¹⁰⁸. Rather, it is an expression of the concrete development of the historically specific alienation inherent in the generalised commodity form; in the form of the *total social capital*, the materialised social relation between private and independent individuals *becomes determined as the concrete “automatic subject” of the movement of modern society*. This, I think, is the fundamental discovery of Marx’s critique of political economy, which, in turn, allowed him to find the form-determinations of the class struggle as *immanent* in the movement of alienated social life itself.

More specifically, I have argued that, in its *simplest* form-determination, the class struggle is the most general *direct* social relation between *collective personifications of commodities* through which the *unity* of the *indirect* relations of capitalist production asserts itself. However, in contrast to other recent approaches, such as Postone’s and Kurz’s, which develop a broadly similar take on the antagonistic forms of working class subjectivity, I have shown that the class struggle is the necessary concrete form taken by the purchase of labourpower at its full value and,

¹⁰⁸ As, for instance, alleges W. Bonefeld, *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy: On Subversion and Negative Reason*, New York, Bloomsbury, 2014).

therefore, by the attainment of the *socially-constituted normal* material reproduction of the productive attributes of wage-labourers in a capitalistic “exploitable shape”, i.e. *in the conditions demanded by the valorisation of the total social capital*. Furthermore, this form-determination is not exhausted at the level of the formal subsumption of labour (hence working class consumption) to capital, but is more concretely developed as capital *really* subsumes the unity of the process of human metabolism under its movement of self-valorisation, i.e. not only the direct social production process but also the “norm of consumption” (including both the quantitative and qualitative composition of use values and the socially-determined modalities of their provision and appropriation).

Admittedly, in this simplest mode of existence the class struggle does have limited transformative powers as a form of the *reproduction* of capital. In other words, it is not *immediately* determined as carrying the potentiality to *transcend* the capitalist mode of production. However, in one-sidedly fixating on this determination, authors like Postone and Kurz incorrectly infer that this implies the denial of the wage-worker’s immanent social constitution as emancipatory subject. But this is far from being the case. As a matter of fact, and as elaborated in great detail elsewhere¹⁰⁹, it is only based on the form-determination of the class struggle as fully subsumed under the “automatism” of the laws of capital accumulation that it is possible to comprehend the limited transformative powers of the class struggle as a form of the reproduction of capital, its specific revolutionary powers underlying its mode of existence as the form of capital’s transcendence and, finally, the mediation between the two.

¹⁰⁹ Starosta, *Marx’s Capital, Method and Revolutionary Subjectivity*, cit.