2. A Materialist Logic for Capitalist Societies

2.1 Reading Marx Anew

Although Marx speaks in terms of "commodity-form", and not of commodity alone, of "money-form", and not of money, of "value-form", and not of value, of "capital-form" and not of capital, the conceptual implications have received little regard in early Marxist scholarship, which took for granted Engel's historicist and empiricist interpretation. It took a hundred years from the publication of the first volume of *Capital* to properly rediscover Marx's notion of social form.

This account has been developed by the so-called "new reading of Marx" or "New Marx Reading" ("Neue Marx-Lektüre"),[1] an interdisciplinary theoretical current, originally developed in (mainly West) Germany from the mid-1960s onward by lesser-known Frankfurt scholars, such as Hans-Georg Backhaus, Alfred Schmidt and Helmut Reichelt – all of whom were pupils of Adorno. Backhaus' pioneering article, *On the Dialectics of the Value-Form*,[2] written in 1969, could be considered the foundational text for this new reading of Marx, along with Reichelt's *Zur logischen Struktur des Kapitalbegriffs bei Karl Marx*, published in 1970,[3] and various texts that resulted from what has come to be known as the German State-Derivation debate (*Staatsableitungsdebatte*).[4] The debate, which involved authors such as Bernard Blanke, Ulrich Jürgens, Hans Kastendiek, Joachim Hirsch, Wolfgang Müller, Christel Neusüss, Heide Gerstenberger, emerged in response to practical, political problems in West Germany in the late 1960s. A set of key events during these years revealed certain inadequacies within earlier forms of Marxism. Firstly, following a recession

1 Ingo Elbe, *Marx im Westen. Die neue Marx-Lektüre in der Bundesrepublik seit 1965*, Akademie, Berlin, 2010. For an introductory overview in English, Elbe, "Between Marx, Marxism, and Marxisms".

2 Hans-Georg Backhaus, "On the Dialectics of the Value-Form", trans. Micheal Eldred and Mike Roth, *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1980), pp. 99–120.

3 Helmut Reichelt, *Zur logischen Struktur des Kapitalbegriffs bei Karl Marx*, Europäische Verlagsansts, Hamburg, 1970.

4 The main contributions to the debate are collected in John Holloway and Sol Picciotto (eds.), *State and Capital. A Marxist Debate*, Edward Arnold, London, 1978.

that lasted from 1965–67, Marxist analysis failed to articulate an effective response regarding the role of the state in the economic recovery in 1967–68. Secondly, the Social Democrats (SPD) had become a major partner in a socio-liberal government with the elections of 1969, thus becoming a majority force. Thirdly, the German student movement fail to establish meaningful contact with the working-class movement. Together, these three developments opened new, problematic questions about the limits and possibility of state intervention.[5] In addition to those involved in the State-Derivation debate, other authors and collective projects representatives of the New Marx Reading include Helmut Brentel, Dieter Wolf, Heinz D. Kittsteiner, Projekt Klassenanalyse, PolyluxMarx, Sonja Buckel, and Moishe Postone.[6] More recently, Micheal Heinrich, a prolific scholar of Marx, whose *Introduction to the Three Volumes of Marx's Capital*[7] is considered one of the most authoritative accounts on Marx, has become a leading voice.

While the movement has its roots in the 1960's, Backhaus did not coin the term, "Neue Marx-Lektüre" until 1997.[8] The years in which the New Marx Reading was taking shape were marked by social upheaval, exemplified by the student protests of May 1968 and by the Vietnam war, which revealed the first cracks in U.S. post-war hegemony. During this time, the dogmas and ideological shortcomings of traditional Marxism, as embodied in authoritarian Soviet "Socialism", were being reevaluated. People wondered if traditional Marxism adequately captured Marx's thought, leading to the so-called "New Left" or "critical turn" in Marxism, as well as the emergence of the structuralist and post-structuralist currents in France, and operaismo and postoperaismo in Italy. Despite the differences amongst the various voices animating the New Marx Reading, the apparent common goal was to overcome the so-called dialectical and historical materialism of Marxism-Leninism. It is also noteworthy that, in contrast to operaismo and despite its radical emancipatory claims, the New Marx Reading was largely unable to break the confines of academia.

A crucial moment was the 1967 colloquium, *100 Jahre 'Kapital'*. Under the auspices of this conference, the new questions, research objectives, and methodologies for a reinterpretation of Marx's thought from the perspective of social theory were first defined. A refusal of Engelsian and humanistic flavor was the basis of inquiry into the original objects and methods of critique of political economy (with an emphasis

5 *Ibid.*, 15.

6 Postone is counted by Heinrich as a full-fledged participant in the New Marx Reading, *Ibid.*, 229.

7 Heinrich, *Karl Marx's Capital*.

8 Elbe contends this origin of the term, backdating it to 1973 in *Marx im Westen*, p. 31,

on Marx-Hegel relation), and the link between the three volumes of *Capital*, recentering attention upon the *Grundrisse*.[9]

Marx's rough draft of the *Grundrisse* had virtually no circulation outside of the Soviet Union. Moreover, the 1953 Dietz edition, which includes all seven manuscripts plus miscellaneous related material, also failed to reach a wider audience. Only in the 1960s, thanks to 1962 Alfred Schmidt's *The Concept of Nature in Marx*,[10] followed by the publication of a substantial commentary on *Grundrisse* by Roman Rosdolsky in 1968, does the *Grundrisse* reach a broad West German public.[11] Rosdolsky claimed that better understanding *Grundrisse* would shed crucial light on the Marxist critical-dialectic method. Other manuscripts central to the development of this new reading of Marx include the first edition of *Capital*'s first volume and its appendix, or *Anhang*,[12] the *Urtext*[13] and the *Results of the Immediate Process of Production*.[14]

By challenging the conventional equation of Engel's commentaries with Marx's thought – the basic assumption of the Marxist paradigm of the Second and Third Internationals – and the Engelsian, historicist misinterpretation of the first three chapters of *Capital*, including value theory, Backhaus and his followers set the framework for a new methodological program. This program entails the critical-reconstructive reading of Marx's system of thought to reconstruct and re-establish his method of presentation [*darstellungsmethode*] as logical, form-genetic method. This approach contests Engels's historical and empiricist interpretation, which sees the sequence of categories (commodity, the elementary, expanded, and general forms of value, money, capital) as merely an abstract reflection of historical progression, rather than as a necessary sequence revealing their inner, inseparable connection. Through this method, Marx's critique of political economy can be understood with greater precision.

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9 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, Penguin Classics, London, 2005.

10 Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, trans. Ben Fawkes, New Left Books, London, 1971.

11 Roman Rosdolsky, *Zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Marxschen 'Kapital'*, Europäische Verlagsanstalt, Hamburg, 1968.

12 Karl Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy. Vol I*, trans. Ben Fowkes, Penguin Classics, London, 1990, pp. 943–1084.

13 Karl Marx, *The Original Text of the Second and the Beginning of the Third Chapter of "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy" (the Urtext)*, Marx and Engels, *MECW*, vol. 29, pp. 430–507.

14 Karl Marx, *Results of the Direct Production Process*, Marx and Engels, *MECW*, vol. 34, pp. 355–471. For this account see Elbe, "Between Marx, Marxism, and Marxisms".

Following Elbe,[15] three reconstructive levels emerge within Marx-Engels studies, according to an "exoteric/esoteric" distinction.[16] Firstly, we identify and set aside the Engelsian component as merely "exoteric", as, for instance, Backhaus does in his *Materialien zur Rekonstruktion der Marxschen Werttheorie*, parts one and two.[17] Secondly, we identify and remove Marx's meta-theoretical self-understanding, the *intentio auctoris*, labeling it as an "exoteric", inadequate self-reflection getting in the way of a proper analysis of capitalism, the true "esoteric" content.[18] Thirdly, we apply the "exoteric/esoteric" distinction to the terms Marx himself employs in his analysis of classical economics. Here, the "exoteric" inquiry is that which adheres to the everyday consciousnesses of social agents (including the authors themselves) and their immediate perceptions and representations. In contrast, the "esoteric" focuses on the formation of thought within the context of capitalist social intercourse. This deeper stage of the critical-reconstructive reading, as pursued by Backhaus in the third and fourth parts of *Materialien*, and by Heinrich in *Die Wissenschaft vom Wert*,[19] duplicates the "esoteric/exoteric" distinction, identifying both exoteric and esoteric elements both in Marx's meta-discourse and his real analyses. Indeed, we should not entirely reject Marx's self-understanding meta-discourse as "exoteric", since it contains many "esoteric" insights. Moreover, "exoteric" contents and conceptual ambiguities can likewise be found in the critique of political economy – a treatment which had previously been described as "esoteric". According to Elbe:

> In place of the legend of a linear progression of knowledge on Marx's part, there appeared the recognition of a complex coexistence and interpenetration of progress and regression in the method of presentation and the state of research of Marx's critique of economy.[20]

It is important here to distinguish two different conceptions of reconstruction. To maintain the idea of esoteric content, even at this last, deeper stage of interpreta-

15 *Ibid.*

16 The distinction between the exoteric and esoteric aspects of Marx's theory goes back to Stefan Breuer, *Die Krise der Revolutionstheorie: negative Vergesellschaftung u. Arbeitsmetaphysik bei Herbert Marcuse*, Syndikat, Frankfurt am Main, 1977.

17 Collected in Hans-Georg Backhaus, *Dialektik der Wertform. Untersuchungen zur Marxschen Ökonomiekritik*, Ça ira, Freiburg, 1997.

18 These first two levels were expressed from a different perspective by Louis Althusser, who advocated for a reconstruction of *Capital* on the basis of a "symptomatic" reading, and by Alfred Schmidt and Backhaus. See Louis Althusser, "From Capital to Marx's Philosophy", Althusser et al., *Reading Capital*, pp. 11–70.

19 Michael Heinrich, *Die Wissenschaft vom Wert. Die Marxsche Kritik der politischen Ökonomie zwischen wissenschaftlicher Revolution und klassischer Tradition*, Westfälisches Dampfboot, Münster, 1999.

20 Elbe, "Between Marx, Marxism, and Marxisms".

tion, means to maintain the belief in the existence of a coherent, hidden kernel, an underlying, inner logic within Marx's theory. Backhaus and Reichelt believed that this inner kernel had been preserved in relative purity in the *Grundrisse* as well as in other drafts of *Capital*. Thus, reconstruction involves identifying and retaining what has been lost and using the earlier texts to shed light on the later ones, revealing a concealed, esoteric core. This project was only possible after the completion of MEGA (*Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe*),[21] in the 1970s.[22] In addition to standardizing Marx's works, the MEGA classifies the *Grundrisse 1857–58*, the *Economic Manuscript of 1861–63*, and the *Economic Manuscript of 1863–65* as preparatory drafts of *Capital*. It proposes a linear development from 1857 onward, progressing with each draft to *Capital* in its final form: Volume I, followed by Volumes II and III, edited by Engels. This mode of classification assumes a clear distinction between drafts and final works. Thus, "this labelling is not a pure description, it implies a certain judgement, and a judgment which can be questioned".[23]

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21 The first project of MEGA was outlined in 1921 by philologist and leftist intellectual, David B. Rjazanov, at that time director of Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow, supported by the German Social Democrats Party, SPD. The plan comprised three sections: the first devoted to the *œuvres*, with the exception of *Capital*; the second to *Capital*; and the third to correspondence. In 1927, the first of the forty-two volumes expected for MEGA appeared in Frankfurt. Between 1929 and 1932, eight more volumes were published by Berlin Marx-Engels-Verlag. The project, however, was left incomplete due to Hitler's rise to power and escalating Stalinian terror. After the Second World War, a new edition was taken into consideration, with the explicit refusal to continue the Rjazanov's on the grounds of outdated philological criteria. Only after Stalin's death was it possible to undertake a second attempt, assigned to the Institutes of Marxism-Leninism of the Social Unity Party (SED) in Berlin and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in Moscow. The first edition appeared in 1972, following new editorial guidelines and innovative concepts (total reproduction of the correspondence; complete reproduction of every layer of work: sketches, drafts, manuscripts; original language with original punctuation and orthography; and appendixes with historical-philosophical-political clarifications). This was followed by a second new edition in 1975. After the fall of "real socialism" in the 1990s, MEGA published with the Internationale Marx-Engels-Stiftung (IMES) in Amsterdam. For a contribution to the history of MEGA and the publication in German of Marx's and Engels's works, see the preface to Riccardo Bellofiore and Nicola Taylor (eds.), *The Constitution of Capital: Essays on Volume 1 of Marx's Capital*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2004.

22 See Michael Heinrich, "Reconstruction or Deconstruction? Methodological Controversies about Value and Capital, and New Insights from the Critical Edition", Riccardo Bellofiore and Roberto Fineschi (eds.), *Re-Reading Marx. New Perspectives after the Critical Edition*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2009, pp. 71–98.

