NOT JUST NOSTALGIA: ROMANTIC MARXISM, SOCIAL REPRODUCTION, AND TIMES OF FREEDOM

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Abstract

Drawing on the romantic stream of Marxism, Social Reproduction Theory (SRT), and Marxist theories of temporality, this dissertation develops a total critique of capitalist society and a utopian vision of communist freedom. It is committed to Karl Marx's view of communism, which requires the realization of the human capacity to consciously create the world in our own image, a process that can only begin to occur by regaining substantive control over our social labour powers. Despite the totalizing tendency of capital to subsume all forms of life under the hegemony of abstract labour time, multiple and diverse concrete temporalities persist as constituent elements of capital's uneven unity. Romantic Marxism, a part of the living tradition of non-orthodox Marxism, serves as a critical point of departure for theorizing a non-unilinear conception of history, as well as a utopian and revolutionary vision of communist freedom. Centring the Romantic tendencies within Marxism grounds a utopian politics in the material relations of non-capitalist lifeways and anti-capitalist struggles of the past that continue to exist in subterranean ways. Elements of these social forms might be recovered as part of a revolutionary project of communist freedom in the present. Identifying and uncovering non-capitalist social forms requires not just theoretical inquiry at a high level of abstraction, but also investigation into the types of radical political activity that express, in various ways, such a vision of revolution. The latest iteration of Marxist social reproduction theory represents a powerful theoretical and strategic framework in the tradition of non-orthodox Marxism. Social reproduction represents a unique moment, connected to capitalist value production while remaining, in a sense, "outside" of it, in that it often takes place in times and spaces distinct from the production of value. SRT helps to reveal the ways in which non-capitalist social forms might be incorporated into a future-oriented project of communist freedom.

Dedication

For those who came before us and devoted their life project to the struggle for a qualitatively different world, those who remain committed to the living tradition of communist freedom, and those who maintain a utopian sense of hope in the face of defeat and despair.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction: Revolutionary Romanticism, the Tragic-Utopian Dialectic, and Universal Humanism

Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks – Karl Marx (1990, p. 342).

Wherever people are in the throes of liberation from the old oppressions, they are also sacrificing – there is no way they can avoid it – certain ways of life which for many years were great and beautiful. The tractor and the mechanical seeder must replace the gestures of the ploughman. Thus, when backward countries move forward, they produce ugliness, platitude and mediocrity as though that meant progress – Henri Lefebvre (2014, p. 66).

But even as capital dominates life-making in these ways, it does not exert absolute control. Bodies can and do resist degradation. Lives can be organized against capital – Susan Ferguson (2020b, p. 119).

Introduction

Drawing on the romantic stream of Marxism, Social Reproduction Theory (SRT), and Marxist theories of temporality, this dissertation develops a total critique of capitalist society and a utopian vision of communist freedom. It is committed to Karl Marx's view of communism, which requires the realization of the human capacity to consciously create the world in our own image, a process that can only begin to occur by regaining substantive control over our social labour powers. While capitalism has generated new productive capacities and allowed for accumulation to occur at levels never seen before, it has done so by directing our activity towards the production of surplus-value rather than the creation of a flourishing human society. Capital exploits the life-making activity, or labour, of human beings, reducing it to a means of producing commodities to be sold on the market for profit. In the process, our essentially human capacity to act in, on, and with the world becomes a mere means to survival. Through this process, we become separated, or alienated, from our own conscious and creative activity, turning our labour-power into a commodity to be sold for a wage.

The growth in society's productive powers under capitalism has led many to argue that capital represents a progressive force, one which eliminates so-called "traditional" forms of exploitation and oppression. This is sometimes true even of capitalism's harshest critics. Indeed, in *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Friedrich Engels (2002) declare that capitalism "has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors', and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment'" (p. 222).[1] Drawing from the dominant interpretation of Marx, orthodox Marxism insists that the capitalist mode of production is a necessary stage on the way to human emancipation that all societies must pass through.[2] This unilinear understanding of history reproduces Eurocentric notions of modernity which view progress as emanating from the West (see Saïd, 1979). This dissertation questions such unilinear interpretations of history by highlighting the ways in which capitalist modernity has often reproduced so-called "backwards" forms of oppression in new ways while also destroying ways of organizing human society that embodied a less alienated relationship to work, each other, and the natural world. Far from producing a more egalitarian society, capitalism has "substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation" (Marx & Engels, 2002, p. 222). What is called progress by orthodox Marxism is viewed by non-orthodox Marxists as the destruction of more human and beautiful forms of life.

[1] I have chosen not to modify the term "man" when citing Marx and others' work. While the gendered language is outdated, it reflects the conditions of the time in which those authors worked. I use gender neutral (they/them) pronouns, or terms such as "human" or "worker," throughout the dissertation when referring to people in the abstract.

[2] My use of "orthodox Marxism" refers to the productivist, mechanical, and evolutionist interpretation of Marx, dominant in the Second and Third Internationals and found in the writings of Karl Kautsky, Georgii Plekhanov, and Nicolai Bukharin (Löwy & Sayre, 2001, p. 82). See G. A. Cohen (2001) for the most sophisticated articulation of this perspective. Recent iterations of eco-modernism have revived the orthodox Marxist perspective in new ways (see Phillips, 2015). Orthodox Marxism, in this sense, is distinct from Georg Lukács' (1988) use of the term, referring to Marx's dialectical method (p. 1), which will be examined in the two chapters that follow (see also Bertell Ollman, 1990).

Marx often draws from Gothic imagery to describe the vampiric, life-draining character of capitalist production. But despite the tendency of capitalism to subordinate human activity to the abstract logic of value and to destroy less alienated social forms, concrete expressions of labour and life persist. Capital has not been able to completely eliminate the human element of labour, nor has it been able to eradicate the multiple and diverse ways in which social life is organized. While capitalist relations structure the parameters of socio-economic life in all areas of the globe, the reach of capital nonetheless remains contradictory and incomplete. Attentiveness to the uneven development of global capitalism draws our focus to the potentialities of expanding those realms of human freedom and activity that have not been fully subsumed by the logic of capital (García-Quesada, 2022, p. 19).

Despite the totalizing tendency of capital to subsume all forms of life under the hegemony of abstract labour time, multiple and diverse concrete temporalities persist as constituent elements of capital's uneven unity (Martineau, 2016, p. 8). Romantic Marxism, a part of the living tradition of non-orthodox Marxism, serves as a critical point of departure for theorizing a non-unilinear conception of history, as well as a utopian and revolutionary vision of communist freedom. This distinguishes my approach from other Marxist currents that hold to a strictly progressive, future-oriented view of politics and revolution (see Callinicos, 2009; Cohen, 2001). Centring the Romantic tendencies within Marxism grounds a utopian politics in the material relations of non-capitalist lifeways and anti-capitalist struggles of the past that continue to exist in subterranean ways.[3] Elements of these social forms might be recovered as part of a revolutionary project of communist freedom in the present.

[3] While a utopian vision of the future requires thinking and, indeed, imagining beyond what is possible in the present, it is not merely untethered dreaming. I use the notion of concrete utopia to describe the relationship a future-oriented vision of communist freedom might have to past forms of life and struggle – their memory, history, and

Identifying and uncovering non-capitalist social forms requires not just theoretical inquiry at a high level of abstraction, but also investigation into the types of radical political activity that express, in various ways, such a vision of revolution. The latest iteration of Marxist social reproduction theory represents a powerful theoretical and strategic framework in the tradition of non-orthodox Marxism.[4] Politically, social reproductive struggles have been some of the most militant and effective working-class movements in recent times. Emphasizing the dual character of labour – Marx's (1990) insight that the production of commodities requires specific, conscious, and creative activity while at the same time subordinating the latter to abstract labour-time (p. 132) – SRT highlights the incomplete nature of capitalist alienation. Because the production of value requires the creation of use-values, the persistence of concrete activity represents a central site of contradiction for capitalism. The Marxist critique of alienation points towards the possibility of regaining control over our labour and directing it towards a flourishing human society, rather than the production of capitalist profits (see McNally, 2004). While capitalist alienation extends to all aspects of life, human life-making activity continues to occur in concrete times and spaces. Social reproduction represents a unique moment, connected to capitalist value production while remaining, in a sense, "outside" of it, in that it often takes place

material infrastructure – much of which has been forgotten through political defeat (Traverso, 2021, p. 19). Importantly, it is not only inspiration guiding the utopian resurrection of elements of the past, but, as Daniel Bensaïd (2015) has pointed out, revolutionary politics requires an ethical commitment, a fidelity to our ancestors, the comrades who resisted their oppression and died in the process (p. 288). Defeats of the past are never merely defeats but serve as the basis of our present movements. To abandon the urgent struggles of the present would be to betray the memory and history of those who came before us. This definition of concrete utopia is distinct from Erik Olin Wright's (2011) view of "real utopias" (p. 37), which is grounded in empirical examples of institutional transformation, such as participatory budgeting and Universal Basic Income. While Wright acknowledges that utopian visions might point towards the direction of revolution, his view of utopia is rooted firmly in present institutional change, rather than an ongoing relationship with past social forms and a vision of revolutionary struggle aimed beyond what is currently possible.

[4] I refer to this tradition of Marxist social reproduction theory with the acronym SRT. See Tithi Bhattacharya (2017b), Susa Ferguson (2020b), Aaron Jaffe (2020), and Alan Sears (2025b) for recent works from this perspective. Throughout the dissertation I engage with other Marxist social reproduction perspectives which, in various ways, are different, complimentary, or critical of SRT.

in times and spaces distinct from the production of value. For this reason, the time of social reproduction is one where workers might more easily redirect their labour towards the satisfaction of collective needs and desires, rather than the creation of capitalist profits (Ferguson, 2017, p. 121). While structuralist accounts of class limit their analysis to a narrow definition of productive workers, SRT expands the scope of which workers are to be considered strategically important.

This chapter begins by articulating the Romantic critique of modernity and the forms of alienation that have occurred under capitalism. While Romanticism often expresses a nostalgic sense of loss for elements of the non-capitalist past, I develop the concept of "not-just-nostalgia." It refers to the core impulse of the revolutionary Romantic tradition: a utopian desire to *selectively* recover non-capitalist social forms as part of a future-oriented anti-capitalist struggle in the present.[5] Next, I engage with Marxist theories of temporality which, unlike orthodox Marxism, theorize capitalism as an uneven and contradictory global totality. Romantic Marxism highlights the ways in which forms of domination, oppression, and violence continue to underpin the reproduction of capitalist social relations. At the same time, the uneven nature of capitalist totality allows for the persistence of non-capitalist social forms – albeit in ways transformed by the logic of capital – that might be materially drawn upon as part of an anti-capitalist praxis. These non-synchronous elements contain within them the possibility of alternate modern futures that have been, so far, blocked by capitalism. Lastly, I argue that Social Reproduction Theory shares Romantic Marxism's total critique of capitalism. Bringing SRT and Romantic Marxism

[5] Stefan Kipfer (2018) refers to "not-just-capitalist" (p. 486) social forms, including North American Indigenous lifeways and practices of struggle. While such forms are not entirely outside or autonomous from the social relations of capitalism, not-just-capitalist elements persist, representing a potential source of political struggle. I also use not-just-nostalgic to refer to so-called defensive forms of protest, both in the past and the present that, through efforts to protect a traditional culture or way of life, also point towards new and liberatory social forms.

together strengthens both perspectives. Romantic Marxism benefits from SRT's explicit attentiveness to the concrete relations of oppression and domination that constitute the experience of capitalism today. While Romantic Marxism offers a powerful theory for understanding resistance to capitalism, the framework is strengthened by linking it to the important social reproductive struggles animating our contemporary political realities. At the same time, SRT is enriched by Romantic Marxism's utopian impulse to selectively recover non-capitalist social forms of the past as part of the process of reclaiming control over the concrete times of life.

The Romantic Critique of Capitalism

A Broad Conception of Romanticism

In *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity*, Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre (2001) define Romanticism broadly, underscoring its contradictory character and multi-dimensional articulations (p. 58). Romanticism, so conceived, encompasses political positions from fascistic to revolutionary, conservative to reformist, and extends across disciplinary boundaries to include artistic expressions, politics, philosophy, theology, and history, amongst others (p. 1). As such, the Romantic tradition as a whole, as well as the works of its individual artists and authors, can be "simultaneously (or alternately) revolutionary and counterrevolutionary, individualistic and communitarian, cosmopolitan and nationalistic, realist and fantastic, retrograde and utopian, rebellious and melancholic, democratic and aristocratic, activist and contemplative, republican and monarchist, red and white, mystical and sensual" (p. 1). It includes thinkers as diverse as Friedrich Schelling, Edmund Burke, Charles Dickens, William Blake, Charles Fourier, and Ernst

Bloch. Such a broad conception of Romanticism goes beyond popular definitions which restrict it to the temporal period following the end of the French Revolution in 1799 up until the end of the nineteenth century (pp. 16-17). Instead, Löwy and Sayre insist that Romantic tendencies existed in the eighteenth century prior to the French Revolution and continue into the present.

Despite such an expansive definition of the term, it is possible to articulate a coherent definition of Romanticism that captures its diverse and contradictory character without either becoming overly abstract or asserting a plurality of Romanticisms (Löwy & Sayre, 2001, p. 15). Romanticism is a civilizational critique of modern industrial capitalism which extends beyond the economic sphere,[6] referring to a social totality that includes economic, political, cultural, and other social relations. It mourns the loss of non-capitalist social forms, including lifeways, modes of thought, and spiritual practices that have been destroyed by the spread of modern capitalist society. The imposition of capitalist social relations has led to the spread of ultra-rational thought through the application of abstract categories, reducing qualitative difference to quantitatively measurable units, replacing the diversity of human conscious and creative activity with mechanistic productive methods, and destroying communal and egalitarian forms of relating with each other and the natural world.

While not every form of Romanticism expresses all aspects of this total critique of modern society, they all, in different ways, reject some of the features of capitalist civilization listed above. But while a general feature of Romanticism can be described as a feeling of nostalgia for non-capitalist social forms of the past, revolutionary Romanticism reroutes that

[6] Such a critique does not view the various "spheres" of social life as static, distinct, or isolated. As we will see below, Marx shows that the spheres of production, circulation, and consumption are mutually conditioning and co-constitutive. While the spatial metaphor is useful to denote an analytical separation between the multiple and diverse elements of social life, it is not meant to describe an *actual* separation.

nostalgia towards the creation of a different and more liberatory future (Löwy & Sayre, 2001, p. 73). It is, therefore, not-just-nostalgic, in that it does not desire an actual return to a real or imaginary past. Rather than idealizing "tradition" in a way that reifies the past, viewing it as a static thing, revolutionary Romanticism views the past as a site of contestation, a living relationship representing fertile ground for the recovery of material practices and theories. The act of unearthing these practices necessarily requires transforming them and, in the process, renews them in ways that allow them to be applied in the present.[7] The not-just-nostalgic character of revolutionary romanticism is what distinguishes it from other forms, including the "restitutioninist Romanticism" (p. 59) of Friedrich Schelling or the desire to restore forms of feudal aristocracy found in fascistic expression of Romanticism (p. 68). Instead, revolutionary Romanticism desires "a detour via the past, towards a new future, a detour that allows the human spirit to become aware of all the cultural richness and all the social vitality that have been sacrificed by the historical process launched by the Industrial Revolution, and to seek ways of bringing them back to life" (p. 254).

Romantic Marxism and Concrete Utopias

Though Marx was certainly not blind to the progressive features of capitalism and, at times, celebrated it for achieving a level of development never seen before, his work nonetheless draws extensively from the Romantic tradition and maintains a utopian vision of a future communist society (Löwy & Sayre, 2001, pp. 88-89). Marx was heavily influenced by Romantic literature, and this influence persisted throughout his life. *Capital* contains multiple references to Gothic imagery, including capital's "vampire-like" (Marx, 1990, p. 342) character, as well as to

[7] This view of tradition is central to radical Indigenous theory and practice (see Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2011).

Charles Dickens' – one of Marx's favourite authors – *Oliver Twist* (p. 569). *The Communist Manifesto* notes that the works of Utopian Socialists "are full of the most valuable materials for the enlightenment of the working class" (Marx & Engels, 2002, p. 255), and Marx's later writings express an admiration for communal traditions in North America, India, and Ireland, amongst others (see Anderson, 2016; 2025). Indeed, as we will see later, Marx came to view peripheral countries like India and Russia as central to the possibility of world communism, if combined with the broader proletarian movement in Western Europe.

These romantic threads come together in Marx's theory of alienation, which will be examined in detail in Chapter 4. For Marx (1978a), alienation can only be overcome when individuals reclaim their "social power" (p. 46) to labour as their own human essence. Estranged, or alienated, labour represents, for Marx, a loss of essential human values, what he refers to as the separation of humans from our "species-life" (Marx, 1978d, p. 33), or the ability to consciously, creatively, and socially act in, on, and with the world. Transcending alienation and reclaiming the essentially human capacity to labour is, in part, a desire for a return to a time before class division (Wills, 2024, p. 73). That desire emerges from a feeling of loss for a less alienated existence before capitalism. For Marx, recovering control over our labour – understood broadly as the ability to transform both ourselves and the world (Sears, 2025a, pp. 4-5) – and overcoming alienation are both central to a project of human freedom. But because we can only confront alienation from the standpoint of our present conditions, its overcoming must occur in relation to the particular level of development of human society rather than through an idealistic desire for a return to an imagined past. Romantic thinkers like Heinrich Heine also recognize that universal human freedom cannot be achieved either under modern bourgeois society or through a return to the past, because prior forms of life were themselves based upon oppressive and

exploitative relations (Löwy and Sayre, 2001, pp. 74-75). Thus, while the spread of modern capitalism has occurred through a process of dispossession, expropriation, and colonization, damaging pre-existing relations of mutuality and reciprocation amongst human beings, as well as between humans and nature, it cannot be overcome through a wholesale rejection of modernity. Instead, the process of disalienation must occur according to the material circumstances we find ourselves in today. Romantic Marxism's relationship to the past, therefore, is not-just-nostalgic, in that it views non-capitalist social forms as both a source of inspiration and a material basis for the process of rebuilding anti-capitalist activity, organizations, and infrastructure in the present.

The vision of communist freedom that emerges from Romantic Marxism's relationship to the past often goes beyond what is thought to be possible by those who separate Marx's attempt to explain the logic of capital in scientific terms from his ethical critique of capitalist society (Wills, 2024, p. 5). Certainly, Marx's scientific approach to understanding the social relations that make up capitalist society and the historical conditions that allowed it to come to be is necessary and valuable. However, Marx's critique of political economy is not distinct from his ethical humanism and his revolutionary aspirations. As Alan Sears (2014) argues, "Marx distinguished his own thinking from that of the utopian socialists, but that does not mean that anti-capitalism should be anti-utopian" (p. 18). The utopian commitment to a revolutionary future, that which seems impossible given the current conditions, is part of what makes qualitative transformation possible. It is what turns "impossible" communism into "possible" communism (Marx, 1978e, p. 635).

The orthodox interpretation of historical materialism is incompatible with a vision of the future that might draw, even selectively, from the past. The mechanical, productivist, and evolutionist view of history is premised upon a linear conception of history, where future society

is built upon the development of productive forces. This presents significant difficulties for Romantic Marxism (Löwy & Sayre, 2001, p. 116). If, as Alex Callinicos (2009) argues, what makes historical materialism uniquely valuable is that it is "an empirical theory which roots the mechanisms of social change in the structural properties of successive modes of production" (p. 264), then a communist future can only emerge by accelerating the tendency of capital to develop society's productive forces so that the entire world might inherit the benefits of Western development. If the dialectic of historical materialism is defined as the given level of development of the productive forces and its contradiction with the productive relations of that society, leading to the synthesis of a higher mode of production, then Marxism's relationship to the past exists only insofar as the latter represents a necessary step on the way to a higher stage of society. Our past, in other words, is something to be overcome and never repeated.

What relationship, then, can Marxism have with a utopian tradition that looks to selectively recover elements of non-capitalist social forms that have been lost due to the spread of capitalist modernity? While some Marxists view all appeals to the past as necessarily reactionary, others, like Ernst Bloch, emerge from the minoritarian "warm" current of non-orthodox Marxism, viewing the selective recovery of elements of the past as an integral part of the communist movement towards a revolutionary future (Löwy & Sayre, 2001, p. 184). This dissertation represents a contribution to the warm current of Marxism, highlighting the utopian tendencies internal to Marx's work, and Marxist theory and practice more broadly. Certainly, Marx disagreed with the Utopian Socialists of his time for their idealist conception of revolution, where the masses would be swayed by moral appeals to a utopian vision of the future (Wills, 2024, p. 41). But he nevertheless respected their commitment to socialism, even though he remained critical of the way in which they began from an imagined ideal, rather than the material

conditions and possibilities of the present. Indeed, the extent to which Marx's vision is opposed to Utopian Socialism can be overstated, as his work retains the influence of utopian thinkers such as Moses Hess, whose view of utopia is grounded in a communal tradition of the past and the possibility of its redemption (Löwy & Sayre, 2001, p. 79).

The Tragic-Utopian Dialectic of Capitalist Modernity

Bringing forward Marx's romantic influence allows for a tragic-utopian dialectic to emerge out of his critique of capitalist modernity. The not-just-nostalgic character of Romantic Marxism maintains a sense of hope for a revolutionary future that might still be realized in the face of ongoing alienation and political defeat. On the one hand, capitalism has led to the *possibility* of previously unimaginable degrees of human freedom. But, on the other hand, it has led to new forms of domination and alienation while also destroying other forms of living that were, perhaps, less alienated, more diverse, and more connected to our human capacity to consciously and creatively produce our lives. While our ability to direct our labour towards the benefit of human (and non-human) community has been alienated and distorted by capitalism, it has not been fully erased by the violence of capitalist modernity. Non-capitalist social forms exist beneath the surface, what Enzo Traverso (2021) calls "specters" (p. 19) waiting to be uncovered.

The tension between tragedy and utopia can be found in Gothic literature of the nineteenth century, much of which had an influence on Marx's work (McNally, 2012, p. 138). Gothic art often tells the tragic tale of the violent and horrific erasure of life that has occurred as capitalist relations spread across the globe. Vampire stories, for example, emerged from the conditions of an industrializing Britain, conjuring images of the working masses drained of their creative life-force by the dehumanizing power of capital (p. 12). But the tragic dimension of

capitalist development is dialectically related to its possible overcoming, for at the same time that capital directs living labour towards the production of surplus-value it also brings together a class of workers that could overcome it. This "monstrous dialectic" (p. 253) is, for David McNally, best expressed in Mary Shelley's 1818 Gothic novel *Frankenstein*, where Frankenstein's Creature represents both a monstrous, alienated creation of modernity and a conscious, living being seeking to reclaim the universal right to human life (p. 101).

As China Miéville (2002) argues, the reality of the capitalist present is itself fantastical, in that social relations between people are obscured, only visible on the surface as relations between things (p. 41). We will see in Chapter 4 that Marx's theory of commodity fetishism allows us to get behind these surface-level relations that nevertheless have real-life implications. The use of fantastical and Gothic imagery to describe the horrifying reality of capitalist social relations helps to reveal the truth of capitalism: that the form of capitalist commodity production which subordinates the living labour of human beings to the logic of value is not the natural order of things (p. 42). While production under capitalism transforms the labour-power of workers to a commodity and reduces their capacity for concrete, creative, and conscious activity to a means of obtaining the wages required to survive, our life-making activity exceeds the limits of capitalist production. Not merely untethered dreaming, the utopian vision for a different future emerges from these material conditions of the present. The utopian imaginary is a product of capitalism's tragic-utopian dialectic and points towards alternate possible futures that exist in the everyday forms of resistance, care, and solidarity that persist despite capital's drive to subsume all human activity to the logic of value. While these disparate actions are not in and of themselves revolutionary, they contain the glimpse of a different future. Utopian thought is produced by these concrete acts of struggle and can serve as the basis for a revolutionary project

intent on materially transforming the present, so that what is currently viewed as impossible becomes possible (p. 46). While romantic appeals to the past have been mobilized by the far-right to revive notions of aristocratic hierarchy, they might also reveal the unrealized possibilities contained in our non-capitalist history, that which has been destroyed or distorted by the spread of capitalist relations but might still be selectively recovered as the basis for an anti-capitalist project in the present (Tally Jr., 2024). Romantic Marxism views the persistence of non-capitalist relations within capitalist totality as potential sites of struggle, what Massimiliano Tomba (2013) calls "counter-times" (p. 157) to the abstract time of capital.