23 Heinrich, "Reconstruction or Deconstruction?" p. 78. Heinrich challenges this standardized view. Drawing on a close philological reading of Marx's economic manuscripts of 1880–1, he argues for the existence of two different projects: a *Critique of Political Economy* in six books – capital, landed property, wage-labor, the State, foreign trade, the world market – and *Capital* in four books – three theoretical ones and a fourth on the history of economic theory. Ac-

The current version of MEGA, much richer than that of the 1970s, poses serious challenges to the project of reconstruction as such. On the one hand, the idea of a clear distinction between drafts and final work fails, "we have only differently developed drafts of a shifting, unfinished and incomplete projects. And on the other hand, we find several ambivalences even in basic notions which make different lines of interpretation and reasoning possible".[24] These ambivalences are not there by accident, rather they are caused by a fundamental problem: the complex coexistence of two separate discourses in Marx's *Capital*. The first is the "scientific attempt" to "revolutionize a science",[25] namely, the science of political economy, eschewing its humanism, individualism, ahistoricism and empiricism, as a tool for shaping social revolution. The second is that science itself. As Heinrich puts it:

> This scientific revolution, this break with the theoretical field of political economy, was not complete. At some points of his presentation, Marx stuck to the field he broke with at the same moment. In the same text we can observe a break with this field and the continuing presence of some elements of this field. These two sides are not clearly separated.[26]

Consequently, the idea is not to unlock an ultimate understanding of Marx's critique by reconstructing its inner, coherent core, which does not exist. Rather it is more of a "constructive task […] an always unfinished, open and at every level questionable process".[27] The aim is to continue working on Marx's revolution of political economy, moving past the legacy tied to traditional categories of economy, which are obstacles

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cording to Heinrich, the attempts to realize the first involved texts from *Einleitung*, written in summer 1857, to *Economic Manuscript of 1861–63*. The second group of texts composed for the second project comprises the works from *Economic Manuscript of 1863–65* to the 1881 *Notes on Wagner* (see the tables in *Ibid.*, pp. 86–87). Besides important changes regarding value theory, accumulation, circulation, and crisis, the two projects can be distinguished structurally, namely the distinction between "capital in general" and "competition of many capitals" in the *Critique of Political Economy* and the relation of "individual capital" and "total social capital" in *Capital*.

24 Michael Heinrich, *Ambivalences of Marx's Critique of Political Economy as Obstacles for the Analysis of Contemporary Capitalism*, http://www.oekonomiekritik.de/310Ambivalences.htm. 2nd Historical Materialism Conference, London, 10 October 2004, revised paper.

25 Karl Marx, *Marx to Kugelmann, December 28 1862*, Marx and Engels, *MECW*, p. 436.

26 Heinrich, *Ambivalences of Marx's Critique of Political Economy as Obstacles for the Analysis of Contemporary Capitalism*. Heinrich elucidates this thesis with the analysis of three issues in which the ambivalence is patent: value, money-commodity, crises. Regarding value two approaches stand side by side: a "substantialist-naturalist theory of value" and a "monetary theory of value". Marx presupposes the necessity of a money-commodity as the bearer of the money *form*.

27 Heinrich, "Reconstruction or Deconstruction?" p. 96

to links between Marxist categories and contemporary capitalism. Moreover, also the categories used for analysis are themselves open and questionable.

The first (re)constructive effort, started by Backhaus and Reichelt, was focused upon value theory, moving away from a substantialist-naturalist theory and towards a pure, monetary one. The reflection upon value has, indeed, been prominent in the New Marx Reading tradition. Some critics have pointed out[28] that this emphasis on value happened at the expense of the analysis of capitalist totality and that the reconstruction of *Capital* did not reach the categories of capitalist production, nor the general law of accumulation. The charge is that the New Marx Reading is an "apolitical and […] neoscholastic reading of Marx".[29] If this critique might hold in the case of Backhaus and Reichelt's first works, it does not do so with regard to more recent scholarship from the New Marx Reading. A historical recounting of the emergence of the New Marx Reading out of a conglomeration of multifarious theoretical influences further belies the claim that the group lacks politics. The State-Derivation debate, which centered on the politics of social domination in capitalist society, was an early catalyst for the group's formation. The separation of economy and politics in capitalist societies was the central polemic of this debate, which approached the problem via logical and historical analyses of capitalist production. The aim, in other words, was to derive a functional understanding of the state (or the separation between the economic and the political) from the category of capital, working against theorists such as Habermas, who separate the study of politics from the analysis of capitalist production.

It was in this context that the masterly 1923 essay, *The General Theory of Law and Marxism*[30] by the Soviet legal scholar Evgenij B. Pašukanis, an intellectual predecessor of the New Marx Reading who was executed during the Great Purge in 1937, was fully appreciated. Additionally, the economist Isaak I. Rubin's major work *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*,[31] which also appeared in 1923 in the USSR, became foundational for the group when it was translated and disseminated in the 1970s. Rubin, like Pašukanis, was executed during the purges of 1937. Rubin and Pašukanis address core questions respectively of Marxist value and state theory understanding

28 See Riccardo Bellofiore and Tommaso Redolfi Riva, "The Neue Marx-Lektüre. Putting the Critique of Political Economy Back into the Critique of Society", Radical Philosophy, no. 189 (2015), pp. 24–36 and Werner Bonefeld, *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy: On Subversion and Negative Reason*, Bloomsbury, London, 2014.

29 Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen and Dominique Routhier, "Critical Theory as Radical Crisis Theory: Kurz, Krisis, and Exit! on Value Theory, the Crisis, and the Breakdown of Capitalism", *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2019), p. 179.

30 Evgeny B. Pašukanis, *The General Theory of Law and Marxism*, trans. Barbara Einhorn, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, 2002

31 Isaak I. Rubin, *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*, trans. Miloš Samardžija and Fredy Perlman, Black and Red Books, Detroit, 1972.

the importance of reading Marx's *darstellungmethode* as "analysis of form", "form-genetic method". The New Marx Reading thus interprets their work as a reconstruction of Marx's original theories on value and the state.

In addition, complex and close interconnections between French Marxist scholars, such as Althusser, Jacques Rancière, and the West German groups, influenced the emergence of the New Marx Reading.[32] As highlighted by Elbe,[33] one of the first attempts to combine the West German debates and Althusser's tradition was made in 1976 by Joachim Hirsch in the field of state theory.[34] Hirsch integrates the formal-analytical method of the State-Derivation debate with Althusser's Ideological State Apparatus theory and, above all, with the Gramscian-inspired relational state theory developed by Nicos Poulantzas, Althusser's pupil. Hirsch's justification for this experimental method is derived from the assumption that form analysis is only useful for determining the basic class character of the bourgeois state, and that concrete political analysis is required to address most problems surrounding theory of the state. Hence, Hirsch aims to bridge conceptual-logical analysis and historical

32 Althusser considered value theory and fetishism versions of Feuerbach's theory of alienation, and, in the 1970s, dismissed them as residual idealism. In 1969, in an introduction to Volume One of *Capital*, he wrote that readers should "put THE WHOLE OF PART ONE ASIDE FOR THE TIME BEING and BEGIN YOUR READING WITH PART TWO: 'The Transformation of Money into Capital'". Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1971, p. 81. In 1965, the collective volume *Reading Capital* flirted with the conceptual pair of visibility/concealment, crucial for a theory of fetishism. Jacques Rancière developed a theory of fetishism and value-form based upon criticizing such readings in terms of idealist anthropological critique of alienation. See Rancière, "The Concept of Critique and the Critique of Political Economy". Rancière's text, focused on the notions of social forms, subjectification, and objectification, constitutes an important contribution to the debate on value-form, showing conceptual affinities with the New Marx Reading. See Elbe, *Marx im Westen*, pp. 58–62 and Panagiotis Sotiris, "Althusserianism and Value-form Theory: Rancière, Althusser and the Question of Fetishism", *Crisis and Critique*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2015), pp. 167–193. Due to Rancière's and Althusser's later rejection of the notion of fetishism and post-1968 disappointment, this affinity has gone unnoticed. On the question of the relation between value-form theory and Althusserianism, see Panagiotis Sotiris and Dimitris Papafotiou, *Althusser and Value-Form Theory: A Missed Encounter?*, 2016, paper presented at the 13th Historical Materialism Conference, London, 10–13 November, 2016 https://www.academia.edu/29894551/Althusser_and_value_form_theory_a_missed_encounter accessed 9th June 2025; and John Milios, "Rethinking Marx's Value-Form Analysis from an Althusserian Perspective", *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2009), pp. 260–74.

33 Elbe, *Marx im Westen*, pp. 401–4.

34 See Joachim Hirsch, "Bemerkungen zum theoretischen Ansatz einer Analyse des bürgerlichen Staates", *Gesellschaft. Beiträge zur Marxschen Theorie*, vol. 8, no. 9 (1976), pp. 99–149; Joachim Hirsch, *Materialistische Staatstheorie. Transformationsprozesse des kapitalistischen Staatensystems*, vsa, Hamburg, 2005; and Joachim Hirsch and John Kannankulam, "The Spaces of Capital: The Political Form of Capitalism and the Internationalization of the State", Antipode, vol. 43, no. 1 (2011), pp. 12–37.

investigation. He shows that the two major efforts for a renewal of Marxism as a political theory – that of the 1960s and that of the 1970s – are not inherently opposed. More recently, the "historical materialist policy analysis" (HMPA) and the so-called "strategic-relational approach" adopt this perspective as well.[35]

Two key sources for such readings are *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*,[36] written by Marx in 1852 and devoted to a historiography of Louis Bonaparte *coup d'état* of 1851, and is its "prequel", *The Class Struggles in France, 1848 to 1850*[37] of 1850. These texts present a periodization of political developments, which Jessop analyzes in terms of the following:[38]

1. the political stage and its actors, i.e. the superficial but effective level of discourses and symbolism through which different political forces express their aspirations and try to persuade their audiences;
2. "the social content of politics", i.e. the class struggle content behind the scenes of this stage. Marx's analysis of class compositions and class interests is related to economic interests in specific conjunctions and/or periods, and the consequent strategic and tactical possibilities, rather than to abstract positions within the processes of production;
3. the changes in the institutional architecture of the state and their consequent structural influence on the political balance of forces;
4. the interconnected movements of the local, national and international economy over different time scales insofar as they shape political positions.

These debates lead to the second and third threads – after the criticism of pre-monetary theories of value – that shape the (re)constructive efforts of the New Marx Reading. First, the rejection of any manipulative-instrumental conception of the state and, second, the abandonment of interpretations of Marx's theory "based on labor-ontological revolutionary theory (or even upon revolutionary theory as such)".[39] In the background of all of this lies a precise understanding of what Marx is genuinely portraying in *Capital*: it is not English capitalism of his time, nor nineteenth-century competitive capitalism, nor any specific empirically existing capitalism. Rather,

35 A more detailed account of HMPA approach is developed below, in the section "*Dispositisf* and Politics". See also Alexander Gallas et al. (eds.), *Reading Poulantzas*, Merlin Press, Talgarth, 2011.

36 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx and Engels, *MECW*, vol. 11, pp. 99–197.

37 Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France, 1848 to 1850*, Marx and Engels, *MECW*, vol. 10, pp. 45–145.

38 Bob Jessop, *State Power: A Strategic-Relational Approach*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2008, pp. 85–98.

39 Elbe, "Between Marx, Marxism, and Marxisms".

Marx's object of study is, in his words, "the internal organization of the capitalist mode of production, its ideal average, as it were",[40] i.e. the fundamental categories and social forms that characterize capitalism, differentiating it from non-capitalist modes of production, so that we may speak of "capitalism" as such. At times, to be sure, Marx mistook certain contingent elements characteristic of the nineteenth-century capitalist configuration in which he lived for essential mechanisms of capitalist dynamics in their ideal average. One example of this is Marx's thesis on the necessary existence of a money-commodity, which the collapse of Bretton-Woods currency system has irrefutably proved wrong.[41]

And yet, some of the intrinsic features of capitalism first described by Marx have come to full fruition only in the twentieth century. Take, for example, the production of relative surplus value which is tightly connected to Fordism, which only after the Second World War was established across the board.[42] Heinrich goes so far as to claim that, "in some respects, one could say that *Capital* has more applicability to the 20th and 21st centuries than to the 19th".[43] This claim derives from the fact that describing capitalism in its "ideal average" requires an exceptionally high level of abstraction. Capitalism in its ideal average, however, does not manifest in real time or space. It exists only in specific, historical manifestations, embedded in concrete social and political processes, in which capitalist and non-capitalist elements coexist. Nonetheless, to analyze this coexistence – or to investigate a particular manifestation of capitalism or its history – an understanding of capitalist categories and social forms at such an abstract level is essential. And the method to grasp them is the "analysis of forms", the *social form-analysis*, or the form-genetic method, which is, according to the New Marx Reading, the crux of Marx's breakthrough.[44] The fundamental Marxist question concerns the logical process of *form-determination*, which he applied to the categories of political economy in order to bring to light the social relations concealed within in those forms. Marx writes,

40 Karl Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy. Vol III*, trans. David Fernbach, Penguin Classics, London, 1991, p. 970.

41 Heinrich, *Karl Marx's Capital*, pp. 69–70, 161–162.

42 See Chapter 3.

43 Heinrich, "Invaders from Marx", p. 83, p. 5.

44 Marxist orthodoxy, beginning with Engels' commentary on Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) or the supplement to Volume III of Capital (1894), followed by Karl Kautsky, Rudolf Hilferding and Lenin, gives a historicist interpretation of the form-genetic method. Marx's analysis is understood as empiricism and historicism, and *Capital* as a historiographical work. Thus, according to Engels, the first three chapters of *Capital* describe a historical economic epoch which he calls, "simple production of commodities" and dates from 6000 BC to the fifteenth century.

> Political economy has indeed analysed value and its magnitude, however incompletely, and has uncovered the content concealed within these forms. But it has never once asked the question why this content has assumed that particular form, that is to say, why labour is expressed in value.[45]

The same question is raised by Pašukanis in relation to the state and the law:

> [Stuchka's] definition uncovers the class content concealed within legal forms, but does not explain why this content assumes that particular form. For bourgeois philosophy, which regards the legal relation as the eternal, natural form of every human relation, this question never even arises.[46]

Following these questions, then, the new reading reinterprets Marx's critique of political economy in terms of social form-analysis, i.e. as critical analysis of specific social forms within capitalism, considering not only economic forms like capital, value and money, but also legal-political forms, namely the law and the state.[47] From this perspective, the critique of political economy is indeed critical theory, concerned with complex social forms and dynamics under the conditions of capitalist commodity production. This means considering these forms as rising from, "the connection between the material process of production and reproduction of the life of socialized people and the relations between these people who constitute themselves in this process of material reproduction".[48]

In foregrounding this method of social form-analysis, the new reading focuses more upon qualitative and sociological aspects of political economy than would conventional Marxism, which sees it as an alternative economic doctrine or as a theory of the distribution and redistribution of social wealth. In this respect, the New Marx Reading reflects the Frankfurt School's critical theory of society. On the one hand, the New Marx Reading, starting with Backhaus and Reichelt, explicitly distances itself[49] from the culture-critical orientation of Frankfurt's reading, which leads to a

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45 Marx, *Capital I*, pp. 173–4. When Marx undertook his project to critique political economy at the end of the 1850s, he meant to write also a volume wholly dedicated to the state. In the preface to *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* of 1859, he writes, "I examine the system of bourgeois economy in the following order: capital, landed property, wage-labour; the State, foreign trade, world market" (p. 261). The book, however, was never written.

46 Pašukanis, *The General Theory of Law and Marxism*, p. 84.

47 On legal-political form see Aloe and Stefanoni, "Verso una logica dei complessi sociali capitalistici", pp. 39–43.

48 Bernhard Blanke et al., "On the Current Marxist Discussion on the Analysis of Form and Function of the Bourgeois State", Holloway et al. (eds.), *State and Capital*, p. 118.

49 "The fact that the concept of society and the concept of ideology of the Frankfurt School become comprehensible only adopting as a starting point the Marxian theory of value, and yet that this dimension of value theory has been completely obscured both in the German

critique of instrumental reason as a philosophy of history, and to anthropological pessimism. New Marx Reading also rejects the Frankfurt scholars' vague attempts to critique political economy on the grounds that the latter assume from the very beginning the categories of political economy which instead have to be explained.[50] They assert, for example, that Adorno assumes the fetish character of commodities as a result of monetary exchange without considering processes of socialization, thus falling into a premonetary theory of value, which Marx irrefutably proved wrong. At the same time, however, some key reflections of Frankfurt scholars are central to the development of the New Marx Reading, beginning with the influence on Backhaus's critical reconstruction of Marx's theory and Reichelt's theory of validity.[51]

Adorno's focus on socialization [*Vergesellschaftung*] as the basis of society leads to the interpretation of Marx's critique of political economy as an analysis of the specific form of socialization in capitalist society,[52] or the program of an "anamnesis of the genesis"[53] of autonomized social forms, i.e., as we will explore, the task of understanding their *social* origin and taking back the social form to a specific practice.

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controversy on positivism and in the commented exposition of this controversy, shows how Adorno and Horkheimer themselves did not carry out sufficient methodological reflection on the foundation of critical theory in terms of value theory". Hans Georg Backhaus, *Ricerche sulla critica marxiana dell'economia: materiali per la ricostruzione della teoria del valore*, Riccardo Bellofiore and Tommaso Redolfi Riva, (eds.) Mimesis, Milano-Udine, 2016, p. 127 [my English translation].

50 "Critical political economy adopts the conceptual horizon of political economy; the critique of political economy opens onto a very different discursive horizon. Attention – or lack of attention – to specific social forms and purposes distinguishes the two." Patrick Murray, "Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy: From Critical Political Economy to the Critique of Political Economy", Beverley Best et al. (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, Sage, London, 2018, p. 766. See the full article for an account of the relations between the Frankfurt School and the new reading of Marx.

51 Backhaus and Reichelt suggest an *a posteriori* reading of the genesis of the new reading of Marx with the School of Frankfurt as its only source. Backhaus, in the collection of his main works (*Dialektik der Wertform*), published in 1997, reconsiders his transcript of Adorno's seminar in the summer of 1962 on "Marx and the basic concepts of sociological theory", *Seminar Transcript in the Summer Semester of 1962*, trans. Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson and Chris O'Kane, *Historical Materialism*, vol. 26, no. 1 (2018), pp. 154–164. Reichelt identifies the germinal moment of the new reading of Marx in Backhaus' casual discovery of the first edition of *Capital* in a Frankfurt student center in 1963. Helmut Reichelt, *Neue Marx-Lektüre. Zur Kritik sozialwissenschaftlicher Logik*, VSA-Verlag, Hamburg, 2008, p. 11. See Elbe, *Marx im Westen* cit. for a critique of this position.

52 Riccardo Bellofiore and Tommaso Redolfi Riva, "Hans-Georg Backhaus: The Critique of Premonetary Theories of Value and the Perverted Forms of Economic Reality", Best et al. (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, p. 386–388.

53 Quoted in *Ibid*., p. 388.

Related to this, Adorno's critique of the fetish as "the theoretical tool to understanding the social nature of capitalist social relations",[54] together with the theory of real abstraction by Alfred Sohn-Rethel is reflected in the New Marx Reading.[55] Additionally, the critique of positivism, understood in a broad sense, as naïve epistemology which considers its categories immutable and trans-historical, generates reflection upon the social conditions of the genesis of thought forms (both at the level of science and the level of everyday consciousness of social actors) under capitalism. The question here is, "why can thought – in everyday life or philosophical thinking – not adequately grasp its own capitalistic social conditions?".[56] Ultimately, the New Marx Reading draws from these insights, while at the same time, moves past the Frankfurt school by centering the connections amongst the critique of political economy and a reconstructed understanding of Marx's analysis of capitalism.

2.2 The Method of Form-Analysis and Social Forms

Following Blanke, Jürgens and Kastendiek,[57] it is possible to distinguish two explanations for the determination of form: a historical-typologizing explanation, and a functional one. The first retraces form-determination in historical processes that can be typologically generalized (e.g. the state as the outcome of modern history). The second reconstructs one or more functions that a given "sphere" fulfills within social systems, explaining its existence through these functions, which are assumed to be valid across all types of human societies (e.g., the function of making binding decisions as the basis for the state's existence). Contrary to these approaches, a Marxian method avoids the error of taking "the standpoint of phenomena in their finished forms"[58] as its starting point. Rather, it searches for their conditions of existence in the specific requirements of capitalist social structures. Thus, social form-analysis aims at "theoretically reconstructing the entire historical-social formation".[59] The analysis must determine, firstly, *whether* a given social form is inherent to the "ideal average" of capitalist society. To answer this, the inquiry must decipher from structural constraints imposed by capital relations, such as impersonality, reification/naturalization and specific separations, "those conditions which

54 *Ibid.*

55 Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, trans. Martin Sohn-Rethel, Humanities Press, Atlantic Highlands, 1978.

56 Frank Engster, "Critical Theory and Epistemological and Social-Economical Critique", Best et al. (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, p. 751. On forms of thought see below.

57 Blanke et al., "Form and Function of the Bourgeois State", p. 113 ff.

58 Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy. Vol II*, p. 294.

59 Blanke et al., "Form and Function of the Bourgeois State", p. 118.

make the genesis of a certain form necessary". Secondly, the form-analysis must establish how different forms relate to each other as necessary forms in the reproduction of the society itself. As written in "Form and Function of the Bourgeois State", "The aim of the analysis is not, however, to realize in retrospect the 'course of history' but to present the forms in the context in which they stand 'logically', that is, in which they reproduce themselves under the conditions of a particular historically concrete form of society".[60]

It is easy to see here that this method deals with the demarcation of and relations amongst "logical" analysis and "historical" analysis.[61] A significant objection, however, to the form-analysis approach is the charge of ahistoricity. As Holloway and Picciotto write, "If form analysis is to be understood as purely logical and historical analysis as empirical, this will not help us to develop a historical materialist theory of the development of the [social forms]".[62] To contest this objection, it is crucial to comprehend how "logical" and "historical" interrelate in the form-genetic method. According to Kittsteiner,[63] this method has four "historical implications":

1. its object is not a historical becoming, nevertheless is historical-social, non-natural and non-eternal;
2. inner historicity of capital, its "logical temporality": the immanent direction of development given by the system of forms (structural historical dynamics of "the development of productive forces, the rate of profit", etc.,);
3. external historicity of capital: the historically specific preconditions from which capitalist social complexes proceed which could not be originally produced by capital itself but only reproduced later by the complex (e.g. the separation of the immediate producers from their means of production);
4. historical as empirical-factual: the sphere of the historical contingency of singular events, for example, the "real movement of competition".

Kittsteiner's implications take into account that social forms are always the product of historical processes, struggles, and social actions. It is thus misleading to consider their genesis in terms of intrinsic logic, or seeing the social actors in these processes as inherently capitalistic. Along these lines, "form analysis is the analysis

60 *Ibid.*, 118–9.

61 This issue brings into question the very possibility of drawing such demarcation. See the introduction of Holloway and Picciotto, *State and Capital*.

62 *Ibid.*, 22.

63 See Heinz-Dieter Kittsteiner, "'Logisch" und "Historisch": Über Differenzen des Marxschen und Engelsschen Systems der Wissenschaft. (Engels' Rezension "Zur Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie" von 1859), *Internationale Wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*, vol. 13 (1977), pp. 1–47.

of an historically determined and historically developing form of social relations".[64] For example, the political form of the bourgeois state is related to the crises of the *Ancien Régime* society. In this sense, the bourgeois state was the result of historical processes, struggles and actions of a particular society.[65]

Therefore, form-analysis *per se* does not have pretensions of explaining institutions, concrete political processes and different class compositions and their organization, etc., of capitalist societies – neither how and why the historical constitution of money, state, etc., occurred, nor their functions. Nevertheless, it frames the overall structural conditions that orient institutional configurations, functions, power relations, rationalization models, and individual actions. Thus, this approach is not a ready-made "theory of society", but rather its categorial basis. In other words, on the level of form-analysis, it is possible to derive the "system-limit" (of the economical or the political, for example, and of capitalist society as a whole) because it is fixed "by the form determinations developing out of the relation of capitalist production".[66] Again, from "Form and Function of the Bourgeois State",

> On this level of abstraction, however, we can give only the *general points of departure* […]. The question of how this formation takes place in detail, how it is transposed into structure, institution and process […], can no longer be answered by form analysis. It would have to be made the subject of historical analysis.[67]

The task of the remainder of this chapter is to enlighten the relations between form-analysis and historical analysis, enriching the materialist logic of capitalist social complexes in order to clarify how it relates to concrete and historical institutional constellations, processes, social actions. This enrichment is necessary to operationalize this logical, theoretical view of the social complexity and translate it into empirical research, answering the methodological problem of "how the 'logic' of capitalist society theoretically reconstructed […] is to be 'applied' to the analysis of historical and concrete forms of appearance".[68] Until this point, this chapter has aimed to describe the form-genetic method and its aims. Now, questions of *why* will be illuminated. Why is it necessary to reconstruct theoretically, to make a logical "anamnesis of the genesis" of value, money, the state, etc.? Why has introducing the question of the form, as Marx did, been revolutionary not only for the science of political economy, but also for the critique of capitalist society?

64 Holloway and Picciotto, *State and Capital*, p. 27.

65 Heide Gerstenberger, "The Historical Constitution of the Political Forms of Capitalism", *Antipode*, vol. 43, no. 1 (2011), pp. 60–86.

66 Holloway and Picciotto, *State and Capital*, p. 139.

67 Blanke et al., "Form and Function of the Bourgeois State", p. 119.

68 *Ibid.*, 114.

The answers lie, in part, in the phenomenon of fetishism characterizing capitalist societies. Simply put, in capitalist societies, social forms such as commodity, money, capital, etc., manifest as mere things, objects which have always existed (e.g. commodity as the product of labor, money as mean of payment, capital as an amount of money), while they are actually "social hieroglyphics"[69] that need to be deciphered. Thus, form-analysis can be seen "as a critique of fetishism"[70] capable of undermining the fetishized objectivity of social forms.[71] But, what are social forms, and how are they related to fetishism?

The notion of social form as it is conceptualized within the framework of the New Marx Reading contends that value, money, capital, the state and all other capitalistic social forms are "congealed",[72] condensed,[73] or objectified[74] social relations between individuals which vanish in their appearance. The uniqueness of the Marxian conception expressed in *Capital*, which all these elements capture, is in its affirmation not only that social forms are relations between individuals, but also that they are "concealed beneath a material [*dinglicher*] shell",[75] i.e. mediated by things. As Heinrich underlines,[76] Marx's and Engels' points of departure in the *Communist Manifesto* are classes and class struggle, which they assume can explain all the rest. On the contrary, however, Marx has reached the conclusion in *Capital* that, since relations between individuals are "concealed beneath a material [*dinglicher*[77]] shell", they cannot constitute the starting point, but rather are a result which has to be developed. For this reason, in *Capital* the chapter titled "Classes" is the last, incomplete, of the third book. In *Capital*, Marx's analysis abandons the misconception expressed in the *Manifesto* that, in capitalism, social relations are readily transparent and that only manipulation by the ruling classes disguises them. Again, the conditions of social relations specific to capitalism, according to *Capital*, are their concealment "beneath

69 Marx, *Capital I*, p. 167.

70 Alexander Neupert-Doppler, "Society and Political Form", Best et al. (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, p. 819.

71 As will become clear, form-analysis works on the epistemic side of fetishism, i.e. on naturalization only. In order to dissolve the concrete reification a change in daily practices of (re)production of life is needed.

72 Sonja Buckel, *Subjectivation and Cohesion: Towards the Reconstruction of a Materialist Theory of Law*, trans. Monika Vykoukal, Brill, Leiden, 2020, p. 236.

73 Sonja Buckel, "The Juridical Condensation of Relations of Forces: Nicos Poulantzas and Law", Gallas et al. (eds.), *Reading Poulantzas*, pp. 154–69.

74 Hirsch and Kannankulam, "The Spaces of Capital".

75 Marx, *Capital I*, p. 167.

76 Michael Heinrich, *¿Cómo leer "El Capital" de Marx?: indicaciones de lectura y comentario del comienzo de "El Capital"*, trans. César Ruiz Sanjùan, Escolar y Mayo, Madrid, 2011, pp. 185–6.

77 This is the adjectival form of the German word "Ding" which means "thing". Sometimes Marx uses also the synonym adjectival form "sachlich/e" derived from "Sache".

a material [*dinglicher*] shell" and reification. They are not regarded as transparent at all.