Romantic Marxism and Modernity

The Contradictions of Modernity

Against Eurocentric conceptions of time which view the development of capitalist modernity as a linear, progressive, and inevitable process, Romantic Marxism highlights the contradictory nature of capitalist time and the persistence of multiple and diverse temporalities despite – and against – the totalizing tendency of capital to subsume all forms of life under the hegemony of abstract labour-time. Rather than theorizing historical development as being determined by an abstract set of economic laws, where development of society's productive forces determines all other social relations, Romantic Marxism insists that we remain attentive to the diverse and multiple expressions of social life that make up capitalist totality (García-Quesada, 2022, p. 2). Capitalism can only be properly understood through the dialectical relationship between the abstract and concrete, by examining the contradictory and uneven forms it takes and situating these within our general understanding of global capitalist totality (p. 7).

Such a view of history follows Marx's own dialectical method. As Kevin Anderson (2025) argues, Marx can, and should, be viewed as a multilinear thinker (p. 138). Instead of viewing Marx's more empirically grounded notebooks as a departure from his earlier work, we might view them as a map of his intellectual interests later in life, an indication that his thinking was still evolving and expanding (Sayer & Corrigan, 1983, p. 82). Reading Marx's work as a whole – including the late Marx's notes on non-Western societies, colonialism, and gender – allows us to move between the more abstract logic of *Capital* and the concrete analysis of uneven capitalist development in Ireland, India, and the United States found in his later notes. These specific cases highlight the diverse forms capitalist development has taken while remaining grounded in Marx's general theory of capitalist reproduction. Furthermore, they help to illuminate an interpretation of Marx that challenges the Eurocentric and unilinear reading that has been dominant since his death.

Theorizing modernity as a contradictory and contested project complicates the relationship between Romanticism and the Enlightenment. Instead of viewing the two as necessarily opposed, where the Romanticism of the nineteenth century sought to negate the Enlightenment period of the eighteenth century, Löwy and Sayre (2001) argue that the two represent different aspects of modernity's complex and contradictory whole (p. 55). While there is an undeniable link between capitalism and the Enlightenment, the latter is non-homogeneous in the sense that it cannot be entirely defined in terms of bourgeois ideology. At times, Enlightenment thought has been mobilized towards non- and anti-capitalist ends. Just as the Enlightenment has taken different forms, so too has Romanticism. Thus, rather than approaching Romanticism as an anti-modern reaction, it is better to understand it as a "modern critique of

modernity" (p. 21), one which challenges the disenchantment, quantification, and mechanization of the world that has occurred under capitalism.

Similarly, Marshall Berman (1988) describes modernism as "any attempt by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization, to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it" (p. 5). Thus, modernism is an open, heterogeneous, and non-linear social *process*, containing multiple possible futures, some of which follow the Western model and others – equally modern – which reject or challenge the values of capitalist modernity from the perspective of those who have been excluded from modern society as it has been constructed in the West (p. 8). Modernity is therefore both tragic and utopian, in that it offers new possibilities for human flourishing while at the same time tearing us apart from that which connects us to the world and each other. Berman describes the process of modernization as a "maelstrom" (p. 16) which continuously develops and changes, bringing people together in new ways while destroying old social forms, producing new productive methods while alienating us from our capacity to labour, and developing new ways of understanding our place in the world while simultaneously creating a sense of loss and confusion.

The experience of modernity is both a fragmented and universal experience, going beyond national, class, and religious distinctions (Berman, 1988, p. 15). The process of modernization has destroyed past ways of life – pre-modern and modern – but it has not integrated all those subjects who have been affected by it in the same way. Instead, poor people, women, people of colour, and many others – particularly those located in the global South – have been excluded from the benefits of the wave of modernity that has torn them from their way of life. However, despite the so far unrealized promise of modernity, Berman remains committed to the possibility of realizing a truly universal modernism, grounded in "the counter-dream of

modernization from below" (p. 219). Such a vision can be found in Marx's work, which reveals the human labour, ingenuity, and creativity behind capitalist growth. While capitalist alienation makes it appear as though development is the result of the movement of capital, Marx (1990) demonstrates that capital is itself a product of conscious human activity (p. 163). While capitalism has divorced that activity from workers, the possibility of regaining control over our social labour powers persists. Working-class struggle, from this perspective, represents a form of modernization from below, where workers attempt to redirect their labour towards the creation of a flourishing human community, where production would occur according to concrete social and biological needs, rather than the creation of capitalist profits.

In the global South, where modernization has been expressed through colonial and imperial processes that have produced new global and national forms of inequality, the uneven and contradictory nature of modernity is exposed most clearly (Coronil, 1997, p. 385). Rather than viewing modernization as either fostering linear development through the imposition of the Western capitalist model on the entire world or producing new forms of underdevelopment and dependence, Fernando Coronil insists that the uneven process of modernization has produced unique expressions of modernity in the global South, which are themselves constitutive of modernity as a whole (pp. 17-18). Berman (1988) calls this the "modernism of underdevelopment" (p. 193), where the relationship between processes of modernization and the persistence of pre-modern social forms creates uniquely modern expressions. While, as Manu Goswami (2012) shows, struggles for recognition in the global South have often been subordinated to reformist nationalist movements which direct anti-imperialist resistance towards the reproduction of the Western nation-state form, other potential horizons of emancipation exist (p. 1463). Both Goswami and Berman retain a sense of hope in the possibility of realizing these

alternate modernisms, the vision of which emerges from concrete anti-imperial struggles that imagine a future beyond national recognition, embodying universal human freedom as a political goal (Goswami, 2012, p. 1469).[8] Berman (1988) insists that the realization of such a universal modernism requires an ongoing relationship with "modernisms of the past" (p. 35), which might be combined with modernisms of the present in new ways. Romantic Marxism represents a similar attempt to realize the promises of modernity in a way that combines past social forms (both pre-modernisms and modernisms of the past) with modern developments of the present. Such a utopian vision of the future is materially grounded in a process of modernism from below, the struggles of ordinary people to reclaim control over their ability to produce the world in their own collective image.

Truly Universal Humanism and Alternate Modernisms

In appealing to the possibility contained in past social forms, it is important not to fall into purely nostalgic efforts to return to an idealized pre-capitalist history. Such a return is both impossible and undesirable. Nostalgic idealism for the past risks flattening all non-capitalist societies and erasing the real inequalities that existed in prior historical moments. Furthermore, provincialist efforts to return to an imagined state of isolation from the rest of the world ignore the fact that all individual nations have already been conditioned by the capitalist world market and transformed by their relationship with other states and the world system (Goswami, 2012, p. 1468). Beyond the binary of the false universalism of Western modernity and a fragmentary

[8] The critique of nationalism does not equate to a rejection of struggles for national liberation, which contain within them the desire for a non-nationalist and universal form of emancipation. While Marx sees the nation-state as alienating, he distinguishes it from self-determined societies organized along ethnic or political lines (Benner, 2018, p. 29). While the capitalist nation-state form separates political power from the people who actually make up society, elements of real human community and solidarity persist to this day. It is for this reason that struggles for national liberation might still represent important constitutive elements of the movement for communism, if combined with broader, global working-class struggle. Chapter 5 will situate national liberation struggles within the movement for universal human emancipation.

provincialist politics lies a new and truly universal humanism. As Ato Sekyi-Otu (2019) argues, to treat the possibility of universalist humanism as a Eurocentric fiction cedes too much ground to Western conceptions of modernity, thereby accepting that universality belongs exclusively to the West (p. 14). Rather than rejecting the notion of universal totality, conceived of as a false universal narrative emanating from the West that is unable to recognize the distinctiveness of non-European perspectives, it is better to theorize totality as an uneven, contradictory, and differential *process* of totalization (Goonewardena, 2018, p. 462). This is not to deny, as David Scott (2000) reminds us, that the Western vision of humanism is, in fact, only a partial humanism rooted in Eurocentrism, colonialism, and patriarchy (p. 120). But despite the failure of what Berman (1988) calls "modernization from above" (p. 181) to live up to its promise and potential, the possibility of a truly universal modernism from below persists in the activity and struggles of ordinary people. This universal desire for human freedom can materialize in explosive ways, through forms of resistance and insurgent activities of the exploited and oppressed (Sekyi-Otu, 2019, p. 31).

In an interview with Scott (2000), Sylvia Wynter refers to the possibility of such a new universal project of emancipation as a "revisioned humanism" (p. 121). While this new humanism may contain multiple different trajectories and include elements that are incompatible with Eurocentric notions of modernity, it is nevertheless grounded in an attempt to realize the universalist promises of modernity that have been blocked by capitalist alienation. Tomba (2019) calls this "insurgent universality" (p. 1), that which goes beyond national and statist conceptions of unity. Instead, common ground is found in a political practice of collective struggle, where recognition moves beyond abstract notions of national citizenship and towards concrete relations of mutuality, solidarity, and truly democratic political participation (p. 21). Such a project

requires a multi-temporal view of history, one which considers the history of humanity as a whole, alongside the partial histories that make up the uneven and contradictory totality of human history. From this standpoint, it becomes possible to see Western humanism as an incomplete project, one which can only be universalized through the incorporation of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist perspectives.[9]

As noted above, anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggles have often been reduced to movements for national sovereignty and the reproduction of the capitalist nation-state form. Doing so limits political internationalism to the uncritical support of all nationalist struggles, regardless of their political character or their emancipatory potential. Such a view is grounded in the Eurocentric belief that emancipation can only occur through the replication of the Western path of development and the establishment of a sovereign nation-state. It reduces anti-imperial struggles to nationalist ones and assumes that the nation-state holds the key to political and economic freedom. But, as Todd Gordon and Jeffery Webber (2020) argue, the current capitalist expression of imperialism is no longer executed primarily through direct military or political control, but through the economic compulsion of the capitalist world-market (p. 107). This does not mean, as some argue, that nation-states have been replaced with a transnational capitalist class (see Robinson, 2010). Rather, capitalist imperialism subordinates the activities of national actors to the logic of the world market while also producing new global inequalities and forms of intra-state competition and conflict (Gordon & Webber, 2020, p. 114). Responding to the complexity of this expression of capitalist imperialism requires a perspective that neither

[9] As Kanishka Goonewardena (2018) explains, the Marxist framework of totality has often been opposed to post-colonial perspectives which reject the false universal of Western modernity (p. 457). However, rather than viewing the two as unreconcilable, an anti-colonial Marxism allows us to recognize the universal in the particular, moving towards a truly universal humanism capable of integrating the various forms of difference that are constitutive of the social totality, which itself can only be properly understood through those diverse social forms (p. 464).

uncritically supports nationalist movements, thereby reducing efforts of decolonization to nationalism, nor ignores the particularities of anti-colonial and anti-imperial movements struggling for national liberation by responding to the realities of capitalist imperialism in its various expressions. Goswami's (2012) notion of "colonial internationalism" (p. 1463) is both anti-imperialist and anti-nationalist, beginning from a standpoint of radical political equality but emerging from the particular modern condition and experience of imperialism under capitalism.

Goswami (2012) describes colonial internationalism as "a specific temporal politics" (p. 1463), one which is undeniably modern, emerging as it did in the inter-war period. However, rather than an abstract view of modern progress, the politics of colonial internationalism respond to the concrete relations between the capitalist world-system and the states existing within that system (pp. 1468-1469). Anti-imperial struggles, while emerging from the specific conditions and experiences of imperialism, are representative of "a new practical universalism" (p. 1475) made possible due to the shared experience of European colonization and imperialism. Rather than putting faith in the false promise of Western humanism, colonial internationalism depends on the capacity of ordinary people to struggle for their own collective emancipation (p. 1474). Against the Eurocentric linear conception of modernization, colonial internationalism imagines alternate possible futures, alternate modernisms. And while Goswami describes colonial internationalism as "a future-oriented schema" (p. 1462) which rejects the possibility of returning to an imagined pre-colonial past, she nevertheless problematizes the notion of a unilinear modernism and insists on the persistence of concrete, multiple, and diverse temporalities internal to capitalist modernity.

Goswami's colonial internationalism, therefore, aligns with Tomba's (2019) insurgent universality, which likewise emerges from the unrealized possibilities of alternate modern

trajectories that have not been entirely erased by the false universality of Western modernity (p. 5). While global capitalism imposes the abstract time of capitalist production through the extension of the capitalist world-market, non-capitalist temporalities persist. These concrete counter-times are internal to the uneven and contradictory circuits of capitalist reproduction, as we will see in the next chapter. They are produced not just by the movement of capital but by the concrete struggles of working-class subjects, including those engaged in anti-colonial and anti-imperial forms of resistance (Tomba, 2013, p. 169). For Tomba (2019), like for Goswami, a "*nonnational* anticolonialism" (p. 131, all emphasis in original unless otherwise noted) is grounded in the concrete struggles of exploited and oppressed peoples. Its universality emerges from shared experiences and practices of resistance. It is formed through collective political activity from below, not granted from above by a nation-state. However, unlike Goswami, Tomba connects non-national anti-colonialism with non-capitalist social forms of the past, including indigenous practices, the French Revolution, the Paris Commune, and the Russian Revolution. While none of these forms of life or resistance exist in a pure state today, elements of them might be selectively recovered and reimagined in the present. Rather than viewing them as outdated or backwards elements of the past, Tomba insists that these moments contain non-synchronous elements, unrealized possibilities that have been blocked by modern capitalism.

Our Four Romantic Marxists

Reviving non-capitalist social forms in the present requires a multilinear view of history and a commitment to the utopian and revolutionary project of communist freedom. It is a project of theoretical, organizational, and political recovery, unearthing and reimagining the best of those thinkers and political traditions who came before us in light of the present moment. I will not, however, advocate for a return to the politics of Communist regimes of the past, who flew the

flag of communism but in practice had little to nothing in common with Marx's understanding of the term.[10] Indeed, equating communism with the authoritarian and bureaucratic regimes of the twentieth century has done incredible damage to the belief that communism represents a viable and liberatory alternative to capitalism (Camfield, 2025, p. 99).

Romantic Marxism emerges from the tragic-utopian dialectic of capitalism, retaining a political commitment to revolutionary communism from below in the face of ongoing alienation, betrayal, and defeat. I draw broadly from this tradition, but each of the following chapters will engage with four Romantic Marxists specifically: E. P. Thompson, Walter Benjamin, Henri Lefebvre, and Roberto Schwarz.[11] These thinkers develop, in different ways, a critique of the disenchantment, quantification, and mechanization of the world under capitalism. Centring the question of temporality in their work, this dissertation draws explicit attention to the possibility of combining a selective recovery of elements of the past with a future-oriented communist project in the present. Rather than viewing our history as a closed book, each of our four Romantic Marxists understands the struggle over the unrealized potential of the past as central to the possibility of creating a liberatory future. Instead of defining past social forms as either outdated practices or necessary stages along the linear path of modernization, these four thinkers

[10] Following David Camfield's (2025) *Red Flags*, I use lower-case "communism" to refer to the (so far unrealized) vision of communist freedom, in which a flourishing human society is achieved through the total transformation of capitalist social relations, including full democratic control over the labour process by the members of that society. I use upper-case "Communism" to refer to what is often called the "actually existing socialism" of societies like Soviet Russia and Maoist China. Like Camfield, I argue that Communist regimes neither realized, nor were in transition towards, a society of communist freedom.

[11] While the work of Thompson, Benjamin, Lefebvre, and Schwarz, as well as that of Marx, is central to my understanding of Romantic Marxism, temporality, and communist freedom, this is not a dissertation about the work of any one of these individual scholars. My engagement with the work of our four Romantic Marxists is limited to the themes of each of the following chapters: the relationship between theory and history, temporality, alienation, communist freedom, and politics. As such, I will not be engaging in the broader debates around the work of these thinkers, though I hope to contribute to the rich history of Marxist scholarship that has grown out of the thought of Thompson, Benjamin, Lefebvre, Schwarz, and, indeed, Marx.

insist that non-capitalist forms represent concrete counter-times, oppositional tools to be wielded in our confrontation with actually-existing-capitalism.

Thompson's historical analysis is integrally connected to his theoretical and political views (Löwy & Sayre, 2001, p. 240). Against forms of orthodox Marxism which view the concrete experiences of working people as determined by abstract economic laws, Thompson (2008) insists that theoretical categories can only be properly understood in relation to the life activity and forms of struggle of actual people and their communities (p. 40). Thompson (1991) describes his book *The Making of the English Working Class* as an attempt "to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' hand-loom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity" (p. 12). Rather than relegating them to the historical record, Thompson reframes the activity of those struggling against the spread of capitalist social relations in England as central to the formation of the English working-class. Against the unilinear interpretation of history that views "pre-capitalist" lifeways as outdated,[12] Thompson insists that non-capitalist forms contain the possibility of post-capitalist futures, alternate modernisms that were never fully realized but nevertheless formed a part of the struggles of the Luddites, artisan workers, and others. While Thompson maintains a sense of nostalgia for traditional practices of the past, his writings on Romanticism highlight the tragic-utopian dialectic of Romantic thought, emerging from the tension between the emancipatory potential of the French Revolution and the limitations of its outcome (Thompson, 1997, p. 37). Thompson's work, in other words, is not-just-nostalgic, in

[12] As Massimiliano Tomba (2019) argues, referring to non-capitalist relations as "pre-capitalist" implies that those relations were already pre-determined to be eventually overcome by capitalist social forms (p. 4).

that it reveals the ways in which attempts to defend so-called traditional practices also point towards qualitatively different, non-capitalist futures.

While Walter Benjamin's work often takes the form of literary and cultural criticism, his thought can only be fully grasped in relation to his views on history, politics, and theology, which are themselves integrally connected to his non-orthodox variant of Marxism (Löwy, 2016, pp. 1-2). Traverso (2021) credits Daniel Bensaïd with discovering the "*political* Benjamin" (p. 218), for whom aesthetics and politics are never separated. In *Marx for our Times*, Bensaïd (2009) argues that Benjamin's relationship to the past is not merely a "duty to remember" (p. 88) what came before, but a material commitment to the struggles of the past and the possibility of realizing the alternate futures contained in those struggles. Rather than a purely nostalgic "false romanticism" (Benjamin, 2011b, p. 103), Benjamin argues for "a new romanticism" (p. 105), a material connection to past social forms appropriated for the present, refashioned through concrete activity and struggle. By not reducing history to a determined and unilinear trajectory, it becomes possible to see alternate possible futures that might emerge from new combinations of non-capitalist social forms which persist to this day (Bensaïd, 2009, p. 88). Benjamin's work, particularly his exploration of urban space, highlights the ways in which elements of the past and present combine in new, uneven, and contradictory ways in a manner that Susan Buck-Morss (1991) compares to "a photomontage or a Cubist collage" (p. 18). Benjamin's technique of montage not only helps to reveal the uneven nature of capitalist modernity but also points towards possible ways of transforming it. By inserting contradictory elements into the modern environment, montage begins to break apart the unilinear image of progress while simultaneously beginning to construct an alternate vision, equally modern but qualitatively different than the one offered by capitalism (p. 77).

Henri Lefebvre's non-orthodox Marxism – what Kristin Ross (2023) calls an "antiproductivist Marxism" (p. 1) – highlights the contradictory and open nature of capitalist totality. Lefebvre moves beyond the moment of production, not to ignore it or to show its irrelevance to contemporary capitalism, but to demonstrate the ways in which capitalist alienation extends beyond the point of production into the realm of everyday life. Against the productivism of orthodox forms of Marxism that view modernity as a linear and progressive evolution, Lefebvre views modernization as an uneven process producing multiple and diverse spatial and temporal relations (Schmid, 2022, pp. xxi-xxii). Like for Marx and our other Romantic Marxists, Lefebvre's dialectal view of modernity is both tragic and utopian. Rather than accepting modern society as an inevitable fact of historical development, Lefebvre (1995) views modernity as a contested concept, a contradictory and uneven totality (p. 3). While modern capitalism strives to obliterate all past social forms, this process occurs unevenly and elements of the past persist in new ways (p. 112). What Lefebvre calls old romanticism is an inward-looking perspective "based on 'I' and 'me'" (p. 17), seeking to preserve an idealized version of the past, an impossible task. By contrast, Lefebvre's new romanticism seeks to make the impossible possible, bringing it into reality (p. 324). It draws from the past, not to return to it, but to repair it and to fully realize a universalist humanism, capable of materially transforming the world by reclaiming control over our concrete activity in new ways. Revolutionary romanticism is indeed utopian, but not in the (purely) imaginative sense. In *The Explosion*, Lefebvre's (1969) analysis of the events of May 1968, he highlights the ways in which new possibilities were opened up from the spontaneous (but not from nowhere) activities of "the possibilists" (p. 57), who sought to go beyond the options offered by both capitalism and the "modernist" (p. 55) reformists. Like Thompson and Benjamin, Lefebvre's revolutionary romanticism is utopian and not-just-

nostalgic, in that it is undeniably forward-facing while simultaneously drawing from concrete social forms, practices, and experiences of the non-capitalist past.

While the work of Thompson, Benjamin, and Lefebvre can be applied to questions of uneven development, colonialism, and imperialism, colonial and imperial relations are not primary concerns for any of these three thinkers, as Stefan Kipfer (2023) points out in relation to Lefebvre specifically (p. 36). Unlike our other three Romantic Marxists, colonialism and imperialism are central to Schwarz's work. Moving to Brazil from Austria at the age of one with his family, Schwarz has lived, studied, and taught in Brazil for much of his life, save for the years in which he studied at Yale University, and between 1968 and 1978 when he fled to Paris to escape the military dictatorship which took power in Brazil following the military coup in 1964 (Brown, 2018, p. 465). Schwarz's work explicitly addresses questions of colonialism and imperialism in the Brazilian context, demonstrating that the application of modern social forms in Brazil did not create new conditions of freedom, but instead re-entrenched interpersonal forms of domination and rule (Durão, 2018, p. 558). Rather than a linear process integrating people into systems of wage-labour and democratic citizenship, modernization in Brazil involved "the continuation of forced or semi-forced labour and a corresponding cultural separation of the poor" (Schwarz, 1992b, p. 14) from the ostensibly universal benefits of capitalism. Liberation in Brazil, therefore, is not to be found either by following the Western path of modernity or by returning to an idealized conception of pre-modern Brazil. Indeed, the latter is an impossibility, since Brazil's development was, from the start, bound up with global dynamics of colonization, imperialism, and the world market (Schwarz, 1992f, p. 103). Against both a purely nostalgic Romanticism, desirous of a return to an imaginary pure Brazil, and the modernist view, which would see Brazil become a copy of Europe or the United States, Schwarz insists on the "possibility of an

alternative, non-bourgeois historical development" (p. 7). For Schwarz, the work of Brazilian novelist Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis exemplifies this perspective, representing a specifically Brazilian type of modernism, influenced by Western literature but interpreting modern thought through a uniquely Brazilian lens. Neither a copy of the European model nor a desire for an impossible return, Machado's not-just-nostalgic cultural form is universal without erasing the particularities of Brazil's colonial and imperial history. As Schwarz (2020) puts it, "in peripheral countries, formal invention doesn't arise from the refusal of metropolitan models, but from their critical testing against local experience, which it transcends and universalizes through this encounter" (p. 35). A communist revolution in Brazil, therefore, will follow a distinct path, combining elements of tradition and modernity to produce an alternative modernism unique to Brazil.

Social Reproduction Theory and Utopianism

SRT and Romanticism

Engaging with the work of Marx and our four Romantic Marxists helps to situate our understanding of communist freedom in a living tradition of non-orthodox Marxism. Rather than viewing communism as merely a transition of economic systems, a result of the linear development of society's productive forces, Romantic Marxism allows us to develop a vision of communist freedom that embodies the full realization of humanity's creative powers and the democratic control over the labour process, a future that is only possible by overcoming capitalist alienation in all its forms. Social Reproduction Theory represents a complementary and contemporary expression of the non-Stalinist Marxist tradition. Both a lively site of theoretical

debate within Marxism and one of the most militant areas of political struggle today, social reproductive politics have become central to Marxist theory and strategy in recent years. Like Romantic Marxism, SRT insists that overcoming capitalism requires a total critique of alienation and the complete transformation of all social relations. Social reproductive struggles point beyond what is currently possible under capitalism, imagining and creating new ways of satisfying human needs and desires. They are expressions of the utopian vision of communist freedom, which insists on the possibility of alternate futures not determined by that which is offered by capitalism.