Social forms are fundamentally historically specific modes of organizing social relations (i.e. modes of socialization [*Vergesellschaftung*], in which social cohesion is expressed) that constitute themselves in daily practices. The processes of material production and reproduction of life are the key practices through which reification and naturalization occur in capitalist societies. They solidify and fix this particular layout of relations, with its burden of domination, and perpetuate it. This working definition of social forms, derived from Buckel, Hirsch, Heinrich, and others, illuminates the concepts of objectification and "thingification" along Marxist lines.

Social forms emerge from determined daily practices, which are the historically specified processes of material reproduction of goods and services as well as individuals. Focusing here only on the material reproduction of goods and services, in capitalist societies this function is assigned to capitalist commodities production which is based on two specific practices: individual labor spent privately and on trade, and the exploitation of surplus labor. The functioning of production and circulation in capitalism is, actually, anarchic because it is based upon private and isolated labor. There is no coordination in advance based upon need. There are, instead, private independent producers who expend their labor as private labor, treating the product of this labor as private property that holds not only use-value but also value, expressed in money, and which they exchange on the market. Independent producers make individual decisions without consulting each other. Each guesses as precisely as possible what and how much they need to produce, what and how much other producers produce and how much demand there is on the market. Then, they bring their products to the market and exchange them, because, due to the social division of labor, they are dependent on one another; everyone needs everyone else's products. It is only in the market, only *ex post*, if their products are exchanged as commodities, they find out if their individual labor is part of the total labor of society, that is, if it is recognized as socially useful.

With regard to the practices related to labor activity, we must note three essential elements: workers operate under the control of the capitalist, who has purchased their labor-power; the products of their labor – the goods and services created – are the property of the capitalist, not the workers, who are the immediate producers; these goods and services are produced only in view of surplus value and workers work longer than is necessary for their own reproduction.[78]

The social agents involved in these practices may be completely unaware of their role in this structure. Moreover, regardless of what people think and want, they act *de facto* as commodity owners. For example, Marx writes of value form,

78 For a full account of capitalist processes of production, see Heinrich, Karl Marx's *Capital*, pp. 81–131; and Chapter 3 below.

> People do not therefore bring the products of their labour into relation with each other as values because they see these objects merely as the material [*sachliche*] integuments of homogeneous human labour. The reverse is true: by equating their different products to each other in exchange as values, they equate their different kinds of labour as human labour. *They do this without being aware of it*.[79]

Reification and naturalization are both essential concepts to analyze the ideas of objectification, or "thingification", of social relations and fetishism.[80] Reification occurs because of the general organization of material reproduction and distribution in capitalist societies, that is, private labor based on the social division of labor and trade. It is the process of objectification of social relations in things and institutions, and hence the vanishing of the same relations in the process. As Marx says about the money form,

> It is […] precisely this finished form of the world of commodities – the money form – which conceals the social character of private labour and the social relations between the individual workers, by making those relations appear as relations between material [*sachlich*] objects, instead of revealing them plainly.[81]

This process means, at the same time, a "subjectification of the things in which these social determinations are represented and concealed",[82] or, "the acquisition by the thing of the function of motor of the process".[83]

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79 Marx, *Capital I*, pp. 166–7. [emphasis added, translation amended]

80 Marx, and interpreters such as Heinrich, Fischer, and Lindner, collapse the two distinct phenomena of reification and naturalization into the notion of fetishism. This entails a confusion about the reception of the Marxist concept, especially in light of Marx's alleged irrational social ontology. See Marco Iorio, "Fetisch und Geheimnis. Zur Kritik der Kapitalismuskritik von Karl Marx", *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie Zweimonatsschrift der internationalen philosophischen Forschung*, vol. 58, no. 2 (2010), pp. 241–56; Stephan Grigat, *Fetisch und Freiheit*, Ça ira, Freiburg, 2007; and Ingo Elbe, "Il concetto di reificazione nella critica dell'economia politica di Marx", *Lo spettro è tornato. Attualità della filosofia di Marx*, trans. Pietro Garofalo, Mimesis, Milano–Udine, 2017, pp. 95–109. Marx does not use the word "naturalization", while the term "reification" first appears in *Capital*'s third chapter.

81 Marx, *Capital I*, pp. 168–9.

82 Jacques Rancière, "The Concept of 'Critique' and the 'Critique of Political Economy' (from the 1844 Manuscript to Capital)", trans. Ben Brewster, *Economy and Society*, vol. 5, no. 3 (1976), p. 360.

83 *Ibid*., 362. "The circuit of money-capital is the one which best expresses the capitalist process. In fact it is a peculiarity of this process that it has as its principle the self-expansion of value, as the circuit from M to M' clearly expresses. But this determinate form of the process of reproduction of capital, the process of self expansion of value made possible by the relations of production of capital and wage-labour, tends to disappear in its result" *Ibid*., 356. [emphasis added]

Naturalization is the epistemic repercussion in which reified forms appear as natural and trans-historical. On the level of epistemic functions, social forms are no longer congealed social relations *per se*, but rather "categories". In this sense, value, money, capital, credit, etc., are "the categories of bourgeois economics"[84] and the state is the category of political science. Since, however, "reflection on the forms of human life [and] scientific analysis of those forms [...] [begin] *post festum*, and therefore with the results of the process of development ready to hand", these categories embed those reified forms into the "natural forms of social life [...] immutable [in] content and meaning".[85] Scientific analysis perceives them as the obvious objects of a particular field of knowledge, only focusing on their concrete content and never discussing the form-determinations of their subject matter. Of course, these categories are also the categories of everyday life of social agents. Everyone talks about money, credit, law, state, prices, etc., and acts on the basis of these things. From the purview of science, however, the common sense is not concerned with the meaning or the content of these expressions. Both knowledges and common sense are correct in this way, because social forms as categories are "forms of thought which are socially valid, and therefore *objective*".[86]

In sum, social forms orient social agents' rationalization models (thoughts and representations) and individual actions. The conditions of their genesis vanish with the appearance of the forms and naturalize within social practice, losing any representational ambiguity or valence. Thus, the forms themselves have social validity, but only "for the relations of production belonging to this historically determined mode of production, i.e. commodity production",[87] even if, as an effect of the capitalist organization of the production process, they appear to be valid in every society.

Sic stantibus rebus, fetishism, understood conceptually as the combination of reification and naturalization, is real for Marx. He states, "To the producers, therefore, the social relations between their private labours *appear as what they are*, i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material [*dinglich*] relations between persons and social relations between things".[88] It is not a state of false consciousness, understood as a curtain or a bundle of illusions which simply reflect an *a posteriori*, inverted and mystified version of the process of the reproduction of society.[89] Fetishized forms, constituted through the daily practices and behaviors of unwitting individuals, are the *necessary* forms

84 Marx, *Capital I*, p. 169. In Marx's definition an economic theory is "bourgeois" "in so far as it views the capitalist order as the absolute and ultimate form of social production". *Ibid.*, p. 96.

85 *Ibid*, 168.

86 *Ibid.*, 169.

87 *Ibid.*

88 *Ibid.*, 165–6. [emphasis added]

89 Jan Rehmann, *Theories of Ideology: The Powers of Alienation and Subjection*, Brill, Leiden, 2013.

in which capitalistic social relations manifest under capitalist conditions. This is because fetishized social forms specify practical and rational conditions of possibility for individuals, orienting their behavioral and leading to basic subjectivation.[90] In other words, these forms turn individuals into subjects, or intentional beings equipped for this or that type of behavior and reasoning. For example, economic forms constitute individuals as commodity owners, or wage-laborers and capitalists who think and act in terms of price, wage, profit and so on. Legal-political forms constitute individuals as free citizens and owners of their person and their rights.[91] The social form analysis is thus also a theory of the constitution of subjectivity in the capitalist process of social production. It is a "theory of capitalist subjectivity",[92] though extremely abstract. Bearing in mind that Marx does not discuss subjects in *Capital* – he speaks of individuals in terms of "personification", "character mask", "*dramatis personae*", "bearer" [*Träger*] of social relations[93] – it is clear that there is a "system-limit" that restrains the concept of capitalist subjectivity within this context. These constrains derive from Marx's analysis of the specific mode of socialization in capitalist societies. He opposes anthropologism and individualism in classic political economy, developing form-determinations conceptually, without recourse to the behavior and goals of the individuals involved. The question is whether the social forms are produced because the actors have set themselves the goal, so that the form-determinations may be explained via these goals exclusively, or whether these forms reproduce in the actions of actors without their complete awareness of what they are doing.

This conception implies what could be called a minimal psychological theory, suitable for the conditions of capitalist social complexes. In *Capital*, subjects enter

90 Subjectivity is more conventionally associated with self-knowledge, personal experience, interiority, or, in philosophy, the epistemic condition of certain objects appearing to an individual, for example in the terrain of phenomenology. For this reason, it is important to underline that the problem of subjectivity is approached here from a Marxist lineage. See William Callison, "Subjectivity and Power: Marxist Lineages", *A Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory*, Imre Szemann et al. (eds.), John Wiley and Sons, Hoboken, 2017, pp. 173–89.

91 This double constitution of the subject in capitalist societies is not by chance. Rather, the economic constitution of the individual as commodity owners (both in the sphere of circulation and in the sphere of production) and the legal one as rights' owners are necessary. This is guaranteed by the state which stands above society as an extra-economic force. See Pašukanis, *The General Theory of Law and Marxism*.

92 Rancière, "The Concept of 'Critique' and the 'Critique of Political Economy'", p. 32.

93 Marx's identification between person and mask derived from the Latin word *persona* and the Greek one *prosopon* is largely drawn on Hobbes' account. See Luca Basso, *Marx and the Common: From Capital to the Late Writings*, trans. David Broder, Brill, Leiden, 2015, pp. 40–9; and Mark Neocleous, "Staging Power: Marx, Hobbes and the Personification of Capital", *Law and Critique*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2003), pp. 147–65.

the discussion only in the second chapter, which is devoted to the process of exchange and the introduction of commodities on the market. "Our commodity-owners think like Faust: 'In the beginning was the deed'. They have therefore already acted before thinking".[94] As Basso notes, "the irruption of subjects is thus devoid of any 'humanist' emphasis, since they are examined on the basis of the immanence of the deed".[95] The basic element of this theory is the *action* performed by the subject, not their consciousness or mental state. Through the immanence of inter-actions between subjects – historically determined practices activated by individuals – the process of fetishization (reification + naturalization) of social relations occurs. Basic social objects and the categories and knowledge and everyday life emerge and are structured, thus bearing cognitive effects, shaping representations and consciousness and ensuring the functioning and reproduction of the social complex.[96] Basso writes,

> The fetish character [of social forms] is not an effect of the alienation of consciousness, but rather an effect in and on consciousness produced by the dissimulation of social relations within and through the way in which they appear. The basis of fetishism is found outside the sphere of consciousness, in the objective reality of historically determinate social relations.[97]

If we isolate this frame of emergence, we see a movement from the outside to the inside. Subjectivity is constituted by the social process, and not the other way around. The deeds from which Marx starts already conform to the rationalization and behavioral orientations set by the forms themselves. Form-determination must therefore be analyzed before the conscious behaviors and motivations of subjects are addressed. To quote Balibar:

> If the constitution of objectivity in fetishism does not depend on the prior givenness of a subject, a consciousness or a reason, it does, by contrast, constitute subjects which are a part of objectivity itself or which are, in other words, given in experience *alongside 'things'*, alongside commodities, and *in a relation to them*. These

94 Marx, *Capital I*, p. 181.

95 Basso, *Marx and the Common*, pp. 23–4.

96 Marx's psychological perspective has been described as objective, social, externalist, practical and materialist. It is mostly played outside the consciousnesses and the mind, negating, in a sense, its own subject matter. It is a theory of the genesis of subjectivity where the subject is practical, anonymous and not conscious of itself, a non-subject. See David Rubinstein, *Marx and Wittgenstein: Social Praxis and Social Explanation*, Routledge, London, 2013; and Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, trans. Chris Turner, Verso, London-New York, 2007, pp. 66–7.

97 Basso, *Marx and the Common*, pp. 17–8.

> subjects are not constituent, but constituted; they are quite simply 'economic subjects' or, more exactly, they are all individuals who, in bourgeois society, are first of all economic subjects (sellers and buyers and therefore owners, […]). The reversal effected by Marx is, then, complete: the constitution of the world is not, for him, the work of a subject, but a genesis of subjectivity (a form of determinate historical subjectivity) as part (and counterpart) of the social world of objectivity.[98]

It is important to make explicit the object and range of application of this conception to avoid accusations of reductionism and economic determinism.[99] The conception deals exclusively with the constitution of subjectivity and its rationalization models relative to the field of action of the social and does not include the totality of the sphere of the "mind". There is an "incompressible minimum of individuality".[100]

Fetishism is only real under the conditions of the capitalist social process. Since fetishized social forms emerge from capitalist daily practices that are the consequence of determined social practices,[101] if these practices fade away, that is to say, if capitalism comes to an end, fetishism will also end. At the same time, as we have said, fetishism, in terms of naturalization, is not, in principle, impenetrable. Here, we find the work of form-analysis.

> Fetishism is also not a completely closed universal context of deception from which there is no escape. Rather, it constitutes a structural background that is always present, but affects different individuals with varying strength and can be penetrated on the basis of experience and reflection.[102]

Intersubjective actions also possess independent dynamics that "lead to processes of learning and radicalization in which the capitalist system as a whole is called into question".[103]

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98 Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, p. 67.

99 See Chapter 3 below, which enriches this discussion by introducing the concept of forms of production of individuals, thereby avoiding any possible accusations of economic reductionism.

100 *Ibid*., 122.

101 "I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore *inseparable from the production of commodities*." Marx, *Capital I*, p. 165. [emphasis added] Marx's analysis of fetishism is not reduced to commodities, i.e. the sphere of circulation, but it is extended to money (in the second chapter) and to capital (in chapter 48 of the third volume, entitled "The Trinity Formula"). Value is the simplest abstraction, which, "contains in an embryonic way all the inner qualities and contradictions" of those other categories. *Ibid*., 16.

102 Heinrich, *Karl Marx's Capital*, p. 185.

103 *Ibid*., 195.

As capitalist commodity production establishes itself, the social context that results from relations between individuals that comprise society through reified and naturalized social forms undergoes a process of objectified autonomization independent of the individuals. It is not under their control, rather it controls people. As written in *Capital*,

> Their [the exchangers] own social movement has for them the form of a movement made by things, and these things, far from being under their control, in fact control them […] Their own relations of production […] assume a material shape [*sachliche Gestalt*] which is independent of their control and their conscious individual action.[104]

As said, social forms are rooted in daily practices that express certain relations between individuals. At a first glance, these practices are plain, neutral and fair.[105] An individual goes to the market to buy commodities someone else is selling. In this transaction, members appear equal and free. On the market, one can choose from a vast amount of commodities, produced by different companies in competition with each other. Money earned as wage for freely contracted labor is used for these transactions. The broader contract is the common legal expression of this equal exchange of one property for another.[106]

Individuals living in capitalist societies are free. They are subjects with rights. There is no personal domination or relationship of force. We are not obliged to provide services or payments to another person due to birth or some other fixed status. Service obligations or payments only arise through voluntarily signed contracts

104 Marx, *Capital I*, pp. 167–168, 187. [translation amended]

105 The fact that the whole economy seems to consist only of acts of buying and selling, i.e. the sphere of circulation, disregarding the spheres of production and consumption, is a specific result of capitalist production. The sphere of circulation, only concerned with transactions, appears "as that which is immediately present on the surface of bourgeois society" Karl Marx, *Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft of 1857–58)*, Marx and Engels, *MECW*, vol. 29, p. 186.

106 "The sphere of circulation or commodity exchange, within whose boundaries the sale and purchase of labour-power goes on, is in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man. It is the exclusive realm of Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, let us say of labour-power, are determined only by their own free will. They contract as free persons, who are equal before the law. Their contract is the final result in which their joint will finds a common legal expression. Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property, because each disposes only of what is his own. And Bentham, because each looks only to his own advantage. The only force bringing them together, and putting them into relation with each other, is the selfishness, the gain and the private interest of each". Marx, *Capital I*, p. 280.

which can be dissolved at any time. The singular wage-laborer enters into contact with a capitalist in a free and equal way, without any relation of personal dependency with that specific capitalist.

Following Marx and over-simplying to highlight the qualitative difference and peculiarity of the relation of domination in capitalist societies, it is possible to make a comparison with the pre-capitalist societies where domination was direct, personal and unmediated. For example, in a slave-owning society, the slave is personally non-free, they are property of another person, and the slave owner has an absolute personal rule over the slave. The situation is similar in feudalistic contexts. There is a direct, personal dependency between landlord and servant. Thanks to a military, an administrative or a juridical office, the landlord has direct authority, obliging servants to serve and pay their landlord, or they are not allowed to leave their plots. They need permission to marry and their children are born into the same relation of dependency. In both cases, there is no sphere of rule independent of concrete personal relationships, nor is there a separation between "politics" and "economy". Political domination merges with economic exploitation.

In capitalist societies, the majority of people are not only legally free but also materially free, meaning they lack any substantive properties necessary for survival. They do not have vast amounts of money nor ownership of the means of production, whether for sale, or subsistence. Marx uses the expression "worker free in a double sense"[107] to describe this situation. It is for this reason subjects voluntarily stipulate contracts to receive wages to buy the necessities to live. We are driven to sell our only property, i.e. labor-power, *the ability to labor*, treating it as a commodity. The capitalist, on the other hand, the owner of substantive property (the means of production and money) can extract surplus value and realize the "unceasing movement of the profitmaking",[108] that is the movement of the capital. This specific social relation between classes (a class of property owners and a class of propertyless, but legally free individuals) is what Marx refers to as *capital relation*.[109] Even when one feels a personal dependency on a particular capitalist, due to particularly unfavorable working circumstances, this situation should not be confused with pre-capitalist personal dependency. Here, the power of the money owner over the laborer is given by dependency on the supply of money, it is not a direct and personal constraint. As Marx puts it in the *Grundrisse*, "The power which each individual exercises over the activity of others or over social wealth exists in him as the owner of exchange values, of

107 *Ibid.*, 272.

108 *Ibid.*, 254.

109 In *Capital*, Marx's use of the term "class" is structural. It refers to positions within social processes of production based upon ownership or non-ownership of substantive property. In its "ideal average" at the form level, capitalism does not allow for a fully developed "class-theory". See Heinrich, *Karl Marx's Capital*, pp. 191–8.

money. The individual carries his social power, as well as his bond with society, in his pocket".[110]

Thus, if the money owner loses his money, they no longer have any power over the seller of labor-power. Moreover, if the capitalist themselves want to survive, they too are forced into restless movement and profiteering.[111] This way, the decisive relations of domination and exploitation are not personal, but mediated by things. People submit to "inherent necessities", to the "silent compulsion"[112] of personified things and institutions, which, at the same time, embody social connection and social wealth. Again, "the individual carries […] his bond with society in his pocket", but can equally lose it.

The conditions that have made this "silent compulsion" historically possible are comprised by social relations of direct antagonism, violence, coercion, dispossession, and domination. "If money […] 'comes into the world with a congenital bloodstain on one cheek', capital comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt".[113] Here, Marx describes the historical formation of capitalist conditions in England. This violent process, which Marx sketches at the end of the first volume of *Capital* under the title "The So-Called Primitive Accumulation", was not a peaceful result of the market, but was actively constructed by the state. The English case involved the expropriation of small producers (peasants and artisans) from their plots; enclosure, monopolization and concentration of vast amounts of land; appropriation of common land and the transformation of the field into the pasture; expropriation of the Church as feudal property owner an consequent pauperization of its clientele; transformation of feudal clan property into capitalist private property; and imprisonment and imposition of forced labor on the poor.[114] From this process – and from similar accumulation processes that occurred during the global spread of capitalism[115] – the capital relation is formed. This relationship between social classes underlies capitalist production process and capitalist societies as

110 Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 157.

111 Heinrich, *Karl Marx's Capital*, p. 104, ff.

112 "The silent compulsion of economic relations sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker. Direct extra-economic force is still of course used, but only in exceptional cases. In the ordinary run of things, the worker can be left to the 'natural laws of production', i.e. it is possible to rely on his dependence on capital, which springs from the conditions of production themselves, and is guaranteed in perpetuity by them". Marx, *Capital I*, p. 899. See also Søren Mau, *Mute Compulsion: A Marxist Theory of the Economic Power of Capital*, Verso, London-New York, 2023.

113 *Ibid.*, 925–6.

114 Valeria Bruschi et al., *PolyluxMarx. A Capital Workbook in Slides. Volume One*, trans. Alexander Locascio, Karl Dietz Verlag, Berlin, 2013, p. 134.

115 "'Primitive accumulation' is not a historically singular process". Heinrich, *Karl Marx's Capital*, p. 93.

a whole, and is constantly reproduced by it by means of reified and naturalized social forms. As Marx asserts, "These presuppositions which originally appeared as prerequisites of [capitalist production process'] becoming […] now appear as results of its own realisation, reality, as posited by it".[116] To the extent that fetishized social forms orient the action and rationalization of individuals and classes in a non-transparent way, they make basic social antagonisms amenable to prosecution. That is, they ensure that society, despite and because of its contradictions, reproduces these social forms without overcoming them.

Returning to the first part of the definition, *modes of organizing fundamental social relations*, the term concerns the *constitution* of social complexity in the proper conditions of capitalist production, or the specific type of social cohesion and socialization in capitalist social complexes. It follows that this socialization is mediated by and expressed in the social forms themselves. Individuals cannot choose freely and consciously their mutual relationships, nor they can control their social existence through immediate actions. Social cohesion is instead expressed predominantly through intertwined, fetishized social forms. In other words, socialization is certainly realized through conscious actions of individuals (such as bringing their products on the market to exchange them), yet nevertheless, they are not aware of the structures and forms of development of socialization itself. Therefore, in the end, socialization is not produced consciously and directly by individuals, but it is obtained "behind their backs", in a mediated-impersonal way, through the fetishized forms of value, money, capital, state, law, and, it will be argued, others.

2.3 *Dispositifs* and Politics

As we have seen, conceptual form-analysis and the discourse on social forms reveal the "system-limit" of capitalist societies and its fixed, structural conditions and objectifying domination. The social forms express, and account for, the stability and regularity of capitalist society. This is not, however, a sufficient "(critical) theory of society". No statements about concrete historical formations, institutions, processes, or struggles can be made at this level of abstraction, but rather, it is its categorial basis.

116 Marx, *Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy*, p. 388. Also, "Capitalist production therefore reproduces in the course of its own process the separation between labour-power and the conditions of labour […] As soon as capitalist production stands on its own feet, it not only maintains this separation, but reproduces it on a constantly extending scale". Marx, *Capital I*, pp. 723, 874. For an analysis of the relation between primitive accumulation and capitalist accumulation, see Werner Bonefeld, "Primitive Accumulation and Capitalist Accumulation: Economic Categories and Social Constitution", *Science & Society*, vol. 75, no. 3 (2011), pp. 379–99.

Thus, the logic of capitalist societies needs to be enriched and diversified, adding another dimension of analysis to clarify how social forms relate to institutional constellations, and how reification, naturalization and social agency occur in capitalist complexes. What are the conditions of reproduction in capitalist societies? How are these conditions historically met? Why does reproduction work, if capitalist relations are inherently antagonistic? How is it possible to break the cycle of reproduction of social forms within capitalist societies? All these questions deal with the so-called "structure and agency" problem,[117] a central topic of Marxist social theory[118] and of mainstream sociology. What is the relation between the "structure" and the "agency"? "Agency" may be defined as, "the capacity of individual or group actors to actively contribute to the shaping of the social,"[119] and "structure," as,

> the repetition over time of the related actions of many agents [which provides] the framework, within which the action of a single agent at a particular spatio-temporal point is performed. Structure qua *framework* constrains any given agent's action at a particular spatio-temporal point. (In addition, structure qua framework *enables* various actions not otherwise possible).[120]

With these definition in mind, the New Marx Reading draws upon Poulantzas – and Gramsci, via Poulantzas – to address the problem of structure and agency. These attempts, such as Hirsch's, which are based upon the West German State-Derivation debate turn to Poulantzas and to the concept of *institutionalization*. For example, the state is regarded as "a spatio-temporal institutionalisation of the political form",[121] or the "concrete [...] structure of the state and its apparatuses" is considered to be the result of a "process of institutionalization" of the political form.[122]

Additionally, the Foucauldian concept of *dispositif*,[123] is useful for defining this level of the logic of capitalist societies because it brings together three fundamental

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117 Nicholas Abercrombie *et al.*, "'Agency and Structure'", *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology*, Penguin, London, 1984.

118 For an account of the different conceptualizations of the structure-agency relation within Marxist social theory, see Alexander Gallas, *Dichotomy, Dualism, Duality: An Investigation into Marxist Conceptualisations of Structure and Agency*, VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, Riga, 2010.

119 *Ibid.*, 9.

120 Seumas Miller, "Social Institutions", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2019, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/social-institutions/ accessed on 9th June 2025.

121 Sonja Buckel et al., *The European Border Regime in Crisis: Theory, Methods and Analyses in Critical European Studies*, vol. 8, Studien, Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, Berlin, 2017, p. 10.

122 See Hirsch and Kannankulam, "The Spaces of Capital", p. 13.

123 I keep the French word and not the common English translation "apparatus" because of its crucial conceptual and etymological ties, which, instead, are occluded by "apparatus". A preferable English translation is "dispositive". For a detailed analysis of the conceptual dif-

aspects of a "(critical) theory of society" – knowledges, powers and subjects/subjectivations – which are the same dimensions involved in social forms, only on another stage in the analysis. This integration and the transition to the concept of the *dispositif*, which encompasses more than just the condensation of social forms within institutions, builds upon both Sonja Buckel's interpretation of Hirsch's Poulantzasian perspective, which is clearly influenced by Foucauldian tools,[124] and on the historical and textual engagement between Poulantzas and Foucault. Although Poulantzas rejects Foucault's general epistemological and theoretical project, in his 1978 masterpiece *State, Power, Socialism*[125], he explicitly engages, both positively and negatively, with Foucault's works on discipline and power-knowledge, particularly with *Discipline and Punish*[126] and *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*.[127] The reverse is not the case: Foucault never refers to Poulantzas' work, even if he does refer to some other contemporary Marxists.[128] It has also been pointed out[129] that in the posthumously published seminars *Security, Territory, Population*[130] of 1978 and *The Birth of Biopolitics*[131] of 1979, Foucault implicitly, perhaps covertly, answers some criticisms put forward by Poulantzas. In any case, during Poulantzas' life-time (Poulantzas died in 1979), there was a unilateral dialogue of borrowing and adapting Foucauldian concepts, as well as harsh criticisms directed against Foucault's underestimation of capitalist relations of production and class struggle and his reductive view of the law as merely repressive.[132] It is furthermore necessary to

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ferences between *appareil/apparato*/apparatus and *dispositif/dispositivo*/dispositive see Jeffrey Bussolini, "What is a Dispositive?", *Foucault Studies*, no. 10 (2010), pp. 85–107.

124 See Buckel, *Subjectivation and Cohesion*, 2020.

125 Nicos Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, trans. Patrick Camiller, Verso, London-New York, 2000.

126 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, New York, 2012.

127 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction. Vol.* 1, trans. Robert Hurley, Pantheon Books, New York, 1978.