But what might SRT, an approach emerging from Marxist feminism, have to gain from even a selective recovery of past social forms, which were often embedded in patriarchal and racist relations of domination? If modern capitalist society eliminates all traditional forms of domination, as Marx and Engels (2002) argue in *The Communist Manifesto*, it would follow that Marxist feminism should reject all forms of romantic nostalgia and maintain a purely forward-facing view of women's liberation through the full realization of the freedoms made possible by bourgeois society. Indeed, this is the position taken by what Susan Ferguson (2020b) calls "equality feminism" (p. 23), a perspective grounded in the notion that women's oppression emerges primarily from societal barriers to women attaining the same levels of freedom as men, and that these barriers are largely the result of patriarchal laws and customs (p. 30). For equality feminists, freedom from oppression occurs through a process of modernization, where women are progressively incorporated into systems of citizenship and wage-labour, giving them political and economic independence from men. However, Marxist feminists remain critical of the notion that capitalist society represents the path to emancipation. Rather than viewing wage-labour and citizenship as inevitable outcomes of modern progress, Marxist feminism insists that capitalism

is an economically and politically unequal system based around the ongoing oppression of women, both at the point of production and beyond it (p. 97).

Other Marxist approaches to social reproduction have done important work connecting the oppression of women with the colonial and imperial spread of capitalism. As Silvia Federici (2014) shows in *Caliban and the Witch*, the alienation of workers from their labour was part of a long process, a central part of which was alienating women from their bodies (p. 135). Patriarchal and colonial violence were central to this process, including the dehumanization of colonized subjects and their forcible separation from the ways of living that sustained them. This required the subordination of concrete and differential rhythms of non-capitalist ways of life to the time of capitalist production. The imposition of World Standard Time occurred, in part, through forms of colonialism and imperialism, attempts to subordinate pre-colonial forms of life to the logic of value, as seen in the British colonization of Australia (Martineau, 2016, pp. 155-159). But while the violence of primitive accumulation laid the foundation for capitalist development, patriarchal oppression did not disappear with the spread of capitalist relations (Federici, 2014, p. 16). Instead, gendered oppression continues to underpin capitalist accumulation in new ways, where women's work in the home ensures a continuous supply of labour-power for capital (Vogel, 2013, p. 150). This process is further differentiated along racial lines, where the paid domestic labour of racialized women acting as housewives allows for rich white women to climb the corporate ladder (Mies, 2014, pp. 120-127). At the same time, informal labour performed by women in the global South allows women in the global North to act as consumers of cheaper commodities. Remaining attentive to these "legacies of primitive accumulation" (Jaffe, 2024b, p. 210n55) reveals the ways in which capital's logic of value is

expressed in uneven ways and continues to be constituted by patriarchy, racism, and other oppressive relations.

But while capital remains haunted by the history of primitive accumulation, other spectres of non-capitalist relations persist today in the form of concrete egalitarian practices, ways of living and struggling that have survived the violent process of capitalist accumulation. While capital seeks to subordinate all forms of life to the logic of value production, non-capitalist lifeways continue to persist in subversive ways, in the everyday lives of women and indigenous peoples struggling to maintain a connection to each other, the land, and their own activity (Federici, 2014, p. 177).[13] For these communities, the spread of capitalist relations does not represent liberation but the destruction of the communal and egalitarian practices that sustained them (p. 72). Federici describes the forms of resistance that occurred in response to land enclosures, including riots and sabotage (p. 73), as well as the ongoing practice of the witches' Sabbat in defiance of the imposition of capitalist work and time discipline (p. 177). Such forms of resistance persist today in the shape of indigenous struggles against the colonial imposition of abstract labour-time, both through militant anti-colonial opposition and in communal ways of life. For instance, ongoing Aboriginal protests against British colonization in Australia are accompanied by efforts to maintain cyclical and seasonal understandings of time against the colonial imposition of abstract labour-time (Martineau, 2016, pp. 155-159). As Susan Ferguson (2020b) argues, while capitalist alienation extends beyond the labour process into all aspects of

[13] Other traditions have shown the connection between anti-capitalist practices and non-capitalist social forms. See C. L. R. James (1963) and Frantz Fanon (2021) for examples from the Black Radical tradition. See also José Esteban Muñoz (2009) for a queer utopian perspective which draws selectively from the past. While this dissertation does not directly engage with these traditions, it shares the utopian spirit of locating non-capitalist practices as part of a future-oriented project of societal transformation. Recent books from within SRT have conducted similar work. See David McNally (2025) for an engagement with the Black Radical tradition and Alan Sears (2025a) for a combination of Marxism and queer theory.

life, it can never fully subsume all forms of concrete activity to the logic of value, nor are the concrete times of life ever fully subordinated to the abstract time of production (p. 129).

The Concrete Times of Social Reproduction

Concrete counter-times are a product of the concrete forms of activity of human beings which persist under capitalism. The tension between concrete human activity and abstract labour is what Marx (1990) calls the dual character of labour (p. 131). Both use-value and value find their origin in labour, but while the production of use-values requires specific types of human activity, the production of value abstracts from these qualitatively distinct forms of labour. However, while use-value has been subordinated to the law of value, Marx insists that concrete labour, that which produces use-values, persists under capitalism (p. 133). Therefore, while a commodity only has value if it is also a use-value, a product of labour can be useful without being a commodity, without being productive of value. This occurs whenever someone directly fulfills a social need through their own activity. Social reproductive activities that do not produce capitalist value, including much labour performed in the home as well as public teaching, represents examples of use-values that are not productive of value (Ferguson, 2020b, p. 126). The dual character of labour refers to the tension between the essentially human capacity to act in and on the world that exists in all societies on the one hand, and the specific form that labour takes under capitalism on the other (McNally, 2004, p. 198).

SRT attempts to disentangle the forms of labour that are directly productive of value – that which produces commodities for sale on the market – and the types of human activity that are not productive in the capitalist sense, but which are nevertheless linked to processes of value production, in that they reproduce the social conditions necessary for capitalist reproduction (Ferguson, 2020b, p. 123). Social reproductive labour not always performed for the market. It is

often unwaged, occurring in spaces outside of the workplace (cooking and cleaning activities performed in the home, for example), and even when waged it is often not commodified (teaching in public schools, for instance). Of course, social reproductive labour is not fully autonomous from the logic of value, and social reproductive workers are constrained by the material limits of their access to wages and their available free time (p. 126). However, as Lise Vogel (2013) reminds us, human beings are not produced as commodities (p. 144). Capital leaves the reproduction of labour-power largely up to the working-class themselves, meaning that social reproductive labour is therefore somewhat autonomous from capitalist forms of work discipline (Ferguson, 2020b, p. 129). This degree of autonomy allows social reproductive workers to more easily direct their life-making labour towards the reproduction of human beings and the creation of a flourishing human community, rather than the production of surplus-value (Bhattacharya, 2017a, p. 81). In the process, they begin to create new possibilities of meeting human needs and desires, ones which go beyond the alienating logic of capital (Sears, 2025a, p. 154).

The persistence of concrete life-making activity represents the basis of the possibility of overcoming capitalism. By reclaiming control over our conscious and creative activity we become capable of directing our labour towards the benefit of our own communities, rather than the reproduction of capital. Utopian feminisms have emphasized the need to create communal forms of living as a way of both producing more leisure time in the present and prefiguring a post-capitalist society by establishing non-capitalist "outsides" (Ferguson, 2020b, p. 56). Dolores Hayden (1978), for example, describes the efforts of utopian feminists such as Marie Stevens Howland to create communities in which domestic labour would be collectivized through communal kitchens and child-care facilities (p. 278). For utopian feminists, the socialization of "women's work" must be central to any vision of a socialist future. Such utopian traditions have

been carried forward by queer and anti-colonial perspectives which attempt to prefigure alternatives to capitalism through "a creative engagement with the palimpsestic counter-archives of the past" (Haritaworn, 2022, p. 84). These alternatives represent concrete counter-times to the abstract time of capital and contain the possibility of alternate non-capitalist futures.

While SRT also emphasizes the need to create new ways of working, living, and struggling together, it places primary emphasis on the struggle *against* capitalist social relations, rather than efforts to create alternatives *outside* of capitalism (Ferguson, 2020b, p. 133). As the authors of *Feminism for the 99%* argue, the struggle against capital by way of the social reproductive strike is an effort to build community and working-class power across productive and unproductive sectors of capitalist society, as well as a way of creating a space and time where workers can begin to develop new ways of relating to each other and the world (Arruzza et al., 2019, p. 10). While these new social forms will certainly look different than what existed in the past, they might also draw from non-capitalist ways of living and organizing that were cooperatively organized, reviving material infrastructure and institutions of previous generations (Sears, 2014, p. 111).

Social reproductive struggles, therefore, are part of a broader effort to completely transform present social relations by regaining control over our labour and, therefore, our time. It is only by reclaiming control over the time in which we labour that we will be able to direct our social powers towards human flourishing rather than profit. Realizing a truly liberatory vision of communist freedom can only occur through a process of reclaiming full control over the time of life, allowing for a marked increase in the amount of socially available free time (Hudis, 2023, p. 9). This does not mean that work would no longer exist or that a communist society would no longer need to engage in some forms of necessary labour (Hägglund, 2020, p. 323). Nor does it

mean that "play" would be privileged over "work" (though as we will see later, the playful activity of children blurs the line between work and play, in that it can be both productive activity and excessive of the capitalist logic of value production). A communist society would not abolish work but fully *realize* the human capacity to labour, broadly understood as the conscious and self-governed creative activity of human beings living in community with each other and the natural world (Sears, 2025a, p. 4). However, while this vision of communist society – which follows from Marx's own conceptions of what a post-capitalist society might entail – requires the *development* of human productive capacities, or our social labour powers, any project of communist freedom emerging from the present condition must reckon with the *limitations* of that development in relation to the ecological crisis, amongst other constraints (Hudis, 2013, p. 214). Some of those limits will be examined in the chapters that follow, but exactly what a future society will look like can only be decided by those who build it (p. 211).[14]

Because social reproductive labour maintains a greater degree of autonomy from the control of capitalist clock-time, social reproductive struggles are strategically important to a project of communist freedom which seeks to reclaim the time in which we labour and direct it towards human needs, rather than profit. Due to its distinct temporality, the fact that social reproductive labour retains its life-making character in ways that value producing labour does not, the moment of social reproduction is more open to struggles seeking to regain control over our labour-power and, therefore, over our free time. Central to SRT's strategic intervention is the importance of social reproductive workers, those who perform the tasks necessary for the

[14] While I hope to offer some suggestions of what communism might look like, this dissertation is not primarily about tactical or strategic decisions around how a post-capitalist society will be organized. Such a process will undoubtedly require large-scale coordination across local, regional, and global scales. A global communist society would involve the creation and expansion of democratic decision-making organizations in a way that allows for both local autonomy and global cooperation. However, the development of such a society will only be possible if those new forms of organization are determined by the individuals and communities who build it.

reproduction of the working class such as cooking, cleaning, education, and health care. This is, in part, because social reproduction strikes have been some of the most militant and effective in recent times (Moody, 2017, p. 39). But it is also due to SRT's theoretical insight that the reproduction of the working class is both necessary for capital's reproduction, because capital needs workers in order to produce value, and opposed to it, because by reproducing themselves as human beings workers begin to realize a degree of self-control over their own labour.

Production, Social Reproduction, and Working-Class Power

Centring the activity of non-productive workers allows for an expansive conception of working-class power. For SRT, class is a historical, processual, and social relation that is itself constituted by other relations, including race, gender, and sexuality (Jaffe, 2020, p. 86). This goes beyond traditional Marxist conceptions of class and requires a strategy inclusive of, amongst others, the experiences of women, people of colour, and unwaged and informal workers.[15] Certain structuralist conceptions of workers' power argue that there has been a move away from a properly materialist perspective in favour of a so-called "cultural turn" (Chibber, 2024, p. 4). This shift, according to Vivek Chibber (2017), has reduced class to merely one of many social factors, obscuring its unique quality as "an obdurate structural fact" (para. 2). While Chibber (2024) accepts that agency has a role to play in the development and struggle of working-class organizations that contribute to class formation (p. 126), his insistence that structural factors remain primary and independent from cultural ones leads towards a view of class as structurally determined, with only some room for variation. This perspective understands the primacy of

[15] As Henry Bernstein (2010) shows, working-class people in the global South often secure their own means of reproduction through diverse combinations of wage-labour, self-employment, and subsistence activities, taking place across both urban and rural locations (p. 111). Rather than limiting our conception of what constitutes a worker to those fully incorporated into the wage labour market, it is important to understand how various forms of labour and exploitation have been transformed and integrated under global capitalism.

workers' power as being derived mainly from their structural position in strategically located industries. Erik Olin Wright (2000) contrasts this "structural power," that which "results simply from the location of workers within the economic system," with "'associational' power" (p. 962), derived from the collective power of working-class organizations. While "structural power *may* itself influence associational power" (p. 962, emphasis mine), Wright shows that associational power is not entirely determined by a worker's location in relation to production (pp. 984-985). Chibber's (2024) use of these concepts, however, removes class structure from its relationship with other factors and concludes that "it turns out that in the case of class, structure enjoys an explanatory priority over culture" (p. 41). Politically, this results in Chibber insisting that class formation is determined by the structural location of workers in relation to production, thereby limiting the scope of political (or cultural) demands that the working-class might engage with to their "material interests" (p. 72), which Chibber calculates according to a rational cost-benefit analysis.

In his book *On New Terrain*, Kim Moody (2017) examines the structural transformations that have occurred under neoliberalism and insists that targeting strategic sites of value production remains central to the possibility of reviving leftist struggle (pp. 59-60). However, his conception of structural power is more processual and relational than Chibber's, and considers the integral role of class struggle, class composition, and class formation in the evolution of structures themselves. Such changes are dynamically related to class struggle and the changing composition of the working class. While he points to new concentrations of both fixed capital and workers – specifically in logistic centres – he emphasizes the need for connections with community-based organizing outside the workplace (p. 86). As Katy Fox-Hodess (2023) argues in a response to John Womack Jr., these forms of associational power are not merely derived and

determined by structural, or strategic, power (p. 84). Answering a question about Wright's distinction between structural and associational power, Womack Jr. (2023) states that "associational power is a result of strategic power" (p. 31). While Womack Jr. agrees that associational power is necessary as a way of gaining moral and political support for working-class struggles, he insists that it is "a derivative power" (p. 31), determined by the structural position of workers in relation to production. However, as Fox-Hodess and Camilo Santibáñez Rebolledo (2020) show through a study of dockworkers in Europe and Latin America, the ability of dockworkers to employ their strategic power based on their structural position is related to forms of associational power (p. 224). This was the case in Portugal in 2013, when structurally essential dockworkers relied on relationships with other, less strategic, workers, including unemployed community members, to help exert political pressure on their employer and the Portuguese state (Fox-Hodess, 2023, p. 85).

A historical, processual, and relational view of class which understands it to be co-constituted by systems of oppression, including patriarchy and racism, is central to the strategic intervention of SRT (Bhattacharya, 2017a, p. 88). The experience of class is lived through other social relations, including gender, race, and sexuality. These experiences, taken together, make up what we see as the working class today (Camfield, 2004-2005, p. 426). Thus, rather than understanding extra-economic factors as merely sites of diversity external to class structure, it is necessary to view them as internally related to, and constitutive of, capitalist class relations (Roberts, 2022, p. 61). There is a need to think and act beyond the specific struggle between capital and wage labour, not because class struggle in the workplace is no longer relevant, but because opposing the totality of capitalist relations necessarily includes confronting the systems of oppression that make up the experience of class exploitation (Lebowitz, 2003, p. 184). Indeed,

the insistence that class struggle go beyond the workplace goes back to Marx and Engels, who consistently argue that working-class organizations must be rooted in, and build connections with, the communities of which they are a part.

The Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is an effort to bring the theoretical framework of Romantic Marxism into an explicit relationship with the urgency of SRT's political intervention, which begins from the view that the central contradiction of capitalism can be found in the moment of social reproduction due to its centrality to the reproduction of both capitalism and human beings. For this reason, the following chapter (Chapter 2) begins with an examination of the logic of capital before highlighting the element that was not developed fully by Marx: the social reproduction of workers themselves. Beginning with this central argument of SRT, I then move to other non-capitalist social forms that have not been fully subordinated to capital's logic. Centring SRT in Chapter 2 allows each of the later chapters (Chapters 3, 4, and 5) to build on the work done in Chapter 2. Each of these chapters begins with Marx's own work before situating his analysis within the framework of Romantic Marxism and engaging with those themes in the work of our four Romantic Marxists. They then conclude by integrating Romantic Marxism with SRT's theoretical and political framework. Moving in this way allows for the analysis to follow from Marx, while also building and expanding on his work in a way that contributes to the rich tradition of non-orthodox Marxism. Bringing SRT in at the end of each chapter serves to highlight the ways in which SRT's theory and politics can be understood as expressions of the Romantic Marxist framework, while also infusing the latter with an explicit anti-oppression and anti-colonial politics. The concluding chapter (Chapter 6) culminates by examining some of the

most militant, effective, and urgent political movements of our time through the frameworks of Romantic Marxism and SRT.

The following two chapters begin at a high level of theoretical abstraction, interrogating the relationship between the totalizing tendency of the abstract time of capital on the one hand, and the concrete, multiple, and uneven times that exist within (and against) the contradictory unity of global capitalism on the other. Chapter 2 examines the circuits of reproduction in *Capital*, highlighting the ways in which the abstract and linear time of production is interrupted by the concrete times of circulation and – central to SRT's theoretical and strategic intervention – the reproduction of labour-power, or the moment of social reproduction. The chapter follows Marx's dialectical method of moving between different levels of abstraction and concretization in order to situate the general logic of capitalist reproduction within concrete and historical social relations. Chapter 3 follows from Marx's dialectical method outlined in Chapter 2 and interrogates the orthodox Marxist conception of unilinear history. Rather than viewing history as an evolutionary progression of modes of production, determined by the development of society's productive forces, Romantic Marxism highlights the concrete counter-times that persist in the form of non-capitalist social relations which have not been fully subordinated to the logic of value. Uncovering these non-synchronous moments helps to reveal the possibility of alternate modernisms that have been, so far, blocked by global capitalism but might still be recovered as part of a project of communist freedom.

The next two chapters begin to elaborate the political stakes of the theoretical perspective developed in the previous two. Chapter 4 examines Marx's theory of alienation and argues that overcoming capitalism will only occur when alienation has been eliminated in all its forms. Highlighting the fact that the content of Marx's critique of alienation persists throughout his

entire body of work reveals the ethical and utopian elements of his critique of capitalism. While overcoming alienation must begin from the material conditions in the present, it can also draw, selectively, from forms of activity, life, and struggle of a less alienated past. Chapter 5 defines communist freedom as the process of reclaiming control over our labour and, therefore, the time in which we live our lives. Remaining committed to revolutionary communism requires a type of faith in the ability of ordinary people to democratically organize their own concrete activity and, in the process, create new ways of meeting their needs and desires. The process of revolution will also draw from infrastructure, organizational institutions, and forms of struggle of the past, transforming and appropriating them in new ways to be applied to our current movements.

Chapter 6 will conclude by examining some of the most urgent political concerns of the present moment, including the problem of the far-right, the rise of militant social reproductive strikes in the past decade, and the increasingly pressing need for a response to the ecological crisis. While Romantic critique of capitalist modernity pairs fruitfully with Marxism, it can also be used to mobilize counter-revolutionary forces and appeals to the past have been used to rally growing right-wing sentiment. However, revolutionary forms of Romanticism can be found in recent expressions of non-nationalist anti-imperialist struggles, social reproductive strikes, and ecological movements opposed to political reaction in all its forms. Rather than appealing to traditional notions of the family or aristocratic forms of rule, non-national anti-imperialism, social reproductive struggles, and the movement for degrowth communism represent efforts to create new, liberatory, and democratic ways of fulfilling our needs and desires in egalitarian and sustainable ways. But in order to begin to articulate such a vision, we must first understand the logic of capital.

Chapter 2 - The Circuits of Reproduction: Capital's Logic, Social Reproduction, and Non-Synchronous Social Forms

> *Our concern is rather to discover and present the concrete forms which grow out of the* process of capital's movement considered as a whole*. In their actual movement, capitals confront one another in certain concrete forms, and, in relation to these, both the shape capital assumes in the immediate production process and its shape in the process of circulation appear merely as particular moments* – Karl Marx (1991, p. 117).

> *The problem, as we have sufficiently argued, is to move from the circuits of capital to capitalism; from a highly conceptualised and abstracted mode of production, within which determinism appears as absolute, to historical determinations as the exerting of pressures, as a* logic of process *within a larger (and sometimes countervailing) process* – E. P. Thompson (2008, p. 163).

> *The production of labor power then takes place outside the immediate circuit of capital but remains essential for it. Within* capital's circuit*, labor power is a means of production for capital's reproduction, or valorization. But within* wage labor's circuit*, the worker consumes commodities as use values (food, clothing, housing, education) in order to reproduce herself. The second circuit is a process of* production of self for the worker or a process of self transformation – Tithi Bhattacharya (2017a, p. 81).

Introduction

While the logic of capital exists as a general tendency, it is expressed in historically and socially specific ways. In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx abstracts from the historical development of capitalism in order to uncover the logic of capitalist reproduction (Lebowitz, 2009, p. 84). It is only through such a process of abstraction that Marx is able to move beyond the surface level of appearances. However, while *Capital* remains focused on capitalism's reproductive logic at a high level of abstraction, it consistently highlights the concrete social relations which make up capitalist totality, including class struggle, the law, competition between capitals, and technology. Marx's dialectical method moves between different levels of

abstraction and concretization in order to reveal the counter-tendencies, contradictions, and uneven dynamics internal to capitalist totality.

Romantic Marxism emphasizes the existence of these countervailing processes. Not merely another set of structural factors opposed to capital's laws of motion, capital's counter-tendencies are located in the experiences and activities of the working class as it actually exists (Thompson, 2008, p. 153). By centring forms of resistance to capital's effort to subsume all forms of concrete human activity to the value relation, Romantic Marxism highlights the ways in which workers' activity causes capital's development to occur in differential ways, taking paths not entirely determined by capital's laws of motion. Thompson's insistence on a logic of process in the epigraph to this chapter helps us to remain attentive to the dialectical relationship between capital's logical tendencies and its counter-tendencies, including developing and changing forms of working-class struggle. Rather than a linear process of development, the contradictory character of capital's logic is expressed unevenly with "progress here, regression there" (Marx, 1991, p. 369). This is, in part, due to the uneven way global capitalism has incorporated and transformed non-capitalist social forms by way of colonialism and imperialism and, in part, due to ongoing resistance to the imposition of capitalist social relations (García-Quesada, 2022, p. 92).

While *Capital* is an effort to theorize capitalism as a unified whole (Tombazos, 2014, p. 3), it remains attentive to the concrete social relations which make up the totality (p. 6). However, there is an important element not fully developed by Marx that remains essential to capital's reproduction: the physical and social reproduction of the working class. Drawing on the important work of Michael Lebowitz (2003), SRT identifies this tension in the circuit of the

reproduction of labour-power.[16] Under capitalism, workers are reproduced both as sellers of the commodity labour-power and as human beings. By interrogating the relationship between the reproduction of capital and the reproduction of workers, SRT uncovers the ways in which the two are intertwined, even as some elements of social reproduction remain outside of capital's reproductive logic. Doing so highlights the main contradiction of capitalism as that between capital's reproduction and the worker's reproduction, between the subordination of human labour to capitalist production and the self-determined activity of workers directed towards their own development.

Rather than an abstract and determinist logic, the three volumes of *Capital* demonstrate the internal but uneven unity of capital's circuits of production and circulation (Tombazos, 2014, p. 4). While Marx (1990) remains largely focused on production, as this is where surplus-value is created,[17] he insists that the moment of production is itself mediated by circulation, in that surplus-value can only be realized as money through the exchange of commodities on the market (p. 253). Likewise, circulation is mediated by production, in that exchange can only occur once the production process is complete (Marx, 1992, p. 118). While capital's tendency is to reduce

[16] Michael Lebowitz (2003) refers to the missing circuit in *Capital* as the circuit of wage-labour (p. 65), though he acknowledges that the reproduction of labour-power goes beyond the wage relation. It is for this reason that David McNally (2024) proposes that the circuit of workers' reproduction would be better referred to as the "circuit of labor power" (p. 462).