128 Balibar mentions Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, the Frankfurt School and Althusser. Étienne Balibar, "Foucault and Marx: The Question of Nominalism", Timothy J. Armstrong (ed. and trans.), *Michel Foucault, Philosopher*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead, 1992, p. 39.

129 "In his lectures on governmentality, held shortly after the publication of SPS [*State, Power, Socialism*], Foucault used a particular phrase to characterize the state that was reminiscent of Poulantzas: 'The state is nothing else but the mobile effect of a regime of multiple governmentalities'". Urs L. Lindner, "State, Domination and Politics: On the Relationship between Poulantzas and Foucault", Gallas et al. (eds.), *Reading Poulantzas*, p. 149.

130 Michel Foucault, "Security, Territory, Population", Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth: Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984. Vol* 1, trans. Robert Hurley et al., The New Press, New York, 1997, pp. 67–71.

131 Michel Foucault, "The Birth of Biopolitics", Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, pp. 73–9.

132 For a detailed account of the relation between Poulantzas and Foucault, see Chapter 8 of Bob Jessop, *State Theory: Putting the Capitalist State in its Place*, Penn State Press, University Park,

consider Poulantzas' connection to Althusser[133] triangulated with Foucault, through his critical discussion with Marx and Marxism, a "genuine struggle" that "can be viewed as one of the driving forces of [Foucault's] productiveness".[134]

Poulantzas, Foucault and Althusser, despite their overt resistance to comparison with each other,[135] share the interest in the problematic of the reproduction of social complexes which is, at the same time, the problematic of subject(ion) under the conditions of modernity. Their respective thought has also been impacted by common life experiences, such as the failure of May of '68 and the consequent reorientation in their respective theoretical and political analyses.

Moreover, Foucault's work is, in various ways, directly integrated into the Historical Materialist Policy Analysis (HMPA) and its foundational strategic-relational approach framework.[136] In this light, Foucauldian arguments about power and knowledge, governmentality, statecraft, strategy and technology of power are fundamen-

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1990; Chapter 5 of Thomas Lemke, *Foucault's Analysis of Modern Governmentality*, trans. Erik Butler, Verso, London-New York, 2019; and Lindner, "State, Domination and Politics".

133 Alexander Gallas, "Revisiting Conjunctural Marxism: Althusser and Poulantzas on the State", *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 29, no. 2 (2017), pp. 256–80.

134 Balibar, "Foucault and Marx", p. 39.

135 This is particularly true in the case of Althusser and Foucault. Foucault criticized Althusser's concept of ideology to an extent that would enable a theory of the epistemological break between knowledge and science and the pretense to make Marxism a political metadiscourse. See Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power", Michel Foucault, Colin Gordon (ed.), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, trans. Colin Gordon et al., Pantheon Books, New York, 1980, pp. 109–33. Moreover, Foucault rejected the comparison between the concept of material ideology and his notion of *dispositif*. There are, however, continuities between the two concepts. For a juxtaposition of ideology and *dispositif*, see Orazio Irrera, "L'idéologie et la préhistoire du dispositif", *La pensée politique de Foucault*, Orazio Irrera and Salvo Vaccaro, Kimé (eds.), Paris 2017, pp. 137–55; Orazio Irrera, "Foucault and the Refusal of Ideology", *Foucault and the Making of Subjects*, Laura Cremonesi et al.(eds.), Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, 2016, pp. 111–28; Diego Melegari, "Due fratelli silenziosi. Althusser, Foucault al bivio dell'ideologia", *Scienza & Politica. Per una storia delle dottrine*, vol. 26, no. 50 (2014), pp. 137–159. The link between Althusser and Foucault has only recently been considered. See Jean-Baptiste Vuillerod, *La naissance de l'anti-hégélianisme. Louis Althusser et Michel Foucault, lecteurs de Hege*l, Lyon, 2022; Balibar, "Foucault and Marx"; Pierre Macherey, *Le sujet des normes*, Éditions Amsterdam, Paris, 2014; Warren Montag, "'The Soul is the Prison of the Body': Althusser and Foucault, 1970–1975", *Yale French Studies*, no. 88 (1995), pp. 53–77.

136 Jessop, *State Theory*; Jessop, *State Power: A Strategic-Relational Approach*; Ulrich Brand, "State, Context and Correspondence. Contours of a Historical Materialist Policy Analysis", *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft*, vol. 42, no. 4 (2013), pp. 425–42; Buckel, *Subjectivation and cohesion*; Buckel et al., *The European Border Regime in Crisis*; Alex Demirović, "Materialist State Theory and the Transnationalization of the Capitalist State", *Antipode*, vol. 43, no. 1 (2011), pp. 38–59; John Kannankulam and Fabian Georgi, "Varieties of Capitalism or Varieties of Relationships of Forces? Outlines of a Historical Materialist Policy Analysis", *Capital & Class*, vol. 38, no. 1 (2014), pp. 59–71; and Buckel, "The Juridical Condensation of Relations of Forces".

tal for avoiding the class reductionism characterizing Poulantzas' reflections. Although in *State, Power, Socialism* Poulantzas, took notice of other relations of domination in capitalist societies (especially gender),[137] which were ignored in his previous work, he has never managed to shed a traditional Marxist emphasis on class domination. Consequently, he does not do justice to the multiplicity of relations of domination in capitalist contexts such as sexuality and ethnicity and their intersections.

The notion of *dispositif* was introduced into the philosophical lexicon by Foucault who, since the 1970s, foregrounds this concept in his analyses of disciplinary systems in *Discipline and Punish*, and of the genealogy of sexuality in *The History of Sexuality*. It is not until an interview in 1977, however, that Foucault explicitly defines the term. He develops it more systematically in his lectures at the Collège de France in 1978 and 1979.[138] Although the concept of *dispositif* is acknowledged by Paul Rabinow in the introduction to *The Essential Foucault* as "one of the most powerful conceptual tools introduced by Foucualt",[139] Rabinow also wrote, with Hubert Dreyfus in 1982, that *dispositif* was an extremely vague concept in terms of methodological rigor.[140] Deleuze's interpretation, mitigating the vagueness and exposing the basic features of the *dispositif* and its central status in Foucault's thinking, has been very influential in the reception of this concept.[141] A major event along these lines was Deleuze's conference held in 1988 entitled, *What is a* dispositif?.[142]

In his 1977 interview, Foucault accounts for the "meaning" and the "methodological function" of the term. He says,

> What I'm trying to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid.

137 Jörg Nowak, "Poulantzas, Gender Relations and Feminist State Theory", Gallas et al. (eds.), *Reading Poulantzas*, pp. 123–37.

138 Sverre Raffnsøe et al., *What is a Dispositive? Foucault's Historical Mappings of the Networks of Social Reality*, Copenhagen Business School [wp], 2014.

139 Paul Rabinow and Nikolas S. Rose, "Foucault Today", *The Essential Foucault: Selections from the Essential Works of Foucault: 1954–1984*, Paul Rabinow and Nikolas S. Rose (eds.), New Press, New York, 2003, p. xv.

140 Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982, pp. 119–21.

141 Monique David-Ménard, "Agencements deleuziens, dispositifs foucaldiens", *Rue Descartes*, no. 1 (2008), pp. 43–55.

142 Gilles Deleuze, "What is a *dispositif* ?", Armstrong (ed.), *Michel Foucault, Philosopher*, pp. 159–68.

> Such are the elements of the *dispositif*. The *dispositif* itself is the *network* that can be established between these elements.[143]

The conception of the *dispositif* as a net, thought of as a knotted fishing net, or to a "tangle", to use Deleuze's words,[144] allows us to grasp two of its important features. First, its being "a name of variables", to use again a Deleuzian expression. This means *dispositif* does not indicate something general and constant, always and everywhere given in the same way, but rather something unique, contingent and historically determined, formed in a unique way from the intertwining of particular factors and thus fundamentally plural. It is more useful to speak, then, of *dispositifs*. Foucault's anti-essentialist and nominalist vision emerges clearly here, as well as the eminently historical, archaeological-genealogical character of his analysis of *dispositifs*. The *dispositif* is a deeply relational concept. It is simultaneously a set of heterogeneous elements, situated within an arrangement, as well as the set of all their connections. Deleuze elucidates the three dimensions of the *dispositifs*: knowledge,[145] power, subject(ivation). This is in accordance with what Foucault himself wrote in the second volume of *The History of Sexuality* in 1984, where he defines the notion of "form of experience". This is a concept linked to *dispositif* as "a correlation between fields of knowledge, types of normativity, and forms of subjectivity".[146] In what follows, these three dimensions guide the reading of the notion of *dispositif*. In reference to some conceptual archaeologies of the term, a feature evoked by the image of the net is that of capture, a feature on which Giorgio Agamben's interpretation insists. He writes, "I shall call a *dispositif* literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions or discourses of living beings".[147] If, therefore, living beings are constantly caught in the meshes of the *dispositifs* – which are "meshes of power"[148] – then an im-

143 Michel Foucault, "The Confession of the Flesh", Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, p. 194. English translation amended. In the original, the expression "system of relation" instead of "network" is used. "Network" better translates the French word "*réseau*", used in Foucault, "Le jeu de Michel Foucault", *Ornicar. Bulletin périodique du champ freudien*, vol. 10 (1977), pp. 62–93.

144 Deleuze, "What is a *dispositif* ?", p. 159.

145 *Ibid.*, 160.

146 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley, Random House, New York, 1985, p. 4.

147 Giorgio Agamben, "What Is an Apparatus?", "*What Is an Apparatus?" and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2009, p. 14. [amended translation]

148 The reference is to the title of Foucault's lecture on his conception of the notion of power given at the University of Bahia, Brazil, on November 1, 1976. It first appeared in English as Michel Foucault, "The Meshes of Power", Stuart Elden and Jeremy W. Crampton (eds.), *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography*, trans. Gerald Moore, Ashgate Publishing Company, Burlington, 2007, pp. 165–74.

portant consequence is that *dispositifs* can be conceived neither as tools *at the disposal* of someone nor as tools *made by* someone.

Considering the first part of the negative disjunction, *dispositifs* are not at the disposal of any one entity. There are no absolute sovereigns or central authorities to govern them because they themselves arrange (the Latin word for the verb "arrange" is *disponere*, from which comes the French word *dipositif*) the relations of power. They allow knowledges, powers and subjectivations, to performatively come into being. Agamben claims that this term replaced the term *positivité*, "positivity", used at the end of the 1960s, borrowed, via Jean Hyppolite, from the young Hegel. In the essay *Introduction to Hegel's Philosophy of History*,[149] Hyppolite analyzes *The Positivity of the Christian Religion* of 1795–96, in which Hegel writes of the opposition between "positive religion", which is institutionalized and historical, and "natural religion", which is focused on the direct relationship between human reason and God. While the latter is immediate, the former, according to Hegel, deals with "feelings that are more or less impressed through constraint on soul".[150] This constraint on the subject – which is an important link between positivity and *dispositif* – is not only an external relation of command and obedience through rites and rules but, through acts from within on the individual, positing, or "positivizing", feelings, behaviors, forms of perception and self-awareness. Therefore, according to Agamben, historical relations between living beings and processes of subjectivation and the typical Foucauldian "productive" account of power, held in tension by institutions and rules, are condensed in the concept of positivity.

According to Agamben, we see that *dispositifs* orient rational and behavioral models, constituting individuals into subjects, thus shaping specific social interplays. Accordingly,

> at this stage, the social actions must be analyzed as events that occur with regards to and with an effect on the dispositive. […] The dispositive is an inclusive depiction of whatever seems to have been prescribed or determined as applicable to the social interplay at any given time. […] This normative level is regarded as an inevitable 'reality', in so far as the dispositive influences the (in their own right already prescriptive) activities of the sociality. The effects of the dispositive are embedded in the institutions it reshapes.[151]

The Agambenian etymological and archeological reconstruction, however, does not touch directly upon knowledge, the one of the three dimensions of *dispositifs*. This

149 Jean Hyppolite, *Introduction to Hegel's Philosophy of History*, trans. Bond Harris and Jacqueline Bouchard Spurlock, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 1996.

150 *Ibid.*, 21.

151 Raffnsøe et al., *What is a Dispositive?*, pp. 19–20.

point can be integrated by using Judith Revel's analysis.[152] Revel identifies the conceptual antecedent of the notion of *dispositif* in the term "*épistémè*", or "epistemological field",[153] both key concepts in Foucault's *The Order of Things*[154] of 1966. Foucault reiterates this point as well, in 1977,

> What I should like to do now is to try and show that what I call an apparatus is a much more general case of the *episteme*; or rather, that the *episteme* is a specifically discursive apparatus, whereas the apparatus in its general form is both discursive and non-discursive, its elements being much more heterogeneous.[155]

For Foucault, an epistemological field is the "historical *a priori*" and the element of "positivity", by virtue of which "ideas could appear, sciences be established, experience be reflected in philosophies, rationalities be formed, only, perhaps, to dissolve and vanish soon afterward".[156] An epistemological field is an *a priori* in that it is a system of the conditions of possibility of the different types of discourse *and* it is historically determined. The epistemological field allows, on the one hand, the spatialization of history and the identification of the constitutive and performative characters of *a priori*. The notion of the epistemological field – of historical *a priori* – depends upon the concept of network, thus implementing the transition to the concept of *dispositif*.[157] The replacement of the term "*épistémè*" with *dispositif*, therefore, leads the analysis towards the investigation of the "institution", which Foucault defines as, "everything which functions in a society as a system of constraint and which isn't an utterance".[158] This is to say, the analysis of materiality, of balances of forces and of power games is enabled, thus impressing on the "philosophy of *dispositifs*", as Deleuze calls it, a political torsion, more than an epistemological one.

Regarding the second part of the negative disjunction, *dispositifs*, we have said, are not made by any one subject. "And what", one could argue, "laws are not enacted by the state? What administrative measures are not decided by competent bodies? What architectural structures are not designed and built by professionals?" These questions are all permutations of the broader one, "What are the origins of *dispositifs*?" Foucault, again in 1977, states, "I understand by the term '*dispositif* ' a sort of – shall we say – formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment

152 Judith Revel, *Dictionnaire Foucault*, Ellipses, Paris, 2008, pp. 41–2.

153 Another interpretation in accordance with Revel's reading is Óscar Moro Abadía, "¿Qué es un dispositivo?", *Empiria: revista de metodología de Ciencias Sociales*, no. 6 (2003), pp. 29–46.

154 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Alan Sheridan Smith, Routledge, London, 2005.

155 Foucault, "The Confession of the Flesh", p. 197.

156 Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, p. XXIII.

157 Judith Revel, *Le vocabulaire de Foucault*, Ellipses, Paris, 2009, pp. 24–7.

158 Foucault, "The Confession of the Flesh", pp. 197–8.

that of responding to an urgent need. The apparatus thus has a dominant strategic function".[159] Response to an urgency, a criterion of genesis which, together with the structure of heterogeneous constituent elements, best defines *dispositif*, fixing its "*strategic* nature".[160] In the wide heterogeneity and flexibility of the *dispositif*, the French philosopher introduces, therefore, as a unitary principle, the rule of their appearance. It is precisely the search for the catalysts or the dynamics that originated the *dispositifs* of modernity that absorbed Foucault in the 1970s, beginning with his study of the prison in *Discipline and Punish*. The reduction in penal severity, with the passage from torture to prison, is not so much a decrease in intensity (a quantitative phenomenon) as, Foucault says, "a change of objective".[161] It is not so much a transformation in attitude as "an effort to adjust the mechanisms of power that frame the everyday lives of individuals; an adaptation and a refinement of the machinery"[162] according to changing social, economic and cultural situations. Or again, we can mention the example that the French philosopher cites concerning the practical problem that a floating, wandering population causes at the dawn of mercantilist society. The strategic objective is, in this situation, to avoid the mobility of labor, so that "one finds the local and perfectly explicit appearance of definite strategies for fixing the workers in the first heavy industries at their work-places"[163] including the building of working-class cities, housing, the establishment of savings-banks system and philanthropy.

For Foucault, strategies without strategists is possible at the macro-level, at the network level, not at the level of individual agents. He writes of "grand strategies", or "global strategy". This is not to say that Foucault believes that a building is not the work of an architect, or that a mandate of education is not a decision taken by Parliament, but that at the network level, there is no need to "attribute to it a subject which makes the law, pronouncing it in the form of 'Thou shalt' and 'Thou shalt not'".[164] To return to the example of the mobility of employment, the moralization of the working class through philanthropic discourse has not been imposed by anyone – not by Guizot's legislation nor by Dupin's books, nor by the masters' unions. "And yet", Foucault states, "it was accomplished, because it met the urgent need to master a vagabond, floating labour force".[165] It is through contextualized interactions, re-adjustments, re-workings and the over-determination of practices, objec-

159 *Ibid.*, 195. [translation emended]
160 *Ibid.*, 196.
161 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 16.
162 *Ibid.*, 77.
163 Foucault, "The Confession of the Flesh", p. 202.
164 *Ibid.*, 204.
165 *Ibid.*

tives and tactics, that "you get a coherent, rational strategy, but one for which it is no longer possible to identify a person who conceived it".[166]

Insistence on the concept of globality, or coherence, attributes a sense of cohesion, balance, and calculation to historical processes, concealing from view the "shambles" or component parts that bring *dispositifs* into being. This impression is partially legitimate from the point of view of the functionality of a *dispositif*. Foucault is not interested in the mere description of a phenomenon, but wonders "Why did that work? How did that hold up?"[167] He starts with the assumption that such a thing has succeeded, as if following a "battle", and attempts to explain retrospectively. To start from something that worked and held up, and to explain it, implies an ordered vision, while to describe the battle does not. Even if one argues, however, that Foucault's analyses are "too neat", it remains true that *dispositifs* induce nonetheless a certain amount of unpredictability. Describing a *dispositif* does not necessarily predict the system of its effects. Thus, for example, the prison does achieve the strategic objective of monitoring, concentrating and constraining the mobility of a multitude of vagrants and irregulars, but, at the same time, produces the unforeseen, involuntary effect of forming professional delinquent affiliations. In the end, Foucault defines the *dispositif* as:

> a matter of a certain manipulation of relations of forces, either developing them in a particular direction, blocking them, stabilising them, utilising them, etc. The apparatus is thus always inscribed in a play of power, but it is also always linked to certain coordinates of knowledge which issue from it but, to an equal degree, condition it. This is what the apparatus consists in: strategies of relations of forces supporting, and supported by, types of knowledge.[168]

In other words, the idea of grand strategies designates "the specific character of the social by viewing its regularisation as a result of the unification and homogenisation of individual patterns of action, which is induced by their concurrence".[169] Foucault's conception may be problematized by functionalism, especially in the idea of the genesis of the *dispositifs* as a response to an urgency, and by the issue of scale, not only the level of practical social analysis, but also concerning the types and numbers of

166 *Ibid.*, 203. See also what Foucault writes about "general apparatuses" ("*dispositifs d'ensemble*") in *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*: "Here the logic is perfectly clear, the aims decipherable, yet it turns out that no one can have conceived and very few formulated them: such is the implicit character of the great, anonymous, almost mute strategies which coordinate the voluble tactics whose 'inventors' or directors are often devoid of all hypocrisy". Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction. Vol.* 1, p. 95.

167 *Ibid.*, 209.

168 Foucault, "The Confession of the Flesh", p. 196.

169 Gallas, *Dichotomy, Dualism, Duality*, p. 78.

dispositif applied to social analysis. What does it mean, for example, to talk about the "*dispositif* of the Athenian city", or the "Christian *dispositif*", or "the *dispositif* of the French Revolution or the Bolshevik Revolution", as Deleuze does?[170] Finally, the concept of the *dispositif* does not inherently explain how the regularization of patterns of action is achieved, why they tend to converge or where is their point of convergence.

In sum, an empathetic reading of Foucault suggests the existence of an overall unity of a system of domination through strategic codification of power relations. Nevertheless, since such an approach cannot explain theoretically why and how a certain strategic codification takes place (for example, Poulantzas' concept of "structural selectivities" and Bob Jessop's adaptation as "strategic selectivities"), it ultimately collapses into a discourse of micro-power – the ever-changing and mutual composition and re-composition of the relations of power, their "sociological amorphy".[171] Otherwise stated, if the *dispositif* is a network of power, subjectivation and knowledge connected by heterogeneous, relational nodes, this network, far from offering itself as evidence to sensory experience, emerges only through a theoretical analysis of the abstractions that constitutively and specifically structure the social field, such as social form-analysis. Therefore, it is possible to overcome the problems related to the Foucauldian use of the concept of *dispositif* through a process of insertion-modification in the materialist logic which is being outlined. For this purpose, we can define *dispositif* as *a network of institutions and mixed practices, authorized by correlated scientific knowledges, with subjectivation effects.*

Following the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's entry for "social institutions",[172] institutions are to be distinguished from less complex social elements such as conventions, rules, roles and rituals, which are among their constitutive components. At the same time, institutions are also to be distinguished from more complex social entities such as societies and cultures, of which institutions are constitutive elements. Social institutions are often organizations, and they can also be systems of organization, grounded in different spheres of activity (political, economic, etc.). Moreover, some institutions are meta-institutions, i.e. institutions organizing other institutions or systems. For example, governments are meta-institutions. In a *dispositif* we can find institutions of all these three kinds. A *dispositif*, in this way, can be compared to a molecule – it has constitutive elements ("atoms"), but also its own particular structure and unity. This analogy illustrates both the relative independence of a *dispositif* vis-à-vis other *dispositifs*, and their integration into the unitary system of the social complex. Social forms may be regarded as matrices of *dispositifs* and, in

170 See Deleuze, "What is a *dispositif* ?"

171 Jessop, *State Theory*, p. 238.

172 See Miller, "Social Institutions" cit.

turn, *dispositifs* as concretizations or materializations of social forms.[173] Social forms determine the conditions of possibility for the constitution of *dispositifs* and orient their practices, institutions and knowledges. Moreover, at the most abstract level, social forms determine the particular arrangement of *dispositifs* in their given context.

Examining the functionality of the *dispositif* across the three dimensions of knowledge, subjects and power reveals how multiple social forms develop with respect to each. Considering knowledge, social forms constitute the immediate epistemic objects of knowledge, correlated to institutions and practices, and the conceptual categories or fields of knowledge. For example, economic forms like value or capital constitute what individual economists perceive to be the natural objects of political economy. Rather than understanding the *form-determinations* of their subject matter, they focus solely on the concrete content, namely the practices

173 Buckel, *Subjectivation and cohesion*. This analytical integration between the complementary dynamics of "logical"-abstract and "historical"-concrete, or Marxian social forms and Foucauldian dispositifs, is repeatedly suggested by Foucault himself. Foucault hints at the fact that Marx's conceptual reconstruction of the capitalist mode of production is the background against which the point of view of his *dispositifs* analysis can be understood. "If the economic take-off of the West began with the techniques that made possible the accumulation of capital, it might perhaps be said that the methods for administering the accumulation of men made possible a political take-off in relation to the traditional, ritual, costly, violent forms of power, which soon fell into disuse and were superseded by a subtle, calculated technology of subjection. In fact, the two processes – the accumulation of men and the accumulation of capital – cannot be separated" (Discipline and Punish, pp. 220–1). Foucault asserts this view in another crucial passage: "This bio-power was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes. But this was not all it required; it also needed the growth of both these factors, their reinforcement as well as their availability and docility; it had to have methods of power capable of optimizing forces, aptitudes, and life in general without at the same time making them more difficult to govern. If the development of the great instruments of the state, as institutions of power, ensured the maintenance of production relations, the rudiments of anatomo- and bio-politics, created in the eighteenth century as techniques of power present at every level of the social body and utilized by very diverse institutions (the family and the army, schools and the police, individual medicine and the administration of collective bodies), operated in the sphere of economic processes, their development, and the forces working to sustain them. They also acted as factors of segregation and social hierarchization, exerting their influence on the respective forces of both these movements, guaranteeing relations of domination and effects of hegemony. The adjustment of the accumulation of men to that of capital, the joining of the growth of human groups to the expansion of productive forces and the differential allocation of profit, were made possible in part by the exercise of bio-power in its many forms and modes of application. The investment of the body, its valorization, and the distributive management of its forces were at the time indispensable". Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Vol. 1, pp. 140–1.

and institutions being constituted. In this way, pre-formed knowledge socially validates the corresponding forms by organizing and authorizing certain *dispositifs*. This link between social forms and knowledge shows that the social form-analysis is not an abstract exercise, but rather enables the challenging of certain bodies of knowledge and the social relations underlying them.

Social forms outline the "system-limits" of capitalist subjectivity. They determine the specific conditions of possibility for the actions and the rationalizations of individuals. Recall the example of wage laborers. At the level of *dispositifs*, concrete and historical institutional constellations, knowledges and processes underlie the delineation of subjectivity. For example, consider the neoliberal *dispositif*, whose elements are – among others – legal-political practices that reduce workers' rights and political-economic practices that liberalize exchange. Here, with regard to the field of action of this *dispositif*, the wage laborer is further constituted by such meshes of power as a precarious worker.

At the level of the *dispositif*, power relations are often conflicting and polemical. The tactics, objectives, strategies, projects, and interests of different social agents confront each other in a field of struggles between social forces. Different class compositions, class identities, political parties, dynamics of political representation, social movements, public assemblies, mass gatherings, informal groups and so on are all factors within this field of social struggle. Conflicting relationality takes place in the context of *dispositifs*, traversing them; in this way, its trajectories are shaped both by the *dispositifs* themselves and, more structurally, by the social forms. Social forms bear the marks of indirect and impersonal power relations characteristic of capitalist societies. Within the materialist logic that integrates the discourse of the *dispositifs* with that of social forms, two types of power relations can be distinguished – that of collective conflict across *dispositifs*, and the relationality of "domination", which refers to the relatively permanent social bond determined by the social forms. Thus, the notion of power alone is not sufficient to grasp these two different types of relationality. To remedy this, the concept of 'politics' is essential for defining the realm of conflict – one that includes both dominant and opposing strategies, as well as the "grey zones" between them. This interpretation of 'politics' draws significantly on Rancière's conception.

According to Rancière, the mainstream conception of politics – elections, bureaucracies, shifts of power within states, the governments, etc. – is not politics at all. It is instead what he calls *the police*. Rancière writes,

> Politics is generally seen as the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution. I propose to

> give this system of distribution and legitimization another name. I propose to call it *the police*.[174]

This characterization resonates not only with the coercion and repression often associated with "the petty police, the truncheon blows of the forces of law and order and the inquisitions of the secret police",[175] but also with the concept of police identified by Foucault in eighteenth-century writings: practices of government that are oriented to cover everything relating to population and its happiness. The process of police, as Rancière defines it, "is that of governing, and it entails creating community consent, which relies on the distribution of shares and the hierarchy of places and functions".[176] This distribution " leaves no space for a supplement"[177] because it allocates "ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying",[178] i.e. determines the limits of the visible and the sayable within which "bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task".[179] The fact "that human communities gather together under the rule of those qualified to rule – whose qualifications are legitimized by the very fact that they are ruling", is the "normal order of things".[180] For Rancière, politics stands in logical opposition to the police. He writes,

> I now propose to reserve the term *politics* for an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing: whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration – that of the part that has no part. This break is manifest in a series of actions that reconfigure the space where parties, parts, or lack of parts have been defined. Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination.[181]

Politics is a "rupture, […] a deviation, […] a supplement to all social (ac)counts and an exception to all logics of domination".[182] Its process "is that of equality. It consists of a set of practices guided by the supposition that everyone is equal and by the attempt to verify this supposition. The proper name for this set of practices remains

174 Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999, p. 28.