[17] This point is, as Michael Heinrich (2021) points out, debated between Marxists who view value as being produced in the act of production "independent of exchange" (p. 67) and those who argue that value can only be said to exist as a result of the exchange of commodities. Heinrich argues for the latter position, that value is created "as a result of production *and* exchange" (p. 67), since it is only through exchange that socially necessary labour-time, the measure of value, comes to be (p. 71). However, while Heinrich is right that the moment of exchange is critical for Marx, since value must be *realized* through exchange, it is only in production that value is actually produced. As Fred Moseley (2023) argues in his critique of Heinrich's interpretation of the first chapter of *Volume I*, Chapter 1 of *Capital* abstracts from exchange and focuses on the commodity as a result of capitalist production (p. 53). While it is true that the value of a commodity can only be expressed in relation to another, this is not the same as value only existing through exchange (p. 93). As Moseley argues, a commodity comes to possess value through the expenditure of abstract human labour-power during production for the market (pp. 66-67). As such, value exists independently of the act of exchange, but is only expressed and realized through the latter (p. 60).

both production and circulation time as much as possible, in order to maximize the amount of surplus-value produced and realized as money, it consistently encounters "interruptions" (p. 118) in the process. These roadblocks are only increased as capital expands to a world scale, where national borders, competition between capitals, and new spatial and temporal dynamics come into play (Marx, 1991, p. 117). Understanding the process of global capitalist development requires centring the colonial and imperial processes that have been, and continue to be, necessary for capitalist reproduction (McNally, 2024, p. 463). While SRT shows the ways in which concrete human activity persists against capital's logic of value, Romantic Marxism endeavours to uncover the social relations of the non-capitalist past that persist in various ways, internal to contemporary capitalism yet not fully subordinated to its logic. Both SRT and Romantic Marxism argue that concrete social forms of life and activity continue to underpin capitalist reproduction, and that such forms contain the possibility of being redirected towards a flourishing human society rather than profit. The circuit of social reproduction and non-synchronous elements of the past both represent potential concrete counter-times to the abstract time of global capitalist production.

The first section of this chapter outlines the logical sequence of *Capital*. While Marx abstracts from the actual historical process of capitalism's development in order to uncover its general tendencies, he consistently moves between levels of abstraction to illustrate the contradictory and uneven nature of capitalist totality. The second part examines the circuits of production, circulation, and reproduction in *Capital*, engaging with recent Marxist works on time to understand this uneven and contradictory unity, first at a national and then global scale. Rather than reducing capitalist development to the abstract unfolding of a set of laws, this section highlights the structural yet contingent ways in which colonialism and imperialism have been

central to the reproduction of global capitalism. The third section builds on the previous one and argues that while Marx acknowledges the necessity of the worker's social reproduction to the reproduction of capital, he does not fully develop this point. By expanding on Marx's method, SRT reveals that the circuit of the reproduction of labour-power – the moment of social reproduction – represents a potential limit to the reproduction of capital. The final section of the chapter will engage with our four Romantic Marxists in order to better understand capital's logic, the relationship between theory and history, and the importance of remaining attentive to the concrete social relations that underpin capitalist reproduction.

Capital's Laws of Motion

The Logic of Capital

Instead of a fully closed and determined system, Marx understands capitalism to be an interrelated set of social relations, a unity of moments that make up the whole. While Marx begins from production, he does not view it as separate from other factors. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx (1993) shows that while distribution, exchange, and consumption are all determined by production, production "*in its one-sided form*" (p. 99) is similarly determined by those other relations. By this Marx means that productive relations represent a social totality, a unity of which distribution, exchange, consumption, and, indeed, production (in the particular sense) are all parts. These "moments" (p. 98) that make up the totality of capitalist production are each made up of a set of historical social relations, including the form of private property, political system, and legal relations, amongst others, as well as the specific relationship between production, distribution, exchange, and consumption. Viewing capitalism in this way is what

Bertell Ollman (1977) refers to as the philosophy of internal relations, where each part is internally related to the others and the whole (see Chapter 3). Derek Sayer (1989) follows Ollman in showing that Marx did not view social factors as atomistic and isolated categories but as parts of a dynamic and mutually determining totality of relations (p. 20).

But in order to uncover capitalism's laws of motion at a high level of abstraction, Marx must ignore (at first) the ways in which capitalism developed historically, the existence of many capitals, and, as we will see below, the reproduction of workers. The logical sequence of *Capital*, therefore, does not follow the actual historical trajectory of capitalism's development (Lebowitz, 2003, p. 58). It is only through a process of abstraction that Marx is able to uncover capital's underlying logic. But Marx was not content to remain at such a high level of abstraction. Indeed, his intent was always to discover the real movement of capital (Ollman, 1990, p. 32). To do so requires bringing actual historical relations back into the analysis. Thus, Marx's dialectical method moves back and forth between different levels of abstraction and concretization, comparing the laws of motion uncovered in *Capital* to concrete reality, modifying theoretical concepts along the way (Lebowitz, 2009, p. 202). As Marx (1991) states in *Volume III*, he is attempting to "discover and present the concrete forms which grow out of the *process of capital's movement considered as a whole*. In their actual movement, capitals confront one another in certain concrete forms, and, in relation to these, both the shape capital assumes in the immediate production process and its shape in the process of circulation appear merely as particular moments" (p. 117). Not content to understand capitalism as an abstract concept, Marx moves to the concrete examination of social reality, not merely to validate his theoretical discoveries but because concrete forms – including the relations between many capitals noted in the passage above, the various expressions of class struggle Marx examines throughout *Volume I*,

and the "interruptions" in capital's circuits that we will consider below – shape the logic of capital as a whole.

In the first chapter of the first volume of *Capital*, Marx (1990) begins with an analysis of the commodity: "The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an 'immense collection of commodities'; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form. Our investigation therefore begins with the analysis of the commodity" (p. 125). *Capital* begins from capital's appearance – an immense collection of commodities – but through rigorous investigation of the commodity form, Marx is able to get behind this surface-level appearance, revealing the social relations that actually underpin the capitalist mode of production (Ollman, 1990, p. 35). To do so requires going beyond investigating any one particular expression of capital (Lebowitz, 2009, p. 7). Remaining at the level of individual capitals or individual workers, as traditional political economy does, obscures the movement of the working class and capital as a whole. Through a process of abstraction, Marx investigates the nature of the commodity form by isolating and separating it out from all of the other moments that make up social reality. This process of abstraction allows him to uncover first the contradictory nature of the commodity – the dual character of labour contained in the relationship between use-value and exchange-value, to be examined below – and then the logic of capitalist reproduction that follows from this initial discovery (p. 83).

The value of a commodity can only be expressed through its relationship to another commodity, which is to say that value can only be realized in exchange (Lebowitz, 2003, p. 59). While exchange initially occurred through the trading of commodities of various sorts, gold eventually "began to serve as universal equivalent in narrower or wider fields. As soon as it had won a monopoly of this position in the expression of value for the world of commodities, it

became the money commodity" (Marx, 1990, p. 163). While, as we will see in more detail later, commodities must fulfill a real social need and so must contain qualitatively distinct use-values in order to be exchanged, exchange can only happen between quantitative equivalents. It is in this context that the money form arises:

> Money necessarily crystallizes out of the process of exchange, in which different products of labour are in fact equated with each other, and thus converted into commodities. The historical broadening and deepening of the phenomenon of exchange develops the opposition between use-value and value which is latent in the nature of the commodity. The need to give an external expression to this opposition for the purposes of commercial intercourse produces the drive towards an independent form of value, which finds neither rest nor peace until an independent form has been achieved by the differentiation of commodities into commodities and money. (p. 181)

Money, therefore, becomes an end in itself, driving the process of commodity exchange for the purposes of realizing more money (Lebowitz, 2003, p. 59). But for money to be realized, useful commodities must still be exchanged. And so the commodity form and the money form are revealed to be two sides of the unity of capital: "In the velocity of circulation, therefore, there appears the fluid unity of the antithetical and complementary phases, i.e. the transformation of the commodities from the form of utility into the form of value and their re-transformation in the reverse direction, or the two processes of sale and purchase" (Marx, 1990, p. 217). From that point on, the entire process of exchange is driven by the desire to realize value in the form of money, expressed in the formula M-C-M', where M' represents the realization of more money through the sale of commodities (C) (p. 257).

However, a narrow focus on exchange cannot explain how more value is produced (Lebowitz, 2003, p. 60). It is for this reason that Marx (1990) insists that we "leave this noisy sphere, where everything takes place on the surface and in full view of everyone, and follow them into the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there hangs the notice 'No admittance except on business'. Here we shall see, not only how capital produces, but how capital is itself produced" (pp. 279-280). It is only in the moment of production that surplus-value is created, and the majority of the first volume of *Capital* is dedicated to describing the production process in great detail. But because exchange is necessary for surplus-value to be realized as money, production and circulation represent, for Marx, the two sides of capitalist totality (p. 60). Marx (1990) describes the process of capitalist reproduction as follows:

> The transformation of the sum of money into means of production and labour-power is the first phase of the movement undergone by the quantum of value which is going to function as capital. It takes place in the market, within the sphere of circulation. The second phase of the movement, the process of production, is complete as soon as the means of production have been converted into commodities whose value exceeds that of their component parts, and therefore contains the capital originally advanced plus a surplus-value. These commodities must then be thrown back into the sphere of circulation. They must be sold, their value must be realized in money, this money must be transformed once again into capital, and so on, again and again. This cycle, in which the same phases are continually gone through in succession, forms the circulation of capital. (p. 709)

The circuit of capital's reproduction can therefore be seen in the formula M-C(Mp, Lp) … P … C'-M'. Money (M) is used to purchase the means of production (Mp) and labour-power (Lp)

required to begin the production process (P), where surplus-value is created by the production of new commodities (C'), which are then sold for an amount of money greater than the initial investment (M') (Lebowitz, 2003, p. 60). As Marx (1992) states in Volume II of *Capital*,

> all the premises of the process appear as its result, as premises produced by the process itself. Each moment appears as a point of departure, of transit, and of return. The total process presents itself as the unity of the process of production and the process of circulation; the production process is the mediator of the circulation process, and vice versa. (p. 181)

This is so because, as we will see below, the circuit of capital could also begin with production (P), mediated by circulation (C'-M') (Lebowitz, 2003, p. 60). From the perspective of capital's reproduction, each part of the reproductive circuit of capital is internal to it and, in this sense, the logic of *Capital* reveals a closed circuit of reproduction (p. 61).

The Relationship Between Theory and History

Marx's process of abstracting from actual historical processes in order to understand the logic of capitalist reproduction has led some Marxists to insist on the need to separate theory from history in order to understand capitalism at all. G. A. Cohen's (2001) interpretation of Marx's theory of history is premised on the notion that the development of society's productive forces is the primary driver of world history (p. 162). This view is based on two theoretical principles, what Cohen calls "the primacy thesis" and "the *development* thesis" (p. 134). The primacy thesis holds that the productive forces of society explain the productive relations of that society "to a far greater extent than vice versa" (p. 134), while the development thesis assumes that productive forces "tend to develop throughout history" (p. 134). The development thesis will

be interrogated further in the next chapter so, for now, I will only address it insofar as Cohen uses it to support the primacy thesis. Cohen argues that the primacy thesis is asserted by Marx, mainly in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* where Marx (1978b) states that "in the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production *which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces*" (p. 4, emphasis mine). Cohen (2001) takes this to mean that "relations are as they are *because* they are appropriate to productive development" (p. 136). The development of productive forces occurs, for Cohen, because people are inherently rational beings who tend to improve their material conditions by developing more sophisticated ways of meeting their needs through the development of their productive powers (p. 153). These productive forces determine society's relations of production, the latter of which are "revolutionized" (p. 160) when they no longer correspond to the level of the former. Capitalism emerges, for Cohen, because it "alone is fit to develop productive power from moderately high to very high levels" (p. 181). Thus, Cohen's theory of history assumes that historical change is determined by the development of society's productive forces and the corresponding transformations in productive relations. For Cohen, capitalism represents the only economic system capable of developing society's productive forces to a particular level (p. 198).

While Cohen's theory holds that social relations are largely determined by the level of development of the productive forces of society, he does not entirely ignore historical variations that have existed at various moments. Indeed, he acknowledges that "the economic structure is, then, variously implicated in movement and process" (Cohen, 2001, p. 86), including demographic changes within a constant economic structure and shifts in class composition. However, he insists that "to represent the structure as itself a process is to violate both the

concept of structure and the intent of historical materialism" (p. 86). In other words, the concept of economic structure must be abstracted from historical process in order to properly understand and explain the dynamics of capitalism. Thus, while Cohen acknowledges that history is more complex and diverse than the theoretical model which he develops to represent it, he nevertheless assumes that theory and history can be understood as entirely distinct spheres. Recently, Søren Mau (2023) has made a similar argument that "the claim that the logic of capital is inseparable from its historical development means that we cannot even form a concept of the logic of capital; the only thing we can do is to record the facts of the empirical totality of capitalist development" (pp. 169-170). While he does not share Cohen's technologically determinist view of historical materialism which I will interrogate further in the next chapter, Mau's statement follows Cohen in marking a clear separation between theory and history. Mau is certainly much more attentive than Cohen to the ways in which relations such as politics, culture, and the law are not epiphenomenal to the economic structure. But both insist that it is possible to separate capitalism's economic power from these other moments. Mau argues that parsing out capital's logic from history is necessary at a high level of abstraction in order to build a theory at all, but this obscures the fact that capitalism's economic logic has been intertwined with non-economic relations from its inception (McNally, 2017, p. 107). While Mau (2023) accepts that "there is a strong case to be made for the view that capital has an inherent and necessary tendency to nurture and reproduce social differences" (p. 171), he does not meaningfully attempt to theorize this relationship in order to understand the ways in which economic power has itself been shaped by other social relations. Instead, he simply asserts that it is necessary to separate out these levels of abstraction to understand the economic power of capital (Fisher, 2024).

The point, however, is not that the abstract logic of capital cannot be analytically separated from its concrete expressions. Cohen and Mau are right that some form of abstraction is necessary to understand capital's tendencies and avoid being burdened by the multitude of facts and forms of appearance that are accumulated through empirical observation. This process requires identifying different levels of abstraction, which range from historical and concrete relations at the individual and social level to the most general level of the human species (Ollman, 1990, p. 52). Ollman helpfully identifies seven levels of abstraction: level one represents each unique moment, each individual, each spatial location; level two moves out slightly to group qualities together into specific fields (such as engineering) or individual branches of production (like car manufacture); level three encompasses capitalist social relations in their entirety; level four expands to include class society in all its social forms; level five zooms out even further to include human society in general; level six incorporates the entire animal world; finally, level seven is the planet (pp. 52-53). While all of these levels are interrelated, the specific concepts, categories, and problems that make up each level cannot be fully understood unless they are abstracted out from the rest. Remaining at level one or two, for example, would prevent understanding the logic of capital as a whole, as they are too focused on the narrow experiences of an individual or a particular part of the capitalist economy. Marx's method of abstraction means that the concepts developed in *Capital* differ from their social reality (Lebowitz, 2003, p. 58). *Capital*, therefore, provides a theoretical framework and a methodology for understanding historical process and concrete social relations, but it is not a historical account of capitalism's development (Sayer, 1989, p. 137). In this sense, Mau is following Marx's method, deriving theoretical concepts through a process of abstraction from real historical relations.

But Marx does not remain at one level of abstraction, nor does he view the various levels of abstraction as distinct from one another. In *Capital*, where Marx uncovers the general laws of capitalist development, the analysis of the commodity emerges from Marx's concrete observations of capitalist society, before moving from a simple analysis of the commodity to a complex understanding of capitalist totality. As Dale Tomich (2015) argues, Marx's method is grounded in concrete social relations even though it does not directly correspond to historical processes of development (p. 333). By applying Marx's theory of capital to particular cases, it becomes possible to understand the diversity of historical experience as parts of capital's general logic, thereby enriching our understanding of capitalist totality (Tomich, 2016a, p. 34). Tomich's view draws influence from Georg Lukács (1988), who insists that historical facts can only be properly understood when situated within a concrete totality (p. 6). Remaining at the level of empirical evidence can only reproduce the immediate, surface-level appearances that obscure the real social relations that Marx is attempting to uncover. Lukács concept of mediation, the process of moving beyond the immediate appearances of social reality and situating these within a concrete set of social relations, helps us to locate particular historical phenomena within an objective and concrete totality (p. 155). Indeed, this dialectical method is what allows Tomich (2016a) to "*unite* the local history of plantation slavery in colonial Martinique with the history of world capitalism" (p. 7). *Capital* would not tell us much about the world unless it explained the concrete reality of capitalism as expressions of the general tendencies it uncovers. Marx (1990) does this most explicitly in *Volume I* in the chapters on primitive accumulation (Part 8) and the working day (Chapter 10), both of which contain a breadth of empirical detail.

Importantly, the movement between the abstract and the concrete in Marx's work does not proceed in a linear manner. Instead, Marx weaves abstract concepts amongst the concrete

relations of social reality throughout *Capital*, producing a fuller elaboration of his theoretical concepts in the process. Rather than moving between different levels of abstraction and concretization, as Marx does, Mau insists that we must remain at a high level of abstraction to properly understand capital's economic logic. While Mau's analysis reveals much about the impersonal power of capital, he does not often address the ways in which capital's mute compulsion can only be understood materially through other social relations like gender or race (Fisher, 2024). Marx's method, by contrast, requires both high-level theory and concrete analysis. As studies of Marx's notebooks and writings from later in his life demonstrate, Marx developed a growing interest in the development of non-Western societies (see Anderson, 2016; 2025). But while the notebooks of the late Marx show an attentiveness to the diverse concrete and historical forms that capitalism takes, they are not merely a documentation of empirical reality. Instead, as Anderson (2025) argues, they are an extension of Marx's method, part of the dialectical process of moving between the abstract and the concrete in order to reveal the differential and uneven articulations of capital's economic logic (p. 14). Marx's later writings help us to understand capital's diverse expressions, including the ways in which it is constituted by other social relations such as colonialism, imperialism, gender, and race.[18] Examining the specific ways capitalism has developed historically in this way contributes to our understanding of its abstract logic. As Jairus Banaji (2011) argues, capital's logic or "laws of motion" can only be fully understood through historical investigation (p. 47). Rather than reducing history to a linear progression of stages, as Orthodox Marxism tends to do, Banaji insists that we situate the

[18] While Marx himself did not fully develop all of these relationships, it is possible to use his method to do so. Michael Lebowitz (2003) extends Marx's method to highlight the importance of the reproduction of labour-power to capital's reproduction (Chapter 4). Lebowitz's circuits of reproduction are developed further by Tith Bhattacharya (2017a), using the framework of SRT (pp. 80-81). See also David McNally (2024), who employs Marx's method to show the centrality of colonization and racism to the spread of global capitalism.

multiple and diverse historical forms, processes, and temporalities within the context of the developing capitalist world system (p. 62). Doing so is especially important because, as we will see below, capitalism's development has been a global process from the beginning.

The Circuits of Reproduction in *Capital*

By moving between levels of abstraction, Marx situates the logic of capital within a complex, interrelated, and dynamic set of social relations. As Massimiliano Tomba (2013) shows, to accept capitalism's categories – production, circulation, exchange, reproduction – as ahistorical and unchanging is to engage in the very political economy towards which Marx directed his critique, falling victim to the fetish that masks capitalist social relations (p. 100). By reading *Capital* as a *critique* of political economy, rather than merely an elaboration of capital's categories, it becomes possible to weave abstract theoretical concepts together with the ways in which they have been expressed socially and historically. Through this process, the uneven and conflictual relations internal to capitalist production begin to come into view, including, as we will see below, the multiple temporalities that interact in complex and contradictory ways at the global scale. First, however, it is necessary to analyze the circuits of production and circulation of a singular nation. Understanding the times of production and circulation as an uneven unity makes it possible to identify points of temporal contradiction internal to capital's logic, as well as the potential sites of strategic intervention that emerge from these.

The Time of Production

In Volume I of *Capital*, Marx deals with the linear time of production, the relationship between living labour in the present (variable capital) and dead labour of the past (constant

capital) (Tombazos, 2014, p. 26). Since it is only living labour that creates value, Marx (1990) locates the production of new (surplus-) value in the part of the working day that is not responsible for reproducing the labour-power of the worker. The latter portion of the day represents the time in which workers reproduce the value of their wages (necessary labour-time) (p. 325), while the former (surplus labour-time) is where workers create new value. As we will see in Chapter 4, framing the production process in temporal terms is what allows Marx to view the struggle over the working day as a struggle over time. Capitalists seek to extend the working day to the maximum limit, while workers aim to preserve their labour-power by limiting the workday as much as possible.

It is also possible for surplus labour-time to be increased within the limits of a set working day. This becomes essential once the working class has achieved victories over limits to the extension of the workday. By reducing necessary labour-time through the implementation of new production methods, surplus labour-time increases relatively (Marx, 1990, p. 432). Increasing society's productive powers lowers the value of labour-power by decreasing the value of those commodities that are necessary for the worker's reproduction (p. 433). But workers do not passively accept efforts to increase the intensity of their exploitation. It is for this reason that capital seeks to subsume labour-time to the discipline of capitalist clock-time (Tombazos, 2014, p. 109). As industrialization spread, so too did the intensification of temporal forms of policing and enforcement mechanisms, such as timesheets and workplace surveillance aimed at subordinating workers to the time of capitalist production (Thompson, 1993, p. 385). Techniques of temporal discipline were accompanied by increased division, specialization, and mechanization of labour, as a way of homogenizing the multiple and differential rhythms of human activity, a process that would lead to the implementation of the assembly line. This

process further subordinated the human tempo of labour to the mechanical and dehumanizing time of industrial capitalist production (Tombazos, 2014, p. 110). As we will see later, the more that capital subjects the worker to increasingly intense forms of temporal discipline, the more the worker is reduced to a cog in a machine, forced to perform more and more specialized tasks as part of an increasingly complex division of labour. This form of cooperation does not seem to be the worker's own, nor does the heightened level of productivity appear to be the result of the worker's labour. Rather, "the productive power which results from the combination of various kinds of labour appears as the productive power of capital" (Marx, 1990, p. 481). Instead of what it is, a result of the growing productive powers of workers, capitalist production develops as a power alien to the working class: "It is no longer the worker who employs the means of production, but the means of production which employ the worker" (p. 425). Labour becomes alienated from the worker, appearing as an external force, a means to survival rather than an embodiment of the potential for human flourishing.

The Time of Circulation

In *Volume I*, Marx (1990) leaves the "noisy sphere" of circulation and enters the "hidden abode of production" (p. 279) to uncover the essence of value. But he returns to circulation in order to better understand the total process of capital's reproduction (Tombazos, 2014, p. 124). In *Volume II*, Marx (1992) theorizes the three circuits of capital – money capital, productive capital, and commodity capital – as moments in a unity (p. 180). As Marx (1990) shows in *Volume I*, the valorization process takes place in the moment of production, and this process is repeated, what he calls "self-valorizing value" (p. 711). This appears to be the work of capital itself – value producing more value – but is revealed in *Capital* to be rooted in the labour process. But it is not enough for value to be produced. It must be realized as money in order for it to be converted

back into capital and this can only be accomplished in exchange. As we have seen above, production is mediated by circulation, where commodities are sold for money, which is then reinvested, allowing production to continue (P…C'-M'-C…P) (Marx, 1992, p. 144). At the same time, production mediates the circuit of money capital (M-C…P…C'-M'), in that production appears as a moment interrupting the realization of surplus-value as money (p. 109). Finally, in the commodity circuit (C'-M'-C…P…C') surplus value is already assumed at the beginning of the process (C') (p. 167).

The unity of these three circuits makes up the contradictory and uneven totality of capital. Understood temporally, the time of capital's reproduction is the total time of circulation and production: "It is the period of time that elapses from the moment that the capital value is advanced in a particular form until the return of the capital value in process in the same form" (Marx, 1992, p. 234). In the circuit of money capital, the time of production represents an interruption to the circulation of money. We have already seen how capital tends towards increasing the degree of productivity of labour, thereby shortening production time and increasing the number of times a given capital can turnover, and this effort to minimize turnover time applies to circulation as well. Since surplus-value is only created by productive labour, the time of circulation represents a non-productive investment and a loss of time for capital (Tombazos, 2014, p. 168). But circulation remains necessary for surplus-value to be realized in money and Marx highlights the tension between the two: "The expansion and contraction of the circulation time hence acts as a negative limit on the contraction or expansion of the production time, or of the scale on which a capital of a given magnitude can function. The more that the circulation metamorphoses of capital are only ideal, i.e. the closer the circulation time comes to zero, the more the capital functions, and the greater is its productivity and self-valorization"

(Marx, 1992, p. 203). Of course, the time of circulation never actually comes to zero, and so the time that it takes to sell commodities on the market, the time it takes to purchase new means of production and labour-power, and all the activities that are necessary for such sales and purchases all represent barriers to the production of value.

Capital at a Global Scale

Up until now we have followed Marx in examining the circuits of capital contained within a single nation. However, as Marx (1992) states in *Volume II*, "the circulation process of industrial capital is characterized by the many-sided character of its origins, and the existence of the market as a world market" (p. 190). It is necessary, therefore, to consider the temporalities of production and circulation at a global scale. As we will see in more detail in the next chapter, global capital incorporates and transforms non-capitalist labour relations, subsuming them under the logic of value. By imposing capitalist production methods at a world scale, the abstract time of capital is likewise imposed globally: "The colonial system and the extension of the world market, both of which form part of the general conditions for the existence of the manufacturing period, furnish us with rich materials for displaying the division of labour in society" (Marx, 1990, p. 474). Through processes of colonialism and imperialism, capital transforms all areas of the globe into producers of value, thereby completely reorganizing the totality of social relations. However, this process occurs unevenly, and the subsumption of non-capitalist elements in specific locations results in different expressions of capitalism, leading to differential times of production (García-Quesada, 2022, p. 51). As Marx (1990) observes: "The average intensity of labour changes from country to country; here it is greater, there less. These national averages form a scale whose unit of measurement is the average unit of universal labour. The more intense national labour, therefore, as compared with the less intense, produces in the same time more

value, which expresses itself in more money" (p. 702). The uneven nature of the world system is constituted, in part, by the resistance of workers to the dictates of abstract labour-time and, in part, by the specific level of productive development in each area of the world (Tomba, 2013, p. 134). Thus, rather than viewing the persistence of child-labour or poor working conditions as evidence of the backwardness of some countries, these conditions are more accurately understood as the result of the specific form modern capitalist development has taken in those locations (p. 155).

Exchange on a global scale increases the time of circulation as "the development of the means of transport and communication conversely introduces the necessity of working for ever more distant markets, in a word, for the world market" (Marx, 1992, p. 329). Production on a world scale requires global circulation, and this creates further opportunity for crises that might interrupt the circuits of capital. As discussed above, it is capital's tendency to strive to shorten both the time of production and circulation as much as possible, thereby allowing for the most efficient circuit of reproduction. National borders represent barriers to this temporal and spatial expansion and, therefore, to capital's reproduction (García-Quesada, 2022, p. 79). It is for this reason that capital strives for "the annihilation of space by time" (p. 80), as a way of overcoming these national barriers. However, not all spaces are the same, and so the general tendency of capital to produce abstract homogeneous spaces must be examined concretely in order to understand its specific dynamics.

The subsumption of space (and time) to the logic of capital occurs globally through the uneven and dynamic relations of the capitalist world system (Coronil, 1997, p. 36). Rather than a result of unequal exchange arising from the circulation of value, Fernando Coronil insists that the hierarchical nature of the world system is a product of the uneven international division of labour

(p. 39). The development of many states in the global South, what Coronil calls "nature-exporting societies" (p. 7), has occured primarily through a reliance on the export of primary resources to the global North (p. 37). While this allows for national development to occur, it also creates new relations of dependence on foreign capital through which new imperial relations emerge. In a seminal work on Venezuela's development in the 1900s, Coronil demonstrates that a uniquely modern form of state emerged in relation to the capitalist world system (p. 4). While Venezuela has been, in various ways, shaped by the logic of the world market, so too has the world system been formed in relation to Venezuela's unique path of development. The global demand for oil allowed Venezuela to develop through the extraction and commodification of its rich oil deposits, though it remained dependent on foreign corporations and international markets, specifically those located in the United States (p. 107). However, by actively seeking to direct oil capital towards state-led national development projects, the Venezuelan state began to shape and direct the activities of global capital in new ways (p. 81).

Remaining attentive to the dynamic relationship between development at different scales – global, national, and local – allows for a historical and processual understanding of the world system, one which does not reify nation states into static conceptions of centre and periphery. Rather than understanding the transition to capitalism as having occurred in England in isolation from the rest of the world,[19] it is necessary to view capitalist development as a global process from its inception. From this perspective, capitalism can only be fully grasped as an uneven and contradictory *global* totality. Viewing development as a worldwide process enables us to see that the rise of capitalism in England was itself underpinned by colonial and slave relations, which produced the economic and political power that allowed England to develop in the way that it did

[19] See Robert Brenner (1977) for the most sophisticated example of this perspective.

(Makki, 2015, p. 477). Capitalism's development in England, then, can only be understood as a product of England's specific relationship to other states, and to the world system of which it has always been a part.[20] Todd Gordon and Jeffery Webber (2020) theorize capitalism as a global totality made up of a differential and hierarchical interrelation of states, what they call "a complexly stratified world system" (p. 96). From this perspective, capitalist totality must be considered in its global, uneven, spatio-temporal, and hierarchical dimensions. By remaining attentive to the specific forms that capitalist states take and the ways in which those states have been integrated into the world system, it is possible to paint a dynamic picture of the general tendencies of global capital that does not abstract away the new and uneven patterns of hierarchy and competition that constitute its logic.

The uneven and global nature of capitalist development has been theorized by other perspectives, including world-systems theory (see Wallerstein, 2004). But while world-systems theory situates the activity of specific states within global capitalism, it tends to view the world system as a static and stable structure, hierarchically ordered as core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral states. Situated within a Braudelian *longue durée*, world-systems theory tends to emphasize the stability of its categories, rather than their relational dynamism. As a result, it has a tendency to be used as an abstract framework into which states are made to fit (Makki, 2015, p. 478). Theorizing the world system as an uneven, complex, and dynamic process addresses the shortcomings of some articulations of world-systems theory, allowing for development and dependency to take the form of a dialectical relationship. Rather than necessarily leading to an increase in national independence and human freedom, the uneven and contradictory process of

[20] See Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto (1979) for a theory of development as a global process, conditioned by imperialist and class relations.

capitalist development creates new forms of dependency, where developing nations remain dependent on imperialist states and the global capitalist market.

Important works from within world-systems theory have sought to learn from these critiques. Richard E. Lee and Dale Tomich (2016) insist that world-systems theory is a holistic perspective which views each part of the world system in relation to the other parts and to the whole. Rather than static containers, the categories of core and periphery represent "relational outcomes" (p. 9) of interactions between, and within, states. These relations have come to structure the world system itself. It is from this perspective that Tomich (2016a) is able to analyze the relationship between the sugar industry and slavery in nineteenth-century Martinique as an expression of global capital in-formation, rather than as a part of an already-formed world system (p. 9). This type of sophisticated analysis requires recentering national, regional, and local scales, thereby revealing how the world-system is itself composed of uneven and diverse moments while simultaneously structuring – but not determining – them (Tomich, 2016b, p. 224).

Recentring processes of development in the global South within the broader context of world capitalism challenges the Eurocentric notion of development, which views the global South as determined by the development of capitalism in the global North (Coronil, 1997, p. 65). Processes of social transformation in Latin America, including the Cuban Revolution and the democratic struggle for social change in Chile in the early 1970s, represent expressions of these possible alternate trajectories (Arboleda, 2025, p. 1111-1112). While the world market structures development across the globe, spaces of difference persist in various ways. These "subaltern modernities" (Coronil, 1997, p. 74) do not conform to the Eurocentric model of unilinear progress. As we have seen in the previous chapter, moving beyond the binary opposition of

modernity and tradition makes it possible to uncover alternative trajectories of development, while simultaneously unsettling the Western view of linear progress. Like the relationship between circulation and production at a national scale, the interaction of multiple commodity circuits at the level of the world market occurs in uneven and, at times, contradictory ways. The rhythms of subaltern modernisms represent interruptions to the standardized time of capitalist production from the perspective of the global North. While global capital seeks to subsume these alternate temporalities to the homogeneous time of value production, this process remains open and incomplete.

The Time of Social Reproduction

Interruptions arise from the contradictory unity of the multiple temporalities internal to capital's reproductive circuits. Capitalist totality includes non-capitalist social forms, which represent potential moments of conflict between the concrete times of life – both human and non-human – and the abstract time of production (Carson, 2024, p. 138).[21] Examining the contradictory times of global capitalism, as we have done above, reveals some of the concrete counter-times that persist despite capital's tendency to subsume all forms of life to the logic of value. Another such interruption is the reproduction of workers themselves, or the reproduction of labour-power. Marx (1992) recognizes this in *Volume II* – "for the workers, in order to continue to exist on the market as exploitable material for the capitalist, must before all else keep alive, and therefore maintain himself by individual consumption" (p. 138) – but he does not

[21] As Rebecca Carson (2024) illustrates, these non-capitalist elements remain integral to capitalist reproduction, even as they are, in a sense, "outside" the value form, in that the reproduction of human and non-human life has occurred (and could occur again) without capitalism (p. 164).

investigate this further. However, it is precisely through an examination of the reproduction of labour-power that the central contradiction of capitalism, the interruption of capital's reproduction by the worker's reproduction, is revealed.

The Missing Circuit in Capital

In *Volume I*, Marx (1990) begins to consider the reproduction of labour-power in relation to the reproduction of capital. On the one hand, there is productive consumption, where workers engage in the production process and "consume" the means of production, transforming them into commodities containing surplus-value (p. 717). On the other hand, there is individual consumption, where workers purchase and consume the commodities necessary for their survival. As Marx observes:

> The worker's productive consumption and his individual consumption are therefore totally distinct. In the former, he acts as the motive power of capital, and belongs to the capitalist. In the latter, he belongs to himself, and performs his necessary vital functions outside the production process. The result of the first kind of consumption is that the capitalist continues to live, of the second, that the worker himself continues to live. (p. 717)

Here, Marx is beginning to describe what Michael Lebowitz (2003) calls the tension between the worker for capital and the worker for self (p. 75). The worker's reproduction (individual consumption) takes place outside the production process, representing an interruption to the reproduction of capital (productive consumption). However, *Capital* does not fully develop the circuit of labour-power, even though Marx (1990) acknowledges that the "perpetuation of the worker, is the absolutely necessary condition for capitalist production" (p. 716). While Volume II

of *Capital* demonstrates that the individual consumption of both workers and capitalists is necessary for capital's reproduction, in that the social reproduction of individuals under capitalism "includes the reproduction (i.e. maintenance) of the capitalist class and the working class" (Marx, 1992, p. 468), Marx's primary focus is the reproduction of *capital* and, therefore, the capitalist character of reproduction (Lebowitz, 2003, p. ix). Marx's circuits of capital include workers' productive consumption – the production of commodities – and their individual consumption that requires the purchase of what Marx (1992) calls "*necessary* means of consumption" (p. 479), or the commodities workers need to survive.[22] However, the social reproduction of workers, the necessary condition for capital's reproduction, takes place, in part, outside of the circuits of capital (Lebowitz, 2003, p. 66). As Lise Vogel (2013) shows, capital leaves much of the work of social reproduction up to workers themselves (p. 159). Therefore, in order to fully understand how labour-power is reproduced we must go beyond the circuits of capital's reproduction.

Other Marxist theories of social reproduction have insisted that Marx's notion of reproduction refers specifically to the way that capitalist relations of production are reproduced (see Munro, 2024; Weiss, 2022). Kirstin Munro (2024) argues that the reproduction of labour-power refers not "to just any biological procreations" (p. 206), but to the reproduction of wage labourers, individuals who must sell their labour-power on the market. Similarly, Hadas Weiss (2022) insists that "far from reproductive labor being a virtuous source of social wealth, then, it serves as an input in the reproduction of capitalist society and its attendant miseries and injustices" (p. 108). From this perspective, social reproduction under capitalism only refers to an

[22] Necessary means of consumption go beyond physiological needs and include social needs that are, as Marx (1992) puts it, "means of consumption by custom" (p. 479).

internally necessary element of the reproduction of capitalist class society. It does not, therefore, represent a moment potentially opposed to capital's reproduction. Against this interpretation, SRT argues that an analysis of social reproduction must consider the ways that human reproduction occurs, in part, outside of capital's circuits (Bhattacharya, 2017a, p. 76). This is only possible by viewing social reproduction as a moment of a contradictory unity. Social reproduction, for SRT, refers to the reproduction of workers, both as capitalist wage labourers and as human beings. Social reproductive labour is essential for the reproduction of capitalist social relations, while simultaneously making up a central part of the life-making activity that sustains us. While capital's tendency is to subsume all forms of human activity under the value-form, this tendency remains incomplete, and the reproduction of labour-power continues to occur, at least in part, outside the circuits of capital.

In a recent work, Rebecca Carson (2024) investigates the circuits of capital, highlighting the contradictions between the reproduction of capital and the reproduction of life (p. 142). The focus on life, she argues, goes beyond SRT's emphasis on the reproduction of labour-power. For Carson, a focus on labour-power restricts the perspective of SRT to the wage relation and, therefore, "fails to include an analysis of social reproduction of those who are excluded from wage labour" (p. 142).[23] However, Carson's view is based on the mistaken premise that wage labour "no longer clearly constitutes the central form of mediation between capital and the concrete, or human life and nature" (p. 139). The limits to her framework can be overcome if we centre the reproduction of labour-power, understood both broadly as the human potential for creative activity, and narrowly, as that which is sold by workers as a commodity under

[23] Indeed, Lebowitz (2003) calls the circuit of workers' reproduction the circuit of wage labour (p. 65). See above for why I argue, following recent SRT scholars, on why it is better understood as the circuit of labour-power.

capitalism. The two circuits of reproduction, capital on the one hand and labour-power on the other, are mutually necessary. Workers must sell their labour-power for a wage in order to purchase the commodities they need to survive, while capital requires the reproduction of actual human beings in order for labour-power to be available on the market as a commodity (Lebowitz, 2003, p. 75). But they are also opposed, in that the more workers produce for capital, the more their labour appears as a force outside of themselves, while the more workers produce for themselves, the less they produce for capital.

The reproduction of labour-power, understood as a circuit "outside" the reproduction of capital yet internally related to it, represents a distinct temporality, one which poses a limit to the reproduction of capitalism. Social reproductive work, including raising children and teaching, is different from the value-producing labour that makes commodities precisely because it is necessary for the reproduction of capital, even though it is not productive of value (Arruzza, 2016, p. 17). Even when social reproductive labour is value-producing, as in the case of nursing in the United States, it requires a higher level of attentiveness to human needs and the concrete rhythms of human beings (Ferguson, 2023). Of course, this "outside" is not completely disconnected from the circuits already described in *Capital*. Rather, the production of labour-power represents a moment of capital's contradictory unity. On the one hand, capital mediates the reproduction of workers, since they obtain the use-values they require through capitalist exchange. On the other hand, workers mediate the reproduction of capital as the producers of value in the production process. While capital requires the reproduction of labour-power, it does not directly concern itself with the worker's social reproduction. It is only interested in the reproduction of value, the reproduction of the capitalist character of production. But this is only one side of the relation. From the perspective of workers, their own reproduction as human

beings is threatened by the reproduction of capital, by the production process which compels them to sell their labour-power for a wage as the only way of obtaining the necessities they need to survive. Here we have a contradiction between the worker for capital and the worker for themselves.

The Dual Character of Labour

The potential for workers to direct their labour-power towards their own reproduction rather than the reproduction of capital lies in what Marx (1990) calls the dual character of labour (p. 131). While the value of a commodity is quantified and measured as abstract labour-time,

> a thing can be a use-value without being a value. … A thing can be useful, and a product of human labour, without being a commodity. He who satisfies his own need with the product of his own labour admittedly creates use-values, but not commodities. (p. 131)

For Marx, then, labour is both the substance of value, the basis of the capitalist mode of production, and a transhistorical category.

The persistence of concrete, creative human activity is precisely where that self-determining element of the reproduction of labour-power is located.[24] While capital constantly strives to reduce all labour to its quantitative and abstract form, this process remains incomplete (McNally, 2004, p. 201). Because commodities must satisfy an actual human need in order to be sold, because they must also be a use-value, their production requires concrete forms of human

[24] While labour is the actual act of producing something, labour-power refers to the human capacity, or *potential*, to set labour in motion. Like labour itself, labour-power is an essential human quality that exists throughout history. Under capitalism, however, labour-power is sold as a commodity. But, as SRT scholars have emphasized, it is not *produced* as a commodity (Vogel, 2013, p. 151). It exists, as Marx (1990) states, "in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being" (p. 270). It is for this reason that the reproduction of labour-power retains a human and self-determining element.

activity. As Marx (1990) shows, a coat can only be made by the specific act of tailoring (p. 132). There is, therefore, a concrete human element of labour that persists despite capital's efforts to reduce all forms of human activity to abstract labour. This does not mean that the reproduction of workers represents a true outside to capital. The production of use-values under capitalism is subordinated to that which expresses value, or exchange-value. Rather than producing goods for their own self-benefit and that of their community, workers produce as a means to survival. To do so, they must produce for the capitalist. As a result, their labour is alienated from them, a process we will examine in depth in Chapter 4. But despite the tendency of capital to subordinate labour-power to the production of value, capital's reproduction continues to remain dependent on concrete human activity. So long as people reproduce themselves as human beings and not as commodities, this human element cannot be fully subordinated to the value relation. The dual character of labour, therefore, underpins the tragic-utopian character of capitalism. Despite the tendency of capital to alienate us from our capacity to consciously act in, on, and with the world, our essentially human ability for concrete and creative labour persists. So too, therefore, does the potential to overcome capitalism.

Marx (1990) does not refer to labour-power as a "peculiar commodity" (p. 274) only because it is the sole commodity capable of producing surplus-value. Under capitalism, labour-power is not manufactured like other commodities. People are not made in factories and labour-power can only be found in living workers. As Marx states, capitalists leave the reproduction of workers up to "the worker's drives for self-preservation and propagation" (p. 718). Vogel (2013) calls this element of social reproduction "domestic labour" (p. 159) and shows that, as capitalist accumulation intensifies, wage labour is increasingly separated from the other moments of the worker's life, including the domestic component of labour necessary for their reproduction. The

separation of productive and social reproductive labour is internal to the contradictory logic of capital. On the one hand, capital requires the availability of labour-power and relies on unwaged social reproductive labour for its reproduction. On the other hand, the social reproduction of labour-power represents a limit to capital's reproduction, in that if a worker is spending time working to reproduce themselves, they are not generally performing value-producing labour (p. 151). It is for this reason that Lebowitz (2003) identifies capital's limit in the contradiction between the reproduction of capital and the reproduction of the worker (p. 14).

SRT's view of capital's tendency to separate productive and social reproductive work has been contested by Beverley Best (2021), who argues that the separation of productive and social reproductive activities is not "logically internal to the movement of capital itself" (p. 909). Best insists that capital's tendency is, in fact, to valorize all forms of labour, including social reproductive work, and that a better explanation for the unwaged character of some social reproductive activity is that individual capitalists are compelled by the market to reduce their costs as much as possible, in order to outmatch their competitors (p. 903). The competitive logic of the market necessitates that individual capitalists reduce their labour-power costs even though expelling workers from the production process tends to reduce profits overall. Unwaged social reproductive work allows capitalists to offshore some of the costs of social reproduction onto workers themselves, thereby reducing their labour costs at the expense of potential profits. In this sense, the division between productive and social reproductive labour is an obstacle, not a necessity, to capital's reproduction (p. 912). From this perspective, the full subsumption of social reproductive labour to the value relation is both possible and necessary to overcome the capitalist mode of production. This is because, according to Best, it is only through the wage relation that capital can be overcome. It is only when all human activity has been fully subsumed to the logic

of value, when all concrete human activity has become abstract labour, that it can be truly socialized.

SRT, by contrast, argues that concrete labour cannot be fully subsumed to abstract labour. This applies to social reproductive labour in particular because activities such as childbirth and child-rearing are much more difficult for capital to profit from (Vogel, 2013, p. 162). Against this view, Sophie Lewis (2019) insists that childbirth has already been commodified as "commercial gestational surrogacy" (p. 24), and should therefore be viewed, along with other types of social reproductive labour, as work. However, as Susan Ferguson (2020a) argues in a review of Lewis' book *Full Surrogacy Now*, Lewis' account of pregnancy overstates the degree to which all human activity has been fully subsumed by the relations of capitalist production. While Lewis is correct in emphasizing that social reproductive labour is directed towards the reproduction of capitalist social relations, she tends to view this process as completely subordinated to the logic of value, thereby ignoring the concrete, life-making human activity that pregnancy entails, even when it is commodified as gestational surrogacy. Furthermore, accepting the full subsumption of all human activity would be to relinquish the human character of labour to the dehumanizing logic of value. Therefore, while Best is right that capital's tendency is to fully valorize social reproductive labour, this process necessarily remains incomplete. It is limited by the ability of capital to profit off of domestic labour, the biological limits of pregnancy and childbirth, and the political limits of what the working class will accept (Vogel, 2013, p. 163).[25]

Social Reproduction's Temporality

[25] As Aaron Jaffe (2020) points out, Vogel sometimes naturalizes women's oppression in biological terms (p. 66). While these biological limits are socially determined for Vogel, in that it is only under specific conditions where biology becomes a basis of oppression, there is a danger of naturalizing gendered oppression and, in the process, ignoring other social forms.

A focus on the circuit of labour-power's reproduction reveals that the dual character of labour produces a dual character of time: homogeneous and quantifiable abstract labour-time on the one hand, multiple and diverse concrete times on the other. While capital's reproduction is a contradictory unity of multiple and diverse temporalities connected through the circuits of reproduction, concrete forms of labour and time required for capital's reproduction remain external to the circuits of value production (Carson, 2024, p. 115). Thus, in order to understand the circuit of the reproduction of labour-power in its totality, it is necessary to examine workers *beyond* their existence as wage labourers (Lebowitz, 2003, p. 159). Doing so requires moving to the moment of social reproduction, where workers reproduce themselves in ways both mediated by the market – purchasing food, clothing, housing – and in activities often performed outside the market – cooking, cleaning, raising children, education (Bhattacharya, 2017a, pp. 81-82). While such activities may be unwaged, they are not disconnected from the wage relation. Labour that is not productive of value performs an important function for capital, in that it allows for the reproduction of the working class, offsetting the costs that would have had to be paid by the capitalist in order for workers to continue living and producing (Lebowitz, 2003, p. 145). The necessity of domestic labour is masked by the fact that it is often unwaged and does not always take place in a formal workplace, but this temporal and spatial separation is precisely what gives it a certain degree of autonomy from the forms of discipline employed during the time of production.[26] Because social reproductive labour often occurs outside the circuits of production, it is less subject to the hegemony of abstract labour-time and more able to respond to the actual needs of human beings (Ferguson, 2023). It is more responsive to the concrete rhythms of the

[26] The separation of unpaid domestic labour and waged productive labour is not always clear. Indeed, the distinction has become even more blurred with capital's increasing reliance on informal and precarious forms of work (see Mezzadri, 2019). However, much social reproductive work continues to be unwaged and performed at times and spaces distinct from that of production (Ferguson, 2020b, p. 126).

people it is responsible for, as well as to the pace and tempo of the workers performing the labour. These times and spaces represent moments where workers can more easily engage in self-directed labour for themselves.