175 *Ibid.*, 28.

176 Jacques Rancière, "Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization", *October*, vol. 61 (1992), p. 58.

177 Jacques Rancière, "Introducing Disagreement", *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2004), p. 6.

178 Rancière, *Disagreement*, p. 29.

179 *Ibid*.

180 Jacques Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics", trans. Rachel Bowlby and Davide Panagia, *Theory & event*, vol. 5, no. 3 (2001).

181 Rancière, *Disagreement*, pp. 29–30.

182 Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics".

emancipation".[183] The form of this process is that of dissensus – a quarrel over a social order's given assumptions, over the naturalness of police order, over the order of the visible and sayable which allocates the places where one does one thing and those where one does something else, "enacted in the name of a category denied either the principle or the consequences of that equality: workers, women, people of color, or others".[184] Names, however, "pin people down to their place and work", which is a function of police logic. "Politics," writes Rancière, "is about 'wrong' names. It is never the simple assertion of an identity; it is always, at the same time, the denial of an identity given by a other, given by the ruling order of policy".[185] These truly political subjects are "always on the verge of disappearing, either through simply fading away or, more often than not, through their re-incorporation, their identification with social groups or imaginary bodies".[186] Rancière writes of consensus:

> Consensus knows only: real parts of the community, problems around the redistribution of powers and wealth among these parts, expert calculations over the possible forms of such redistribution, and negotiations between the representatives of these various parts. Consensus, then, is actually the modern form of reducing politics to the police.[187]

According to this, politics is not a permanent given of human societies, rather it is a precarious, contingent activity. Rancière's notion of the political as "the encounter between two heterogeneous processes, […] the field for the encounter between emancipation and policy in the handling of a wrong", is helpful in that it goes beyond what he writes of "politics".[188] Chambers points out that the distinction between the political and politics is introduced by Rancière in a lecture originally written in English in 1991, *Politics, Identification, Subjectivization* presented at a conference in the United States.[189] Chamber states, "the very idea of thinking about 'the political' comes to Rancière from outside, from what was at the time a very American-centric debate over multiculturalism, and it is voiced in a foreign language, English".[190] After 1991, Rancière does not seem to elaborate on this terminology or distinction.

183 Rancière, "Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization", p. 58.
184 *Ibid.*, 59.
185 *Ibid.*, 62.
186 Rancière, "Introducing Disagreement", p. 7.
187 *Ibid.*
188 Rancière, "Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization", p. 58–9.
189 Samuel A. Chambers, "Jacques Rancière and the Problem of Pure Politics", *European Journal of Political Theory*, vol. 10, no. 3 (2011), pp. 303–26.
190 *Ibid.*, 314.

A "three terms" model – a realm of domination (police), a realm of dissensus (politics), and a ground upon which they meet (the political) – is dependent upon abandoning the ontological interpretation of the political as a mediating third space that would allow the meeting of politics and police (which would still be an Arendtian-style introduction of a space "proper" to politics), and instead understanding it as a relational concept in reference to the dynamic relationship between politics and police.[191] For Rancière, in fact, there is no relationship of externality between politics and police. He writes,

> We should not forget that if politics implements a logic entirely heterogenous to that of the police, it is always bound up with the latter.
> Politics acts on the police. It acts in the places and with the words that are common to both, even if it means reshaping those places and changing the status of those words. What is usually posited as the space of politics, meaning the set of state institutions, is precisely not a homogenous place. Its configuration is determined by the state of relations between political logic and police logic.[192]

And again,

> Politics does not stem from a place outside of the police […] There is no place outside of the police. But there are conflicting ways of doing with the "places" that it allocates: of relocating, reshaping, or redoubling them.[193]

There is another essential aspect of Rancière's conceptualization of politics that it is particularly meaningful in the framework of the materialist logic of capitalist societies. Namely, the refusal of the assumption that "'everything is political' since power relationships are everywhere".[194] Otherwise stated, it is not the case that every social practice is in itself political. Rather, a logic of politicization in which the singular individuals are put together as collective actors is more useful for understanding the larger functioning of a social system. Rancière repeatedly gives the example of feminist movements. He writes, "The domestic household has been turned into a political space not through the simple fact that power relationships are at work in it but because it was the subject of argument in a dispute over the capacity of women in the

191 Jean-Philippe Deranty, "Rancière and Contemporary Political Ontology", *Theory & Event*, vol. 6, no. 4 (2003); and Joseph J. Tanke, *Jacques Rancière: an Introduction*, Continuum Books, New York, 2011.

192 Rancière, *Disagreement*, pp. 31, 33.

193 Jacques Rancière, "The Thinking of Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics", Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp (eds.), *Reading Rancière: Critical Dissensus*, Continuum Books, London, 2011, p. 6.

194 Rancière, *Disagreement*, p. 32.

community".[195] This is to say that, "the home and housework are no more political in themselves than the street, the factory, or government". They are political inasmuch that the feminist movement "asks if […] maternity, for example, is a private or a social matter, if this social function is a public function or not, if this public function implies a political capacity".[196] Feminist movements interrupt the police order of the sayable and visible by calling into question its social/political, private/public divide and create space for previously uncounted objects and subjects. They do this via a process of political subjectification, as Rancière calls it, enabled by an assumption of "wrong" naming, which is a process of collective politicization.[197] The difference here with the larger concept of politics is that, for Rancière, when a political subject is re-incorporated into the police order as a real part of the society (or as a party inside the logic of consensus) it immediately disappears as political subject as such.[198]

Another source of inspiration for the *dispositif-politics* dimension of the logic for capitalist societies is Historical Materialist Policy Analysis (HMPA) approach, especially as elaborated in the article "The European Border Regime in Crisis".[199] Here, the conflicting relationality that traverses *dispositifs* is theorized using mainly the concept of hegemony (similar to the Rancierian concept of police), based upon the insights of Gramsci's hegemony theory. Hegemony projects are defined as "bundles of strategies that pursue similar goals", implemented by a constellation (neither static nor homogeneous) of social actors in response to a problematic social, economic or political situation, which aim at becoming dominant and deterministic in "*society as a whole*".[200] As Buckel and her authors underline, however, "not all social forces, not all actions, practices and strategies can conceptually be subsumed

195 *Ibid.*, 32–3.

196 *Ibid.*, 41, 40.

197 "A mode of subjectification does not create subjects ex nihilo; it creates them by transforming identities defined in the natural order of the allocation of functions and places into instances of experience of a dispute. "Workers" or "women" are identities that apparently hold no mystery. Anyone can tell *who* is meant. But political subjectification forces them out of such obviousness by questioning the relationship between a *who* and a *what* in the apparent redundancy of the positing of an existence. In politics 'woman' is the subject of experience – the denatured, defeminized subject – that measures the gap between an acknowledged part (that of sexual complementarity) and a having no part […] All political subjectification is the manifestation of a gap of this kind. The familiar police logic that decides that […] militant feminists are strangers to their sex, is, all in all, justified. Any subjectification is a disidentification, removal from the naturalness of a place". *Ibid.*, 36.

198 For a critique of Rancière's thesis on reserving the term politics for emancipatory action, see Oliver Marchart, "The Second Return of the Political: Democracy and the Syllogism of Equality", Bowman et al. (eds.), *Reading Rancière: Critical Dissensus*, pp. 129–47.

199 Buckel et al., *The European Border Regime in Crisis*.

200 *Ibid.*, 17.

within hegemony projects".[201] They classify non-hegemonically-oriented practices in reaction to and in refusal of a given hegemonic order as follows:

1. Counter-Hegemonic Strategies: strategies devoted to achieving an alternative hegemony in society. For example, radical reformist projects, including conservative and progressive ones;
2. Anti-Hegemonic Strategies: strategies that reject hegemony and hierarchical relationships. For example, radical critical, anarchist strategies which try to establish alternative spaces and ways of life (communes, occupied social centers, exchange rings, etc.);
3. Escape Strategies: non-political, targeted, everyday practices of subversion, resistance, refusal, avoidance of a hegemonic order. For example, migrant practices of mobility;
4. Resignation: non-strategic, passive behaviors without any active participation in supporting a given hegemonic order.

With the exception of the fourth category, the concept of politics here introduced also covers the counter-hegemonic strategies, the anti-hegemonic strategies and the escape strategies, insofar as they require a collective politicization, similar to the Rancierian concept of politics as antagonistic to the police. These strategies, indeed, powerfully act on social forces and their hegemony projects, forcing them to react and to reorganize.

To analyze conflicts empirically, HMPA sets out a three-step methodology:

1. Context Analysis: aimed at articulating the historical dynamics (conjunctural contextualization) and the structural condition (form-determined and *dispositif* path dependency) of a conflict, and of the different strategic responses to it;
2. Actor Analysis: aimed at identifying how and why social forces react differently or in opposing ways to problematic situations. It involves the analysis of: strategies and their protagonists, hegemony projects, the relative positions of hegemony projects within the social relations of forces;
3. Process Analysis: the reconstruction of the dynamics of the conflict, the complex processes of the struggle of a conflict, via the combination of the first two steps.[202]

The distinction between politics, with reference to *dispositifs*, and impersonal domination, with reference to social forms, avoids the short circuiting of these two types of power relationality, a conflation often present in Foucault's somewhat elusive and

201 Buckel et al., *The European Border Regime in Crisis*, p. 19.

202 Kannankulam and Georgi, "Varieties of Capitalism or Varieties of Relationships of Forces?"

indefinite definition of power. From this perspective, even the distinction Foucault later made – and frequently cited in the literature – between power relations and states of domination proves insufficient.[203] Foucault defines power relations as reversible at any time and as exercising "only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are 'free'",[204] and describes domination as a situation in which power relations "remain blocked, frozen".[205] In capitalist societies, however, juridical subjectivity is based upon freedom and equality, precluding the Foucauldian distinction as a productive analytical premise.

This indicates another problematic point regarding Foucault's equivocal conception of power. In his critique of Freudo-Marxism, Lacanian psychoanalysis and the philosophies of sovereignty of Hobbes, Rousseau, and Schmitt, Foucault constructs the *legal-discursive model of power* as an ideal-type of *negative* understanding of domination, centered on bans, prohibitions and repression, while uncritically adopting a reductive vision of command-based law. This does not allow him to grasp the distinctive features, freedom and equality, of legal subjectivity in capitalist societies, nor, therefore, the *productive*, positive character of modern law in the constitution of individuals as subjects.[206]

Again, social forms are matrices of *dispositifs* and, in turn, *dispositifs* are concretizations and materializations of social forms. Between social forms and *dispositifs*, there is no direct or causal relation between essence and appearance, nor a functionalist or a teleological one, related to the reproduction of social forms or specific *dispositifs*. It is true that the *dispositifs* are generally form-determined, but there are multifarious ways – historical, concrete context-sensitive ways – in which this form determination occurs. Thus, forms are not fixed once and for all, neither they will always be materialized in a specific configuration.

For instance, value form materializes in very different *dispositifs* involving money and credit. Considering money as the mesh of a network as the analytical starting point, it is possible to suppose that, in specific situations, money is a mesh of two different nets, two different *dispositifs*. Money exists in an ensemble with, among other things, laws that link it to a particular commodity, say gold,[207] and in this way

203 "The analyses I am trying to make bear essentially on relations of power. By this I mean something different from states of domination". Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom", Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, p. 283.

204 Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power", James D. Faubion (ed.), *Power: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984. Vol* 3, trans. Robert Hurley et al., New Press, New York, 2001, p. 342.

205 Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom", p. 283.

206 This criticism was first put forward by Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, pp. 77–8. See also Lindner, "State, Domination and Politics", pp. 146–8.

207 Already in the nineteenth century the use of banknotes was more common in everyday commerce than the use of gold. Banknotes were released, firstly by individual banks, and then

money is defined as a money commodity. Considering a distinct *dispositif* in which money is enmeshed with, among other things, a bank system in which only central banks are credit institutes, money is defined as an outcome of credit, or so-called fiat money. Although these *dispositifs* are somewhat different, nonetheless both commodity money and fiat money are concretizations of value form which is, so to say, their upstream category. This is possible because *dispositifs* are traversed by politics, which is not fixed. It is possible to distinguish three types of relations between social forms, the *dispositifs* that actualize them and trajectories of conflicts traversing them:

1. Conflicts that confirm or realize a specific *dispositif* as the concrete expression of a social form, staying within it (such as conflicts around contracted working hours, organized by trade unions);
2. Conflicts that undermine a specific *dispositif* that materializes a social form, but without questioning that form in itself. In this case, conflicts could lead to the constitution of another *dispositif* compatible with the form (such as in the emergence of the neo-liberal *dispositif* in the 1980s and the 1990s after the crises of Fordism);
3. Finally, under certain circumstances, conflicts that undermine a social form in itself (such as May 1968 in France).[208]

Thus, even social forms can become a battlefield, "despite their fetishized immunization against change".[209] In the end, depending on the type of relation, the immanent tendency of capitalist societies towards their own reproduction could be either guaranteed or, it could be impeded. This means that a capitalist society is only a reproducing entity if the concurrence of both forms (structure) and politics (agency) are considered.

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by central banks, which promised to honor the notes in gold. The gold standard had been maintained even after the Second World War as established at the Bretton Woods conference. The difference with the previous system was that only the U.S. dollar was covered by gold, all the other currencies had a fixed exchange rate to the dollar. Due to the vast amount of dollars in circulation by the end of the 1960s it became impossible to couple gold with the dollar. In 1971, during the conference of Camp David, the gold standard and the fixed currency exchange rates was abolished.

208 Alexander Gallas, "Reading 'Capital' with Poulantzas: 'Form' and 'Struggle' in the Critique of Political Economy", Gallas et al. (eds.), *Reading Poulantzas*, pp. 93–4.

209 Buckel et al., *The European Border Regime in Crisis*, p. 12.