Social reproductive activity, where workers reproduce themselves not just as workers but as human beings, represents a moment where workers might develop their capacities to fulfill their biological and social needs beyond the minimum requirements for the reproduction of labour-power (Lebowitz, 2003, p. 203). While capital only requires that workers meet their needs to the extent that it allows them to return to work the next day, workers are capable of demanding more than this bare minimum.[27] As human beings with the capacity for concrete creative activity, they are able to direct their labour towards their own reproduction, the creation and fulfillment of social needs that go beyond what capital allows. This contradiction manifests in class struggle at the workplace, but also beyond the point of production, over the social reproductive activities that are unproductive of value but still necessary for the reproduction of both capital and workers. And because much social reproductive labour is unproductive of value and occurs outside the workplace, it is more able to resist the pressures of abstract labour-time (Ferguson, 2023). The degree of autonomy afforded to social reproductive labour, its distinct temporality, makes it a unique terrain of struggle where workers potentially have a higher degree of control over the labour process and, therefore, more ability to act in their own self-directed interests rather than the interests of capital. The final chapter will consider some specific examples of

[27] What constitutes the minimum requirement for the worker's reproduction is socially and historically specific. Marx (1990) states that "the number and extent of [the worker's] so-called necessary requirements, as also the manner in which they are satisfied, are themselves products of history, and depend therefore to a great extent on the level of civilization attained by a country; in particular they depend on the condition in which, and consequently on the habits and expectations with which, the class of free workers has been formed" (p. 275).

social reproductive struggles from the past decade, along with other expressions of concrete counter-times.

Romantic Marxism and the Logic of Capitalism

The contradictory nature of capitalist totality produces interruptions and discontinuities at various stages of the commodity circuit. By extending Marx's analysis of the circuits of capital to include the circuit of labour-power, this chapter has identified the central contradiction of capital to be that between the reproduction of capital and the reproduction of the worker. While Marx's method involves abstracting from the actual process of historical development in order to grasp the general logic of capital's reproduction, he consistently situates his theoretical discoveries within the context of concrete social reality, moving between levels of abstraction and concretization as a way of better understanding the material world and, in the process, developing his theoretical categories in greater detail. Doing so allows us to begin to reveal the counter-tendencies and uneven social forms internal to capitalism. The moment of social reproduction represents one such interruption, where the effort of workers to direct their activity towards their own social reproduction opposes the reproduction of capital. SRT's attentiveness to the dual character of labour under capitalism – the persistence of concrete human activity and its necessity to the reproduction of both capital and human beings – reveals one possibility of redirecting that activity towards human flourishing instead of the production of value. But other non-synchronous elements persist despite capital's tendency to subsume all forms of life to the logic of value. These concrete counter-times contain within them the possibility of alternate modernities, different potential futures that do not conform to the trajectory of modern industrial capitalism. Romantic Marxism, like SRT, insists on the necessity of comparing capital's logical

tendencies with concrete reality in order to reveal its uneven and contradictory nature, uncovering the non-synchronous moments internal to capitalist totality which might produce new sites of conflict and new possibilities for struggle. Rather than a blunt empiricism that views each particular expression as unique and distinct from each other, the best of Romantic Marxism follows Marx in moving back and forth between different levels of abstraction and concretization.

Against orthodox forms of Marxism which separate theory from history, Thompson (2008) insists on what he calls a "logic of process" (p. 86), an historical and processual approach to understanding the social relations of capitalism that condition, but do not fully determine, human activity. Benjamin (1969e) is likewise critical of what he calls "historicism" (p. 262), that which erases the concrete and diverse forms that human activity has taken throughout history. Similarly, theoretical categories for Lefebvre (2014) can only be fully grasped through their contradictions and countertendencies which make up a part of the social totality: "We are replacing the philosophical idea of an achieved totality and a complete system with the concept of *totalization*" (p. 478). Understanding capitalist totality as an incomplete, differential and uneven whole allows us to view the organization of space in capitalist society as a global process, without erasing all forms of concrete difference. For Schwarz (1992f), capitalism can only be understood by examining the relationship between its diverse and particular expressions and the global totality (p. 104). To do so, we must centre colonial and imperial relations, the relationship between dependency and development, and the specific forms class struggle takes across the globe.

Rather than imposing abstract theory onto the concrete and diverse social relations that make up global capitalism, Romantic Marxism views logical categories not as static containers

but as sets of historically specific social relations. As Thompson (2008) states, "even categories which appear to offer less elasticity – 'feudalism', 'capitalism', 'the bourgeoisie' – appear in historical practice, not as ideal types fulfilled in historical evolution, but as whole families of special cases, families which include adopted orphans and the children of typological miscegenation" (p. 46). Capitalism, therefore, is a set of social relations expressed in a variety of ways across historical time and geographical space. But it is still valid as a category, in that we can only understand the diversity of human activity today by understanding it as occurring within capitalism. Thompson reminds us in *The Poverty of Theory* that

> historical explanation discloses not how history *must* have eventuated but why it eventuated in this way and not in other ways; that process is not arbitrary but has its own regularity and rationality; that certain kinds of event (political, economic, cultural) have been related, not in any way one likes, but in particular ways and within determinate fields of possibility; that certain social formations are – not governed by 'law' nor are they the 'effects' of a static structural theorem – but are characterised by determinate relations and by a particular logic of process. (p. 50)

Neither fully contingent nor strictly determined by structure, Thompson highlights the processual and historical unfolding of capital's logic, where concrete activities take place within an *open* (though necessarily limited) field of possibility and, in turn, redefine what is and is not possible.[28]

[28] For instance, Thompson (1978) emphasizes that his view of class is not entirely independent from structural determination (p. 149). He cites Robert Brenner (1976) as an example of a "scrupulous examination" (Thompson, 1978, p. 149) of the objective determinants of class.

Following Thompson's logic of process, forms of exploitation can only be properly understood when situated within the totality of class relations, which includes the economy, politics, and culture (Clarke, 1979, pp. 142-143). This is opposed to Cohen's (2001) view of class as an "objective position within production relations" (p. 75). While Cohen agrees that "production relations do not mechanically determine class consciousness" (p. 75), he nevertheless insists on a structural definition of class as a static location in relation to the means of production. Rather than an abstract concept, class for Clarke and Thompson is a historical social relation. It is made up of the experiences of the members of that class. Yet, as Nate Holdren (2025) insightfully points out, experience is not merely "raw phenomena and immediate responses" (8th para.). Instead, experience is, as Thompson (2008) states, "social being's impingement on social consciousness" (p. 4), which is to say that experience is both conditioned by our place in society (social being) and transforms the latter. This transformed social being, in turn, conditions, in new ways, how we relate to experience (social consciousness).[29] Experience, for Holdren (2025) via Thompson, represents a category of mediation in the Lukácsian sense, where the way we experience things always and already occurs through the concrete social relations in which we live. There is, in Thompson's (2008) words, a "*dialogue* between social being and social consciousness" (p. 9). To separate history from theory is what Derek Sayer (1989) calls "violent abstraction" (p. 53), or the isolation and reification of theoretical concepts from the world as it actually exists. As we will see in the next chapter, Thompson's work consistently demonstrates the processual and historical quality of capitalist social relations.

In the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Benjamin (1969e) identifies a similar problem with what he calls historicism, or the conception of history as a linear sequence of

[29] The historical and processual definition of class is also central to SRT, as we have seen in the last chapter.

events progressively marching towards the highest stage of development and the realization of "universal history" (p. 262). Historicism, so conceived, subsumes all activity, all forms of life, to an abstract model of historical development, what Benjamin calls "homogeneous, empty time" (p. 262). Human progress, according to the mechanical view of history, is merely the realization of a pre-determined trajectory. Benjamin's critique is directed not only against the positivism inherent in mainstream and conservative perspectives, but also the tendency of orthodox Marxism to reduce Marx's theory to abstract laws that determine the course of history (Löwy, 2016, p. 25). Benjamin's (1969e) first thesis reproaches those who appropriate the term historical materialism and reduce it to the empty, homogeneous time of progress (p. 253), what he describes elsewhere as "the crablike advance of evolution" (Benjamin, 2011a, p. 70), marching inexorably towards the final stage of development, or communism.

In *The Poverty of Theory*, Thompson (2008) argues that Louis Althusser's version of Marxism, which ironically is opposed to what Althusser calls historicism, uncritically applies general theoretical concepts to concrete conditions and, in doing so, abstracts away all difference and particularity. Understood in this way, Althusser is guilty of what Benjamin calls historicism, ignoring the diverse social forms that do not conform to his theoretical categories. By reducing historical analysis to blunt empiricism, Althusser engages in what Thompson calls "an a-historical theoreticism" (p. 4), privileging abstract theory over concrete experience (which, as we have seen above, goes beyond immediate perception). Like Cohen (and Mau), Althusser assumes that theory and history can be separated into entirely separate levels of analysis. Against this view, Thompson argues for a dialectical understanding of history, made by people living, acting, and struggling in sets of social relations that condition – but do not fully determine – their behaviour, creating a host of possible outcomes (p. 110). Thompson's logic of process allows us

to view history as Marx (1978f) describes it in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, made by people but not in conditions of their choosing (p. 595).

By contrast, Althusser's view of process eliminates subjective agency and replaces it with structural development at different, relatively autonomous, levels. Thompson (2008) calls these "*categories of stasis*" (p. 95), distinct and atomistic categories, only interacting as separate containers that create different articulations of a structure. Althusser strips process of any human element, viewing it instead as the interaction of different and distinct structural levels. Viewing social relations as relatively autonomous (and therefore separate) categories already makes the mistake of isolating each relation from each other, rather than viewing them as mutually determining and internally related parts of the whole. It is against this atomistic view that Thompson makes his famous declaration that the law exists "at *every* bloody level" (p. 96). It is never isolated from the economy, politics, or other social relations.

The concept of totality helps us to view seemingly isolated or autonomous relations (like the law) as, in fact, parts of a whole. As Lefebvre (2014) states: "Without [the concept of totality], knowledge itself ceases to have a 'structure'. It becomes scattered into fragmented studies which replicate exactly the division of social labour instead of controlling it and understanding it" (p. 474). Without an understanding of totality, we would only be able to examine things as the appear on the surface, with no way of uncovering how they relate to each other or the whole. Totality, therefore, is an important methodological concept, one which allows us to move between levels of abstraction so as to understand the uneven and fragmented nature of capitalism. Lefebvre (2003) divides capitalist totality into a series of levels, with (G) representing the global, (M) representing the urban, and (P) representing the level of daily life (p. 78). However, he does not view these as distinct and isolated spheres that only interact as static,

externally related categories. Nor are Lefebvre's levels of abstraction, as Stefan Kipfer (2009) shows, reducible to questions of spatial scale (p. 67). Instead, each of the levels (G-M-P) can be investigated at different scales (worldwide, national, regional, local) (p. 75). Indeed, Lefebvre's central insight about the urban level (M) is that it mediates between the global level (G) of capital and state and the level of everyday life (P) (p. 72). Thus, while the level of everyday life may appear to be reducible to local scales, it can only be fully grasped through its global manifestations, as Lefebvre (2014) highlights in the third volume of his *Critique of Everyday Life* (p. 769). Likewise, the global level finds its expression at the scale of the world market, as well as at smaller local, regional, and national scales. State institutions, for instance, exist at regional, national, and international scales, as Kipfer (2009) highlights (p. 75). As Lefebvre (2003) shows, "there are cracks and crevices" (p. 86) between levels, which are increasingly blurred as urban development expands and the contradictions internal to capitalism intensify. At the same time, it remains possible to demarcate them analytically; every relation is not the same as everything else.

Like Lefebvre, Schwarz (1992f) views the local, national, and universal (or global) levels as moments of a social totality, which has itself been conditioned by processes of colonialism and imperialism (p. 104). Schwarz's dialectical method shows that Brazil represents a specific case that can nevertheless reveal important *general* characteristics about capitalism's developmental tendencies (p. 106). Rather than understanding Brazilian development as either fully determined by, or fully autonomous from, the logic of global capitalism, Brazil's particular form of modern development must be understood from the start in terms of its relationship to global capitalism, including how it continues to be shaped by imperialism. Similarly, Fernando Coronil's (1997) examination of Venezuela's oil industry highlights the importance of recentring

perspectives from the global South in order to enrich our general understanding of capitalist development. Throughout the 1900s, Venezuela remained dependent on the extraction and sale of oil on the world market while, internally, oil revenues were being directed towards driving a modernization process defined in terms of capitalist luxury, reproducing class inequalities within the nation-state (p. 173). Venezuela's national policy, in turn, impacted the development of global capital, as the state fought to defend its national interests even as Venezuela was integrated into the world market (p. 102).

Remaining attentive to the ways in which colonial and imperial relations resonate between global, national, and local levels in Schwarz's work helps to reveal the relationship between Lefebvre's levels (G-M-P) and how their effects are felt across spatial scales. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre (1991) connects global relations of colonialism and imperialism to the uneven social relations expressed at the level of daily life (p. 610). But while Lefebvre (2014) insists that his use of colonization "is not simply a metaphor, an allegory, or a mere simile or superficial analogy" (p. 610), Stefan Kipfer (2023) argues Lefebvre's usage is often metaphorical, an "*analogy* to the geopolitical situation of colonised countries" (p. 40).[30] Nevertheless, it indicates Lefebvre's attentiveness to colonial relations and the ways in which they relate to the "*social* unevenness in which the domination of everyday life takes place" (p. 44). Reading Schwarz alongside Lefebvre helps us to move beyond metaphor and explicitly consider the ways in which colonialism and imperialism have produced a particular form of

[30] See Kipfer (2023) for a development of the connection between Lefebvre and Franz Fanon, as a way of showing the ways that colonial relations are expressed spatially across these levels. This allows Lefebvre's notion of colonization of daily life (largely used metaphorically) to be understood as a concrete expression of global colonial, and imperial relations.

modernity in Brazil, one which is distinct from the Western model.[31] Global processes of colonization are dispersed to urban centres, as Stefan Kipfer shows in the case of housing redevelopment in Paris since the 1980s, which retains the influence of France's colonial history (p. 204). Bringing Lefebvre and Schwarz into conversation demands that we view development (at various levels) as a product of world capitalism from its inception, while also highlighting the ways in which relations of colonialism and imperialism are experienced at the levels of urban and everyday life.

Conclusion

Considering the circuits of capitalist reproduction as an uneven unity of differential temporalities reveals the tension between the reproduction of capital and the reproduction of labour-power as the central contradiction of capitalism. On the one hand, capital requires the reproduction of workers in order to continue producing surplus-value. On the other hand, the reproduction of living human beings represents the persistence of concrete human activity opposed to the abstract domination of the value relation. This contradiction emerges from what Marx calls the dual character of labour. It is internal to capitalism but also exceeds it, in that a non-capitalist element of concrete human activity persists. Because labour-power is contained in actually existing human beings, because we retain our ability to consciously create the world in our image through self-directed activity, capitalism's drive to subsume all human life to the production of value remains incomplete.

[31] Kipfer (2023) emphasizes that Lefebvre does, at times, go beyond a metaphorical view of colonization (p. 46). In "Reflections on the Politics of Space," Lefebvre begins to incorporate an analysis of global colonial relations, theorizing the colonization of daily life as the concrete, spatial expression of neo-colonial relations (p. 55).

Capitalist totality, then, is an open *process*. It can only be understood through its contradictory moments, through the relationships between the various parts and the whole. Marx's circuits of reproduction show that capitalist reproduction is an uneven global unity composed of the moments of production, circulation, and distribution. His method is neither a purely abstract theory that views actual relations as mere expressions of general laws, nor a blunt empiricism that understands specific experiences as completely untethered from any general logic. Romantic Marxism exemplifies this dialectical method by constantly moving between levels of abstraction and concretization, embodying what Thompson calls a logic of process. SRT expands on Marx's circuits in order to reveal the reproduction of labour-power that underpins both capitalist and human reproduction.

Social reproduction represents a moment excessive of capital's reproductive logic, where human activity might be redirected towards the development of a thriving human society rather than profit. Similarly, Romantic Marxism identifies persistent non-capitalist social forms that have not been fully subsumed to capital's logic of value production. Like social reproduction, these relations represent non-synchronous moments internal to global capitalism. While these moments are never fully autonomous from capital and remain, in various ways, conditioned by the time of capitalist production, they represent concrete counter-times that contain the possibility of alternate modern futures different from the one presented to us by capitalism. Uncovering these subterranean potentialities requires challenging the Eurocentric notion of progress, which defines all other social forms as expressions of "backwards" ways of life that must be overcome in order to fully realize the potential of modern industrial society. While orthodox Marxism, at times, reproduces some elements of modernization theory, other interpretations of Marx's work shows that there are multiple possible paths to communism.

Uncovering these possibilities requires remaining attentive to the uneven and contradictory nature of historical development, as well as the multiple and diverse temporalities that exist as a part of global capitalist totality.

Chapter 3 – History and Uneven Development: Colonialism, Concrete Counter-Times, and Alternate Modern Futures

If the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that both complement each other, the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting point for a communist development – Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels (2002, p. 197).

In order to analyse a national peculiarity, sensed in everyday life, we have been driven to reflect on the colonial process, which was international – Roberto Schwarz (1992c, p. 30).

In both these approaches – that of uneven and combined development and that of the hypercomplex temporalities of capital – 'old' and 'new', 'pre-modern and 'modern' join together in hybrid concatenations that defy linearity – David McNally (2025, pp. 13-14).

Introduction

Employing Marx's dialectical method allows us to theorize capitalism as an uneven, contradictory, and global unity made up of internally related moments, including economic, political, and cultural relations. While orthodox interpretations of Marx uphold an economistic, mechanical, and evolutionist view of historical development, a close reading of Marx's overall body of work reveals a processual and multilinear theory of history. Marx remains open to the possibility of multiple paths to communism. Rather than insisting that all areas of the world must pass through the same stages of development as England, Marx and Engels argue in the epigraph to this chapter that Russia might have followed its own unique path beginning from the communal *obshchina*, if combined with a global communist revolution. The influence of Romantic thought can be seen throughout Marx's work, which articulates a critique of capitalist violence in all its forms, including its colonial and imperial dimensions. Marx consistently expresses support for struggles against the destructive and dehumanizing expansion of capitalist relations, including the Paris Commune, the Russian *obshchina*, and anti-colonial movements in India.

Following from this interpretation of Marx, Romantic Marxism stresses the open and contradictory nature of global capitalism. The theory of uneven and combined development helps to reveal the dialectical relationship between capital's tendency to subsume all forms of life under the law of value on the one hand, and the persistence of multiple and diverse counter-times internal to capitalist totality on the other. Rather than eradicating so-called "traditional" forms of violence, modern capitalism appropriates and transforms these relations in different ways, producing an uneven world system made up of different combinations of social relations. Capitalist reproduction continues to be underpinned by colonialism and imperialism, a process that can only be fully understood by remaining attentive to the specific relations that exist in particular spatial locations, while ensuring that we situate these within the context of global capitalism. Romantic Marxism helps us to understand how this contradictory process of capitalist development produces non-synchronous moments internal to capitalism. These moments represent sites of potential contestation and class struggle, highlighting the explosive, utopian, and revolutionary possibilities that exist in these moments of temporal contradiction.

The question of time connects Romantic Marxism to the politics of Social Reproduction Theory. Both view the struggle against capitalism as an effort to exert control over our concrete, conscious, and creative activity, over the very time of our lives. As we have seen in the last chapter, while Marx did not always fully or explicitly develop the connections between capital's logic of value, social reproduction, and colonialism and imperialism, his method has been expanded in important and edifying ways since his death. SRT highlights the ways in which capitalist class exploitation is constituted by "extra-economic" forms of oppression and violence, including patriarchy and structural racism (see Ferguson, 2020b; Jaffe, 2020). Recent work from within SRT emphasizes the colonial and imperial relations that remain central to capitalist

accumulation (see McNally, 2024; Jaffe, 2024b). But while capitalism's tendency is to synchronize the various relations that constitute it, this process can never be fully realized. While "pre-capitalist" relations are appropriated for capital's reproduction, they are never fully subordinated to its logic.

Both SRT and Romantic Marxism remain open to the possibility of recovering these non-capitalist social forms as part of a project of communist freedom. Against the Eurocentric perspective that understands modern industrial capitalism as the embodiment of universal linear progress, the revolutionary Romantic critique highlights the ways in which the spread of capitalism has led to the disenchantment, quantification, and mechanization of the world, contributing to the destruction of more communal and social ways of living. But while violent and oppressive relations continue to underpin the reproduction of capitalism in new and transformed ways, non-capitalist forms of life persist within capitalist totality. For Romantic Marxism, the path to human freedom includes a struggle over the past, the possibilities that have been lost or destroyed by capitalist violence, including communal forms of living and political infrastructure. For SRT, concrete human activity represents the basis of the possibility of recovering a more holistic relationship to our labour, each other, non-human animals, and the planet.

The first section of this chapter underscores the importance of theorizing capitalism as an open, contradictory, and global totality. The theory of uneven and combined development allows for a multilinear understanding of history, one which views ongoing relations of colonialism and imperialism as central to the reproduction of capitalism today. The second section highlights the temporal aspects of global capitalism's uneven development. By emphasizing the role of class struggle in the making of history, Romantic Marxism reveals the concrete counter-times which

persist as a part of capitalist totality. These non-synchronous elements might contribute to the revival of a global working-class movement by pointing towards the possibility of new, qualitatively different futures that might be realized in the present. The third and largest section of the chapter will engage with our four Romantic Marxists on themes from the previous two sections, specifically the forms of difference that persist as a part of global capitalism and the liberatory potential of not-just-nostalgic struggles which emerge from the concrete counter-times internal to capitalist totality. The final section of the chapter will connect the insights of Romantic Marxism to Social Reproduction Theory. The two perspectives share complimentary views on the persistence of concrete times despite capital's tendency to subordinate all forms of human activity to the logic of value. While SRT makes the ways in which gender, race, and other forms of oppression are internally related to capitalist class relations explicit, Romantic Marxism highlights the temporal character of these relationships. Bringing the two perspectives into conversation allows us to conceive of working-class struggle (broadly understood) in the present as, in part, an effort to selectively recover elements of the past in order to build a qualitatively different future.

History and Development in Marxism

Modes of Production?

While modernization theory has often been associated with politically conservative thinkers (see Huntington, 1996), orthodox readings of Marx's work have expressed a similar view of development. These unilinear theories understand history as a progression of modes of production, with each subsequent stage representing a move towards the highest social form (see

Cohen, 2001). As we have seen in the last chapter, G. A. Cohen's primacy thesis holds that history is determined by the development of the productive forces of society.[32] In other words, economic factors determine all others, representing the necessary structural limit to the direction of history. The orthodox version of Marxism sees the technological developments enabled by industrial capitalist society as the key to human emancipation, once they have been liberated from the social relations of capitalism. Central to this view is what Cohen calls the development thesis, the notion that "productive forces tend to develop throughout history" (p. 134). Cohen argues that capitalism, as the most developed mode of production, represents a necessary stage of history because it is only under capitalism that humanity has been able to reach the necessary levels of productive power that would allow for the realization of communism (p. 194). History, here, is understood as a mechanical progression of stages which "emerge" (p. 365) once the contradiction between productive forces and social relations becomes untenable, what Cohen refers to as the "'technological' interpretation of historical materialism" (p. 29). Thus, as Cohen states, "capitalism was needed for progress" (p. 25), both because it is a necessary stage on the path towards communism and because it brings an end to pre-capitalist forms of domination and barbarity. Cohen's evolutionist view of progress is made explicit by Leigh Phillips (2015), who insists that we must "*accelerate* our modernity" (p. 186) in order to fully realize the potential of industrial capitalism.

[32] Recent works in Marxist ecology have revived this interpretation of Marx by arguing that the solution to the climate crisis is to be found by embracing the technological progress made possible by capitalism (see Bastani, 2020; Huber, 2022; Phillips, 2015; Srnicek & Williams, 2016). Matthew Huber (2022), for example, argues that the centralization and development of industrial power – nuclear power, in particular – has created the conditions for its socialization, once the means of production have been seized by the working class (p. 251). For an example of the eco-modernist Promethean perspective which uncritically defends modern industrial society as the only solution to the climate crisis, see Leigh Phillips (2015). See Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams (2015) for an example of the accelerationist perspective, which argues that the capitalist tendency towards automation should be intensified as a way of moving towards a post-work utopia.

The mechanical and technological view of history is not completely untethered from Marx. Phillips quotes *The Communist Manifesto* at length, where Marx and Engels (2002) list the accomplishments of the bourgeoisie, including the creation of "more massive and more colossal productive forces" (p. 225) and the abolition of "ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions" (p. 223). Cohen cites *The German Ideology*, where Marx and Engels (1998) outline their materialist conception of history which understands the transition to higher modes of production as occurring by way of technological development: "slavery cannot be abolished without the steam-engine and the mule jenny, serfdom cannot be abolished without improved agriculture" (p. 44). From this perspective, the productive forces of society determine the course of history, and it is only when they come up against a "form of intercourse" (p. 83) (relations of production) which inhibits the further development of these forces that a change in mode of production occurs. The development of society's productive forces is necessary, for orthodox Marxism, because it is only by passing through each successive stage that it is possible for communist society to be realized. Capitalism, then, represents a necessary stage of human history, one which overcomes all obstacles to human development, producing world history by bringing all corners of the globe into contact with each other through the development of the world market. "The mission of capitalism," according to Cohen (2001), "is to carry humanity to that stage of abundance, whereupon it subverts itself and gives way to a classless society" (p. 199). The language here is quite clear: it is *capitalism's* mission to carry us to the required stage, where the contradictions of *capitalism* will allow for communism to emerge. History's trajectory has already been determined, only to be fulfilled by the unilinear march of progress.

Recent works responding to the ecological crisis have insightfully modified the technological interpretation of historical materialism. Matthew Huber (2022) explicitly centres

the role of class struggle in overcoming capitalism, while Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams (2016) attempt to exorcise the Eurocentric underpinnings of accelerationism by rightly insisting that "various modernities are possible, and new visions of the future are essential for the left" (p. 74). However, Huber (2022) maintains that class struggle must be primarily over the control and use of the technologies developed under capitalism (p. 254), rather than a qualitative transformation of the productive forces. Srnicek and Williams (2016) insist that "our level of freedom is highly dependent upon the historical conditions of scientific and technological development" (p. 82). As such, they all remain confined by a perspective which views the acceleration of the productive forces made possible by capitalism as the necessary condition for fulfilling the possibilities of modernity. However, as Martín Arboleda (2025) argues, the technological understanding of the forces of production mistakenly reduces the latter to the particular technological forms they have taken under capitalism (p. 1108). While capitalist society produces certain productive forces, these will necessarily be transformed once capitalism is overcome and new (communist) relations of production allow us to view productive forces as more than inputs in the production process (p. 1109).[33] Rather than accelerating the development of capitalist forces of production, the solution to the ecological crisis requires a qualitatively different type of development, one which would allow for the creation and satisfaction of human needs in ways that are egalitarian, democratic, and sustainable (Löwy, 2023).

The mechanical understanding of history views development as a unilinear trajectory moving inexorably from less to more developed modes of production, measuring all social forms against the Eurocentric ideal of Western industrial society. Leigh Phillips (2015) embraces this

[33] However, while Arboleda (2025) rightly argues that the development of the productive forces under socialism would be qualitatively different than under capitalism, he maintains the strictly forward-facing view that industrial development can – and must – overcome the limits of capitalist industrialization (p. 1109).

perspective, arguing that “the fruits of civilisation should be extended to all of humanity” (p. 5). Civilization, for Phillips, clearly refers to Western civilization, and one wonders how he thinks it should be extended (or how it has been, historically). In a more exaggerated version of the argument, Bill Warren (1980) explicitly states that the imperial “extension” of Western civilization to the rest of the world is, in fact, the most efficient and effective way of spreading capitalist relations, thereby speeding up the process of proletarianization and bringing the world closer to a communist revolution: “Marx accordingly recognized the historically progressive role of British imperialism in no uncertain terms, indeed in words of poetic vision” (p. 40). While Marx certainly rejected any perspective on India that sought to preserve traditional forms of “Oriental despotism” (Marx, 1978c, p. 658), he, in no uncertain terms, opposed British imperialism in India (Benner, 2018, p. 176). Warren’s view is based on an inaccurate understanding of the world economy, one which sees global capitalism as the outcome of mutually beneficial (even if uneven) exchange relations, rather than systematically unequal relations of dependence based on the ongoing use of force, trade imbalances, and mounting debt (McMichael, Petras, & Rhodes, 1974, p. 89). Both Warren and Phillips reproduce a linear understanding of history and the Eurocentric view of development, assuming that there is only one path towards modernity.

In response to such productivist interpretations of Marx, Kohei Saito (2022) goes so far as to argue that we need to abandon historical materialism as a method due to its evolutionist origins (p. 2). According to Saito, Marx did not break with a mechanical view of history until the 1860s, when he began to incorporate insights from studying non-Western and non-capitalist societies into his worldview (p. 182). A similar perspective can be found in earlier works on the influence of Russian populism on Marx’s thought (see Shanin, 1983b; Wada, 1983). Haruki

Wada (1983), for instance, argues that Marx's interest in the prospect of a Russian revolution caused him to modify his position on the possibility of multiple paths of development (p. 44). But while Marx's views certainly developed as he began to focus his studies on non-Western societies, Saito and Wada both cede too much ground to orthodox interpretations of Marx. As Derek Sayer and Philip Corrigan (1983) argue, Marx did not adhere to a mechanical view of development even in his earlier work (p. 77). Rather than interpreting Marx's work prior to the 1860s as productivist and evolutionist, Ellen Meiksins Wood (2016) argues that Marx consistently engaged in what she calls "critical historical materialism" (p. 4), a historical, not teleological, view which understands capitalism as a set of social relations, not merely an economic structure. While Cohen interprets Marx's materialist conception of history as a technologically determinist explanation for the evolution of modes of production based on the development of productive forces, Wood insists that Marx's historical materialism has been, from its inception, attentive to the multiple and diverse paths history can take (p. 122). Rather than a break, Marx's late works represent a *development* of his dialectical method, which consistently criticizes the "so-called historical presentation of development" (Marx, 1993, p. 106) that views earlier modes of production as mere steps along a unilinear path.

Uneven and Combined Development

History, according to the non-orthodox reading of Marx, is a contingent and open process of *uneven development*. As we have seen in the last chapter, capital can take a multitude of diverse forms. The distinctions between its various expressions can only be understood through rigorous empirical study. The uneven nature of capitalism can only be fully grasped by moving between levels of abstraction and concretization, reading Marx's theoretical insights as part of a logic of process rather than as static and determining laws. The theory of uneven and combined

development views history in this way, as a contradictory process containing multiple possible trajectories (Löwy, 2010, p. 23).[34] Doing so allows us to theorize global capitalism as a totality, while also remaining attentive to the historical variations that make up the world system (Makki, 2015, p. 491).

While the theory of uneven and combined development reveals the processual and contradictory nature of the capitalist world system, it is also important to consider the uneven form of development prior to capitalism (Matin, 2007, p. 421). Expanding the theory of uneven and combined development to include pre-capitalist societies allows us to better understand the particular and diverse social forms that make up those histories, particularly in the non-Western world. Doing so reveals the ways in which global capitalism has, in part, been constituted by non-Western social forms, expanding our understanding of capitalist modernity beyond the unilinear Eurocentric framework. Kamran Matin examines pre-capitalist development in Iran, showing that its relationship with nomadic Turkish society created a particular form of state based on paternalistic and centralized power, characteristics that continue to influence Iranian society today (p. 438). These unique traits have been incorporated and transformed by global capital which has, in turn, been altered by the integration of these social forms.

Against the mechanical view of Western progress, the perspective of uneven and combined development highlights the ways in which capitalist modernity incorporates and transforms – rather than eliminates – so-called traditional forms, including both communal ways of living and forms of domination that predate capitalism (Makki, 2015, p. 483). Once integrated into the process of value production, capital's reproduction becomes underpinned by these once

[34] See Leon Trotsky (1960; 1969) for the theory of uneven and combined development. See Michael Löwy (2010) and Fouad Makki (2015) for a history and current applications of the theory.

pre-capitalist, but now uniquely modern, forms. As Massimiliano Tomba (2013) argues, pre-capitalist forms of slavery were transformed by their incorporation into the capitalist world market, while new forms of slavery were created (p. 151). Indeed, the rise of capitalism on a world scale intensified the use of slave-labour and incorporated it into the global system of value production. Rather than a linear progression from traditional forms of domination to free wage-labour, capital created more slaves, bringing approximately 9,599,000 new slaves from Africa to the Americas between 1519 and 1867 (p. 151n270). Thus, rather than an expression of the backwardness of certain societies, the use of slave (and child) labour has been, and in some cases continues to be, central to the reproduction of capitalist society (p. 155). The unevenness of the world system creates the possibility of unique combinations of social relations, as less developed societies integrate economic, political, cultural, and social elements from more developed states in particular ways (Matin, 2007, p. 427). But because they do so under different conditions, new developmental paths begin to emerge. The combination of pre-capitalist relations with modern capitalist developments produces different articulations of capitalism and, as we will see below, different temporal combinations. Studying these multiple configurations furthers our understanding of capitalism in general because, as we have seen, the logic of capital can only be fully grasped through its concrete and differential expressions, including those that emerge from non-Western societies.

Attentiveness to real history, to the particular forms that capitalism takes, as well as the specific combination of relations that constitute these diverse expressions, allows for a fuller understanding of the uneven and contradictory logic of capitalist development. Jairus Banaji (2011) takes up the case of the Deccan in India, showing that pre-capitalist forms of labour have been incorporated into the capitalist mode of production (p. 282). While small peasants in the

Deccan in the late nineteenth century appeared to be dominated by traditional forms of moneylending, they were, in fact, in the process of being incorporated into relations of economic dependence and capitalist exploitation through the investment of capital (p. 304). Rather than indicating the persistence of feudalism, traditional debt relations were integrated into capitalist processes of value production, changing their character while also contributing to the particular form of capitalist development in India. Instead of applying the abstract logic of capitalist development to every case, thereby erasing capitalism's concrete and diverse configurations, or viewing particular cases as entirely distinct and isolated, Banaji shows that cases like the Deccan are best understood as expressions of the *contradictory* process of capitalist development (p. 329).

Marx on Uneven Development

While an understanding of the general logic of capitalism is necessary, it is equally important to remain attentive to the concrete expressions that are constitutive of capitalist totality. At times, however, Marx seems to articulate an overly abstract understanding of development, suggesting that capitalism is a stage that all societies must pass through on the way to communism (Marx & Engels, 2002, p. 222). But even in *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels describe capitalism as a system of "naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation" (p. 222). Cohen (2001) likewise acknowledges that the spread of industrial capitalism was "undoubtedly oppressive" (p. 214), and Phillips (2015) decries the slavery, colonization, and war that capitalism depends on. But both Cohen and Phillips interpret Marx's work as a call to fulfill, rather than struggle against, the modern capitalist path of development. As Phillips states, "the point is to take command of this dynamic yet barbaric machine. To retain the vitality of

modernity, indeed to unleash its heretofore stifled energies, while doing away with its villainy" (p. 258).

Teodor Shanin (1983a) and, more recently, Kohei Saito (2022) respond to the evolutionist tendency internal to Marxism by arguing that even Marx "did not jettison the kernel of evolutionism" (Shanin, 1983a, p. 5) until later in his life. However, both Shanin and Saito overstate the extent to which it is possible to locate a break in Marx's thought. In Volume I of *Capital*, Marx (1990) explicitly states that the development of capitalism in England is not a general model to be applied to all other nations. Rather, development "assumes different aspects in different countries, and runs through its various phases in different orders of succession, at different historical epochs" (p. 876). England, therefore, is only a model for other societies that have already embarked on the same developmental path. As Kevin Anderson (2025) shows, Marx identifies a variety of pre-capitalist forms in the *Grundrisse* – Asiatic, Slavonic, ancient (Greco-Roman), and Germanic – that exist alongside each other, rather than as a progression of stages (p. 130). While development in the West moved through Greco-Roman slave society to Western feudalism and then on to capitalism, this does not mean that every society must follow the same path. Since the Greco-Roman form is not higher than the other pre-capitalist forms and *only* Greco-Roman society transitioned to Western feudalism, the other forms represent different starting points with different possible trajectories (p. 131). It is for this reason that Marx (1993) describes capitalism as "a contradictory form of development" (p. 105), a process which occurs unevenly through the incorporation and transformation of pre-capitalist relations in multiple and diverse configurations. The specific form that capitalism takes depends on the particular combination of these relations, as Matin shows in the case of state formation in Iran and, as we will see below, Schwarz demonstrates in Brazil. Marx's interest in non-Western and pre-

capitalist societies later in life does not, therefore, represent a break with his other work, nor is it a shift in focus from theory to history. Rather, it represents a continuation of Marx's dialectical method, a process of connecting the general logic of capital to the concrete and differential ways this logic is expressed in the real world. Over the course of his life, Marx certainly became more attentive to non-Western forms of development and the role of anti-colonial struggle (Sayer & Corrigan, 1983, p. 91), but his increased sensitivity to multiple paths of development is best understood as a process of learning, not a departure from his earlier work.

When read alongside his more fully developed texts like *Capital*, Marx's later work on pre-capitalist societies contributes to a fuller understanding of the general logic of capitalist development and a more complete grasp of capitalist totality. By learning from his contemporaries, Marx's thought evolved, particularly in relation to colonization and the role of anti-colonial struggle. For instance, Thierry Drapeau (2019) shows that Marx's relationship with Chartist Ernest Jones contributed to Marx's evolving views on colonization and the revolutionary potential of colonized subjects (p. 1196). In his writings on India, Jones denounces British colonial rule and encourages internationalist solidarity between the English working class and anti-colonial struggle in India (pp. 1201-1202). Against the Eurocentric view which describes the Indian people as backwards and uncivilized, Jones insists that it was the British colonizers who were barbaric. While Marx's (1978c) "The British Rule in India" does not romanticize pre-colonial India in the way that Jones does – Marx refers to English colonialism as "the unconscious tool of history" (p. 658) – it highlights the more violent (in comparison to prior forms of colonialism) nature of British colonial rule, an insight that Drapeau (2019) argues was, at least in part, due to the influence of Jones (p. 1203). Thus, Marx neither romanticizes pre-colonial India nor ignores the brutal nature of British colonialism (Benner, 2018, p. 177). While

Marx's views on the structural changes that occurred in India due to colonization reflect the Eurocentrism of his time, they are largely undisputed by anti-colonial Indian historians (Ahmad, 2000, p. 230). As Aijaz Ahmad argues, Marx's perspective cannot be separated from his consistent condemnation of colonial violence (p. 236).

Marx's later notebooks examine the relationship between spreading capitalist relations, colonial violence, and anti-colonial resistance, highlighting the fact that capitalist relations do not simply emerge; they are *imposed* (Anderson, 2025, p. 14). Marx's writings on colonial slavery in Jamaica show a deep contempt for those who assumed that capitalist labour relations would simply be accepted by freed slaves (McNally, 2024, p. 463). Rather than passively accepting capitalist work, freed slaves chose to "loaf," which is to say that they spent their time acting for themselves. While *Capital* is focused on uncovering capitalism's logic of reproduction Marx does not forget that "extra-economic" forms of violence and oppression – including the colonization and enslavement of indigenous peoples of America and Africa – lie at the origins of capitalism and, indeed, continue to underpin its reproduction. Marx's developing views on uneven development in India show an attentiveness to the ways in which colonial and imperial relations have always been central to the spread of capitalism.

The Uneven Times of Capitalism

While global capitalism is made up of a variety of diverse and uneven social relations, capital attempts to unify the multiple and diverse rhythms of life through the subsumption of all forms of labour to abstract labour time. Jonathan Martineau (2016) calls this process the hegemony of capitalist clock-time (p. 108) and Massimiliano Tomba (2013) refers to the

"synchronisation" (p. 144) of multiple temporalities to the law of value. Subordination of human activity to the time of the clock represents a qualitative shift from previous ways of organizing time, one which coincided with the rise of industrial capitalism on a world scale (Martineau, 2016, p. 50). Indeed, capitalism's spread was accomplished, in part, by the subjection of daily life to the time of the clock alongside the institutionalization and coordination of capitalist relations of production, what we know now as World Standard Time. Volume II of *Capital* emphasizes the efforts of capitalists to synchronize the various moments of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption that exist in the process of commodity circulation on the world market (Marx, 1992, p. 327).

However, while capitalism seeks to transform both space and time according to the law of value, to subsume them to the homogenous spaces and times of commodity production, such a standardized fantasy is never fully realizable in practice. Rather than replacing traditional methods of labour exploitation and domination with wage labour, capitalism has often created new forms of violence and domination (the sweatshop) or reimagined old ones (migrant and child labour), by combining these forms with the process of capitalist value production (Tomba, 2013, p. 155). And, as Fernando Coronil (1997) argues, alternative pathways of development exist in the global periphery due to the particular form modernization has taken in the global South (p. 18). These concrete counter-times can be found in extant non-capitalist social forms, which persist today as internal contradictions to the Eurocentric and unilinear path of global development (Tomba, 2019, p. 9).

History and Class Struggle

In order to properly grasp the contradictory and uneven movement of the capitalist world system, it remains important to avoid interpreting these developments as the mechanical result of

capitalism's techno-productivist unfolding. The process of uneven development is only intelligible in relation to class struggle, the efforts of actually existing human beings resisting the homogenizing tendency of capitalist social relations (García-Quesada, 2022, p. 25). Marx and Engels' statement in *The Communist Manifesto* that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Marx & Engels, 2002, p. 219) compels us to understand forms of struggle as counter-movements, expressions of concrete counter-times to capital's tendency towards the subsumption of all forms of life to abstract labour-time. While the abstract time of capitalism structures our days, orders our activities, and places limits on our ability to spend our time as we choose, it is incapable of fully erasing the multiple and diverse concrete rhythms that make up human life (Martineau, 2016, p. 147). It cannot, because capital's reproduction depends upon concrete forms of labour taking place in concrete times. Such labour can only be performed by actual human beings, who are only sustained and reproduced through concrete social reproductive labour. And those human beings, in various ways, resist the subordination of their activity to the abstract time of capitalist production. Uneven development is, therefore, a product of the ongoing conflict over time. While capital seeks to synchronize multiple temporalities, this process remains incomplete and non-synchronous elements persist.

The concrete and differential rhythms of human activity and struggle are never fully distinct or autonomous from the abstract time of capital. They are related to, yet not fully determined by, capitalist time. These "not-just-capitalist" (Kipfer, 2018, p. 486) spaces and times can be found, for instance, in indigenous forms of living and resistance that blur the line between urban and rural spaces. While indigenous lifeways today do not exist fully outside the scope of capitalist relations, they represent possible counter-times to the modern, Eurocentric path of development. The growth in Indigenous populations in North American cities and the ways in

which these communities continue to defend and create new ways of living are examples of the struggle between capitalist synchronization and non-synchronous elements (p. 485). While a return to the past is impossible, the selective recovery or regeneration of communal forms of life and labour that persist under capitalism is not. Indigenous land-defense in North America, such as the opposition to the Line 9 pipeline in Canada, is both a struggle against the expansion of Canadian and global capital and an attempt to create new forms of living, drawing upon (and, in the process, transforming) Indigenous traditions and experiences (pp. 482-483).

Instances where non-synchronous moments collide with capitalist social relations represent potentially explosive spaces of revolutionary possibility. The uneven and contradictory nature of global capitalism creates the possibility of a combination of levels of development, allowing for less developed states to "skip" some of the stages that orthodox Marxism views as necessary steps on the road to communism (Löwy, 2010, p. 87).[35] This is what allowed for the Russian Revolution to occur in a country that was relatively less developed compared to other European nations (p. 51).[36] As Michael Löwy demonstrates, Trotsky's attentiveness to capitalism's uneven nature allowed him to eschew mechanical interpretations of historical materialism and see the possibility of non-bourgeois forms of development through diverse combinations of social relations (p. 87). The possibility of these "leaps" creates the potential for revolution in less developed countries, as occurred in Russia in 1917 and Cuba in 1959. Rather than viewing communism as the culmination of the linear, Western path of development, the theory of uneven and combined development sees the possibility of revolution in areas of the

[35] As Tomba (2019) argues, these "leaps" are not merely skipping ahead along the same linear path (p. 164). Instead, they are better understood as qualitative leaps towards alternate possible futures.
[36] Antonio Gramsci (2000) makes a similar point in his essay "The Revolution Against *Capital,*" where he observes that the Russian Revolution did not follow the order of events laid out in *Capital* (p. 33). Like Trotsky, Gramsci saw the possibility of Russia "skipping" stages when combined with Western productive developments and the experiences and forms of struggle of the global working class.

world that have not passed through the stages of development that orthodox Marxists see as necessary for the emergence of communism.[37]

Marx's later work shows an attentiveness to precisely this possibility. As Kevin Anderson (2025) shows, the late Marx argued that less developed nations might be the spark for a revolution in Europe, if combined with the proletarian movement in the West (p. 17). Marx (1978c) points to the centrality of anti-colonial struggle in India, stating that it will not be "till the Hindoos themselves shall have grown strong enough to throw off the English yoke altogether" (p. 662) that India will be liberated. As Erica Benner (2018) highlights, rather than viewing imperialism in India as a civilizing and progressive force, Marx understood imperial capitalist rule in India as an obstacle preventing the full realization of the increases in human productive capacities made possible by capitalism (p. 180). The reclamation of those increased powers need not occur by following the exact footsteps of the proletariat in the West (p. 181). Instead, Marx identifies the possibility of a uniquely Indian path of development, one which would integrate modern infrastructure in new ways. While he acknowledges that this could also be accomplished by a proletarian revolution in England, the quoted passage indicates that Marx recognizes the centrality of anti-colonial struggle to an international communist revolution. While the *Manifesto* states that England must be the necessary starting point for a communist revolution, Marx's writings on India demonstrate an attentiveness to the possibility of multiple paths towards communism.

[37] See Eric Wolf (1999) for an elaboration on the revolutionary potential of less developed societies, including Mexico, Russia, and Cuba. These cases show that peasant resistance to the spread of capitalism is not merely reactionary. Indeed, it can also represent the basis of "a new and more humane social order" (p. 282). The not-just-nostalgic character of so-called defensive struggles such as these will be developed further in the next chapter.

Marx's recognition of multiple possible trajectories can also be found in his later writings on Russia (Shanin, 1983b, p. 268). In response to a letter from Russian revolutionary Vera Zasulich inquiring as to whether the analysis in *Capital* would require that Russia pass through the same stages as Western Europe or if the persistence of the rural commune might allow Russia to follow a unique path of development, Marx (1983) writes that *Capital* "provides no reasons for or against the vitality of the Russian commune. But the special study I have made of it, including a search for original source-material, has convinced me that the commune is the fulcrum for social regeneration in Russia" (p. 124). While contemporaries of Marx, including Georgi Plekhanov, reified the analysis of *Capital* and insisted that the activity of Russian peasants was necessarily reactionary, Marx expressed support for the Russian populists who saw the possibility of the rural commune as the starting point of a Russian revolution, if combined with modern developments and connected to a global anti-capitalist movement (Shanin 1983a, p. 275). Indeed, Marx and Engels (2002) updated the *Manifesto* in the Preface to the 1882 Russian Edition, where they argue that the Russian *obshchina*, or rural commune, could "serve as the starting point for a communist development" (p. 196). Rather than insisting that Russia or India must follow the same path of development as England, Marx and Engels show a recognition that multiple trajectories are possible.

Revolutionary Romanticism and the Possibility of the Past

While mechanical historical materialism views communism as the outcome of a linear and evolutionist understanding of development, Romantic Marxism follows Marx by highlighting the concrete forms of resistance to the spread of capitalist social relations which allow for the possibility of different, non-capitalist outcomes. While capitalism places limits on our lives, it does not fully determine them. The activity of human beings, the way they interact in

and on the world, and their forms of productive activity and struggle, all shape the direction of history. Non-synchronous social forms contain potential counter-times, alternative possible futures that might escape the totalizing tendency of capitalist modernity. The revolutionary Romantic desire to selectively recover elements of past forms of life is, when integrated with the theory of uneven and combined development, not simply an ideological yearning for what has been lost to, or destroyed by, capitalist modernity. Instead, it is an expression of the not-just-nostalgic struggle over the possibilities contained in non-capitalist social forms that exist in the present. It is rooted, materially, in the persistence of multiple temporalities and concrete rhythms, despite capital's efforts to synchronize them all according to the law of value and the time of the clock. While capitalism transforms and incorporates these ways of living and forms of time into its logics, it has not eliminated them completely.[38] Moments of discord and potential sites of struggle endure, representing possible starting points of a post-capitalist future (Tomba, 2013, p. xiv).

The possibility of a selective recovery of the past is what Marx saw in the struggle for the Paris Commune. As Shanin (1983a) argues, the Paris Commune represented, for Marx, the realization of traditional communal forms of living, not in the sense of a pure return to a pre-capitalist past but as the creation of a new and transformed Commune, the combination of non-capitalist social life with new forms of infrastructure and organization made possible by

[38] Harry Harootunian (2017) argues that this indicates that processes of "formal subsumption" are ongoing and that capitalism remains an incomplete process, or that "real subsumption" has not occurred (p. 68). In the Appendix to Volume I of *Capital*, Marx (1990) defines formal subsumption as when the "labour process becomes the *instrument* of the valorization process" (p. 1019, emphasis mine) and real subsumption as when "a *specifically capitalist form of production* comes into being (at the technological level too)" (p. 1024). Under formal subsumption, non-capitalist forms of labour persist but have become integrated into the process of capitalist value production, while under real subsumption, non-capitalist elements have been completely transformed into capitalist form of labour. While it is true that capitalist totality remains incomplete and open, the notion that real subsumption has not occurred anywhere is perhaps overstated by Harootunian. See George García-Quesada (2022) for an appreciative but critical analysis of Harootunian's take on subsumption.

capitalism (p. 15). Similarly, Marx (1978c) saw in India the possibility of the "regeneration of that great and interesting country" (p. 662) once British rule had been vanquished. Thus, the Paris Commune, the Russian *obshchina*, and anti-colonial resistance in India were not just efforts to defend traditional forms of life. Rather, they were expressions of not-just-nostalgic forms of struggle, attempts to create a qualitatively different future through the recovery of elements of the past. Non-capitalist social forms contain the unrealized possibility of a post-capitalist future, and their enduring rhythms represent possible counter-times conflicting with the linear and abstract time of capital. The struggle over the past is, therefore, a material one, an effort to commemorate the struggles of those who have come before us (Bensaïd, 2009, p. 88). Revolution, so conceived, is a contradictory and uneven process, involving interruptions, retrogression, and leaps into the future.

Romantic Marxism's Uneven Temporalities

While the productivist and evolutionist current has been dominant within Marxism since Marx's death, it has never fully eliminated dissident perspectives. Alternative currents have survived, highlighting the dialectical, multilinear, and historical nature of Marx's theory. Romantic Marxism represents one such throughline, insofar as it is characterized by a processual understanding of history. While it is capital's tendency to transform space into homogeneous sites of production and consumption, this process is contradictory, uneven, and remains incomplete. And while capital attempts to subsume all forms of human activity to the abstract time of value production, Romantic Marxism insists on the contradictory nature of capitalist time, and the persistence of multiple, diverse, and concrete temporalities despite – and against – the abstract time of capital. The selective recovery of non-capitalist elements of the past,

combined with the creation of new revolutionary and democratic organizational forms, allows for new modern futures to emerge as concrete potentialities (Tomba, 2019, p. 81). History, understood in this way, is a multilinear "field of possibility" (Tomba, 2013, p. 130), not a determined, unilinear trajectory.

Thompson's historical analysis allows him to remain attentive to the non-synchronous elements that persisted during the spread of capitalism in eighteenth-century England, including the resistance of Luddites and the activity of riotous mobs. Like Thompson, Benjamin identifies non-synchronous moments of concrete activity and struggle, including the play of children and the destruction of clock towers during revolutionary moments. Benjamin views modern capitalism dialectically, as a social form which has disenchanted the world, but which might also allow for its "*re*enchantment" (Buck-Morris, 1991, p. 253). Like Thompson and Benjamin, Lefebvre views non-synchronous elements of the past as containing the unrealized potential of alternate developmental trajectories, ones which might be realized through concrete struggle. While capitalism produces abstract space, that which is "formal and quantitative" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 49), it also contains within it "differential space-time" (p. 50), or other spaces and times in which concrete forms of human activity take place. While the totalizing pressure of capital's logic of value tends towards the production of abstract space and linear time, spaces and times of difference persist. Schwarz's work demands that we view development as global from its inception, thereby recentering the global South as a producer of modernity while simultaneously destabilizing the false universalism of Western modernity.

Non-Mechanical Historical Materialism

As we have seen in the last chapter, Thompson argues for a logic of process against Louis Althusser's unhistorical theoreticism. But while Thompson's response to Althusser is an

important defense of the need to compare theoretical categories against real social relations, it is possible to bend the stick too far in the other direction. Thompson, at times, gets stuck in the false binary between structure and agency, or economistic determinism and historical process. This leads him to accuse Marx's critique of political economy in works like *Capital* and the *Grundrisse* of economic determinism (Wood, 2016, p. 60n13). However, as we have seen in the last chapter, it is a mistake to abandon theoretical categories entirely or reduce them to the level of experience (understood narrowly as pure empiricism). As we have seen in the last chapter, Marx abstracts from history in order to uncover the general logic of capitalist reproduction. But theorizing capitalism at this high level of abstraction does not preclude the empirical or historical inquiry that Thompson rightly views as essential. As we have seen, sections of *Capital* do, in fact, examine concrete reality in order to investigate the social processes which constitute capitalism's historical development. But without the important theoretical insights of *Capital* and the *Grundrisse* cast at a high level of abstraction it would be impossible to theorize the differential experiences that Thompson describes in *The Making of the English Working Class* as the formation of an *objective* class grounded in capitalist productive relations.

However, as Wood (2016) shows, Thompson's work does not entirely reject theoretical categories (p. 69). Indeed, Thompson distinguishes between the structuralism of Althusser, which views development as merely the realization of capital's ideal form, and Marx's historical materialism, where capitalism's logic is expressed through its uneven historical development. In *The Making*, Thompson (1991) argues that class is not a static category but "a historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness" (p. 8). Through a close examination of eighteenth-century England, a logic of process emerges, where seemingly disconnected experiences begin to

form into a coherent class with its own institutions, culture, and consciousness. Rather than an abstract law, where human activity is determined by the mode of production, Thompson unearths a logic of responses to shared experience, where human activity is conditioned, but not fully determined, by the social relations that people find themselves in.

Lefebvre's theory of space helps to demonstrate the persistence of concrete forms of activity internal to capital's abstract logic. Following Marx's dual character of labour, Lefebvre (1991) elaborates a dual theory of space (p. 70). Space is both a *work*, the outcome of concrete, specific creative activity, and a *product*, the commodified, exchangeable result of labour in the abstract sense. Lefebvre views the two as dialectically related, where the product represents an abstraction of the concrete work without completely eliminating "all creativity into the service of repetition" (p. 77). In abstract space, concrete forms of human activity are no longer directed towards human flourishing. Instead, they are appropriated by capital to produce surplus value. However, abstract space does not completely erase the space of creative work, which occurs in what Lefebvre calls "differential space" (p. 52). While abstract space is homogeneous and quantifiable, differential space is variegated and textured, representative of concrete human experience. These concrete elements represent non-synchronous moments, potential counter-times and sites of rupture produced by the concrete activity of ordinary people.

Like Thompson, Lefebvre argues that the abstract logic of capitalist development can only be understood through its diverse expressions. As Lefebvre (1991) states: "The 'commodity world', which is an abstraction, cannot be conceived of apart from the world market, which is defined territorially (in terms of flows and networks) and politically (in terms of centres and peripheries)" (p. 350). The state produces and reproduces relations of domination at multiple scales, ordering the world system according to hierarchical notions of centre and periphery,

influencing national policy developed by domestic ruling classes, and extending to the daily lives of the individuals in urban (and other) environments (Kipfer, 2023, p. 50). Capitalist totality, therefore, is not a fixed and unchanging structure but an open and contradictory hierarchically organized process, where categories are both "continuous" and "discontinuous" (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 420), contradictory and processual, unifying and fragmenting at the same time. While capital tries to subordinate all forms of life to its global logic, it also separates, individuates, and atomizes aspects of social life, making them appear as distinct and isolated from each other. This incomplete process tends towards homogeneity, but always comes into conflict with contradictory elements, gaps and breaks in its trajectory. The theory of an open and contradictory totality is what allows Lefebvre to theorize space as a contradictory moment where multiple temporalities collide (Kipfer, 2023, p. 14). While capitalist modernity tends towards the production of abstract space, this process is always incomplete, producing diverse combinations of relations as non-synchronous elements are transformed and incorporated into capital's logic.

Like for Lefebvre, the imposition of homogeneous and abstract space and time is not total for Benjamin. From the perspective of mechanical historical materialism, modernization is a linear process of overcoming the violence and barbarism of so-called "traditional" societies. Benjamin (1969e) rejects this binary opposition between modernity and tradition, insisting that there "is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (p. 256). While orthodox Marxism asserts that modernity reduces the level of violence and domination, Benjamin underscores the fact that modern civilization continues to be underpinned by violence and oppression. Modern and traditional forms are, for Benjamin, in an ongoing relationship with each other. As we have seen above, capitalist modernity continues to rely on extra-economic forms of violence and domination, transforming and incorporating them into the

logic of value production. Fouad Makki (2015) argues, drawing on Benjamin, that capitalism does not "move according to a single uniform beat, but operates through the complex contemporaneity of its unevenly combined social forms" (p. 489). While mechanical historical materialism reifies the past, viewing it as merely a stepping stone to a higher stage of development, Benjamin's version of historical materialism sees history as an uneven and contradictory process, where the past is in an ongoing relationship with the present and future.

Such a reading of Benjamin runs counter to those who view him as an undialectical thinker, at least regarding the relationship between past, present, and future (see Arendt, 1969). For instance, Hannah Arendt describes Benjamin's habit of collecting as simply an attempt to "preserve" (p. 39) the past, rather than an effort to bring it into the future in combination with elements of the present. But while Benjamin (1969f) views collecting as a way of remembering the past, he also sees it as a possible "rebirth" and "renewal" (p. 61) in the present. A similar sentiment is expressed in "The Task of the Translator," where he describes translation as an act of both preserving the meaning of the original and renewing it, where meaning attains its "most abundant flowering" in the translation (Benjamin, 1969d, p. 72). And, in "The Storyteller," Benjamin (1969c) shows an appreciation for those who remember the past while transforming it through the art of storytelling which, unlike the written word, is not set in stone.

Like Benjamin, Schwarz emphasizes the dialectical relationship between the past, present, and future. The development of capitalism in Brazil has occurred alongside, and in relation to, transformed pre-capitalist relations which continue to structure Brazilian life in important ways (Schwarz, 1992c, p. 20). Modernity in Brazil, therefore, "does not consist in breaking with the past or dissolving it, but in purifying its elements and arranging them within a contemporary – and, of course, a very inventive – perspective" (Schwarz, 1992d, p. 118). In

Brazil, productive relations continue to be governed by "favour," or the ideological dependence of ex-slaves on their owners, despite the formal implementation of bourgeois labour relations (Schwarz, 1992c, p. 22). Rather than facilitating development in Brazil, the uneven application of Western production methods and culture has hindered Brazilian development, which remains underpinned by "pre-capitalist" relations like favour, though such relations have not remained untouched by the logic of capitalism. Favour, for Schwarz, is a uniquely modern relation, one which "was present everywhere, combining itself with more or less ease to administration, politics, industry, commerce, the life of the city, the court, and so on" (p. 22). Rather than simply imposing Marxist categories such as the free wage labourer onto the Brazilian context, Schwarz compares concrete, historical experience against these general classifications. This allows him to understand the ways in which favour governed, and continues to govern, the activities of free people in Brazil, masking the more explicit colonial violence of slavery while still reproducing the dependence of workers on interpersonal relationships (Schwarz, 1992c, pp. 24-25).[39]

Romantic Marxism's Counter-Times

While, as Schwarz and Benjamin demonstrate, the uneven nature of capitalist development continues to be underpinned by so-called traditional forms of violence, domination, and oppression, it also allows for the possibility of recovering elements of more egalitarian and communal social forms of the non-capitalist past. Thompson (1993) explicitly develops the temporal dimension of the uneven spread of capitalist relations, describing modern industrial society as a reorganization of social relations according to the time of the clock (p. 385). While

[39] Instead of viewing the persistence of extra-economic forms of domination as examples of the ongoing process of primitive accumulation, Schwarz emphasizes the *capitalist* nature of these social forms and the ways in which they continue to shape the form that work takes under capitalism. See Aaron Jaffe (2024b) for an argument against the expansive definition of primitive accumulation which accounts for the ways in which capitalist reproduction continues to be underpinned by colonial and imperial domination, to be developed further below.

previous societies organized their activities according to the time it would take to complete required tasks, allowing for greater flexibility in the pace and rhythm of work, capitalist production tends towards the synchronization of these differential rhythms as a way of coordinating the production process. Thompson points to land enclosure in eighteenth-century England as part of this implementation of time-discipline (p. 380). Once people could no longer sustain themselves by working their own land for themselves, they became increasingly dependent on wage-labour and could therefore be disciplined more easily by capitalist clock-time.

The imposition of clock-time is an expression of capitalism's tendency to synchronize the diverse rhythms of human life. However, counter-tendencies to this development can be found in the concrete counter-times that persist, despite capital's efforts to subsume all temporalities to the time of production. These differential rhythms contain the potential for not-just-nostalgic struggles. While forms of resistance to the spread of capitalist social relations are often described as defensive efforts to preserve traditional values, Thompson (1993) shows that these so-called defensive struggles are, in fact, over how one allocates their time (p. 395). While capitalism transforms production and legal relations, this process occurs unevenly, in part due to struggles to protect traditional customs. It is in this context that the Luddite movement began, as a defense of small handicraft against the spread of industrial production (Thompson, 1991, p. 601). But these struggles were not only defensive, nor were they only an expression of a desire to return to past forms of life. Indeed, they are examples of not-just-nostalgic forms of resistance that were beginning to coalesce as an emerging class-consciousness (pp. 657-658). The Luddite movement will be examined in more detail below.

In the fifteenth of his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin (1969e) articulates a similar critique of capitalist clock-time, the tendency to subsume all other forms of time to the law of value (pp. 261-262). Elsewhere, he identifies the way that the factory assembly line subordinates the rhythm of work to the mechanical time of the machine (Benjamin, 1969a, p. 175). But just as Thompson views the resistance of eighteenth-century English workers as a concrete example of the persistence of multiple temporalities, Benjamin (2011h) insists that moments of contradiction and resistance to the empty time of capital endure (p. 242). He points to French revolutionaries attacking clocks in 1830 as an example of such resistance to the time of capitalist production (Benjamin, 1969e, p. 262). While capital seeks the homogenization and quantification of social time, people continue to struggle for a more human connection with the time in which they live their lives. In "The Metaphysics of Youth," Benjamin (2011f) calls this "youthful time" (p. 150), a form of time which persists as a "countermovement" (p. 156) to the temporality of capital. Here, one is able to engage in self-directed activity or "time of the self" (p. 156). It is for this reason that Benjamin (2011e) views education as so important (p. 40). When done properly it mobilizes past knowledge and experience in young people, empowering them to produce a different future where self-directed activity creates the conditions for freedom. This requires allowing

> young people to act *on their own* and consequently must rest content with conferring and fostering freedom. And so we see that the most urgent requirement of modern pedagogy is to create space for the emergent culture. Youth must learn by degrees to work, to take itself seriously, to educate itself: by placing trust in such youth, humanity places trust in its own future, in the irrational which it can only honor, in the youth that is filled not just

> with the spirit of the future – no! – but with the spirit that feels in itself the joy and the courage of new culture-bearers. (Benjamin, 2011c, p. 60)

For Benjamin, it is through their own self-governed activity that youth will be empowered to create a different future. In "Sleeping Beauty," Benjamin (2011d) states that, through education, young people will "waken in themselves a sense of community, a consciousness of themselves as the ones who, not without glory, will weave and give form to world history" (p. 26). The struggle to realize the ideal of youth is found in the possibility of the past that continues to exist in tension with the present (Benjamin, 2011c, pp. 59-60).

Like Thompson and Benjamin, Lefebvre (1996) views the tendency of capital to subordinate all forms of human activity to the time of production as incomplete (p. 156). As we have seen above, there are a multitude of rhythms and possible counter-times that persist despite capital's tendency to synchronize them all under the abstract space and linear time of production. Like Thompson's clock-time, Lefebvre (1991) sees linear time as related to the commodification of labour-power and the quantification of time into measurable, abstract units (p. 95). Time, like space, is reorganized and subordinated to the logic of value. This process of reducing time to that which can be exchanged on the market begins to obscure the lived time of our very lives: "Our time, then, this most essential part of lived experience, this greatest good of all goods, is no longer visible to us, no longer intelligible" (p. 95). The production of abstract space and linear time appears to eliminate all other forms of space and time through a process of centralizing totalization (p. 332). However, the production of abstract space does not fully eliminate differential spaces of concrete human activity. It is a contradictory process which "carries within itself the seeds of a new kind of space" (p. 52). And while cities under capitalism are produced as abstract spaces oriented according to the linear time of production, they also contain within them

a multitude of living rhythms, cyclical forms of time which interact in different combinations with linear time (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 222). While capitalist production subordinates the living rhythms of nature and human activity to linear time, the former persist in ways which "interfere with the linear processes and sequences of gestures and acts" (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 802). These forms of time are not relegated to a static and unchanging past. They can be recovered in the present because, while "time as such is irreversible … the past is never the past" (p. 805). The polyvalent rhythms and cyclical times of the past might still be recovered because they still exist, in transformed ways, as part of the contradictory present set of social relations.

Benjamin's urban explorations serve as helpful accompaniments to Lefebvre's theory of differential spaces and non-linear times. Benjamin (1996c) consistently highlights the ways urban life is shaped by capitalism, where people are "scarcely able to survive" (p. 451). But while capitalism places limits on the urban form and the activities that take place within it, it does not fully determine them. In "A Berlin Chronicle," Benjamin (1986a) contrasts the "horrors" (p. 13) of the school classrooms of his childhood, where time was ordered and enforced in order to prepare children for work, with the slower, older rhythm of a street near his childhood home. Here, we see the uneven experience of urban development, where differential rhythms persist despite capital's tendency to reorganize all forms of space and time according to the market. But the past does not persist in an entirely unchanged way, nor does it exist completely outside of capitalist social relations. The street of Benjamin's childhood is not the same as it was, even if some material elements and memory of it remain (p. 12). Capitalism incorporates and transforms elements of the past, directing them towards the logic of production. This process is expressed in the Paris arcades, where public space becomes primarily a site of commodity consumption (Benjamin, 1986b, p. 152). However, "moments and discontinuities"

(Benjamin, 1986a, p. 28) persist even in spaces of alienation and commodification, representing potential counter-times to the abstract time of capital.

Like Thompson, Benjamin (1969a) emphasizes the necessity of engaging with the past as a living tradition, remembering other possibilities that have actually existed prior to capitalist modernity (p. 158). While history for Benjamin represents the homogeneous time of progress, other non-synchronous times persist in a variety of forms (Jameson, 2022, pp. 147-148). To grasp these diverse and contradictory combinations of social times, Benjamin employs the technique of montage as a way of bringing together the contradictory fragments that make up modern life without attempting to create a false unity (Buck-Morris, 1991, p. 67). While capitalist modernity creates the myth that modern life has seamlessly transcended all prior social forms, Benjamin's use of montage helps to reveal the modern myth of the inevitable triumph of linear progress. Rather than a mere combination of contradictory elements, montage exposes the fragmentary nature of capitalist modernity, pointing towards the alternate trajectories that might emerge out of capital's discontinuities.

The existence of combinations containing non-synchronous elements means that differential rhythms and heterogeneous moments might be selectively recovered in the present. These combinations can be found in urban spaces, and Kipfer (2018) underscores the need to centre forms of indigenous life and struggle in Lefebvre's urban politics (p. 477). While Lefebvre views urbanization as a totalizing process that *incorporates* all subjectivities in uneven ways, Kipfer shows, drawing on Audra Simpson, that processes of urbanization in Canada actively *exclude* Indigenous people, in particular Indigenous women (p. 486). However, rather than an anti-urban politics that would reproduce the urban-rural binary, Kipfer insists on radically reformulating urban politics to include the defense of indigenous forms of life and not-

just-capitalist spaces as part of a broader struggle of reorganizing spatial relations in the Canadian state as a whole, both in the city and outside of it.

Schwarz's work examines the ways in which the non-capitalist past and modern social forms combine in contradictory, uneven, and unique ways through the importation of the literary novel in Brazil. While the adoption of Western forms of culture in Brazil has been inconsistent and contradictory, they are nevertheless "critical for Brazilian life" (Schwarz, 1992e, p. 44). The imposition of Western values in Brazil has created what Schwarz (1992b) calls "a lack of intellectual continuity" (p. 2), creating either a facsimile of European thought or a wholesale rejection of it. The latter perspective assumes that it is possible to dissociate Brazil from its colonial past through a return to an imagined pure Brazil, while the former insists that Brazil copy the Western model of development. For Schwarz, both sides of the binary desire the realization of modern progress (p. 3). On the one hand, the false universalism of Western development imposes modern values and capitalist production relations through colonial and imperial power. On the other hand, Brazilian nationalism pursues the realization of a truly Brazilian culture by expelling European and American influence, after which a truly Brazilian modernism would become possible. But the desire to recover a "pure" Brazilian society assumes, incorrectly, that Brazil was ever insulated from the world system. Against this view, Schwarz argues that Brazilian culture has always and already been combined with Western forms, making the recovery of an untouched Brazil impossible (p. 16).

Schwarz's work demonstrates that moving towards a qualitatively different future necessitates acknowledging the uneven, but global, nature of development and the particular forms it may take, especially in spaces which have been transformed by processes of colonization and imperialism. Doing so allows for alternate pathways – alternative modernisms –

to come into view, ones that need not replicate the trajectory of Europe or the United States, though they will inevitably occur in combination with Western influence. Rather than imposing the false universalism of the Western model of development, a truly universal humanism allows us to imagine different potential futures, only realizable through the selective recovery of elements of the past. Doing so requires remaining attentive to the specific forms that capitalism takes in the global South and how this might differ from the global North. However, as Nicholas Brown (2018) argues, it is important not to divorce Brazil's experience from the global context (p. 476). Indeed, an analysis of Brazil's uniquely modern social forms enriches our understanding of global capitalism's logic of development.

Social Reproduction Theory, Colonization, and Uneven Development

Romantic Marxism highlights the fact that capitalism was imposed, not homogeneously and completely, but unevenly and irregularly. Multiple temporalities make up a part of the uneven and contradictory totality that is global capitalism. As we have seen in the last chapter, SRT emphasizes the concrete temporality of the circuit of labour-power, the moment of social reproduction. The fact that social reproductive labour is central to capital's reproduction while also remaining, in a sense, outside of the circuits of capital means that the concrete, life-making labour of social reproduction might be more easily directed towards the reproduction of human beings rather than the reproduction of capital. But SRT also helps us to understand how the ways in which capital strives to subordinate all forms of human life to the logic of value do not occur in a uniform way. Colonization, imperialism, and gendered and racialized forms of oppression condition the ways in which capital operates, and so our analysis of capitalism's logic of uneven development must remain attentive to those social relations.

The theory of uneven development allows us to identify the liberatory potential contained in concrete counter-times. It also helps us understand the ways in which past social forms have been transformed and appropriated by the spread of capitalist relations. While, as we have seen above, Marx acknowledges the colonial violence and dispossession that formed the basis of capital's "primitive accumulation" in Europe, he does not explicitly consider how this impacted the uneven development of capitalism *globally* (McNally, 2024, p. 464). Expanding on Marx's method allows us to begin to examine the specific forms that capitalist development has taken outside the global North, the relationship between non-waged forms of labour and capitalist value production, and the ongoing centrality of extra-economic forms of domination to capitalist reproduction. A social reproduction approach allows us to understand the ways that forms of colonial, imperial, and racial violence continue to underpin capitalist reproduction, without relying on an expanded definition of primitive accumulation (Jaffe, 2024b, p. 190). Instead of extending the theory of primitive accumulation to include current manifestations of violent domination, capitalist violence today is better conceived as part of *capitalist* reproduction rather than ongoing *pre-capitalist* violence.

In a recent book on *Slavery and Capitalism*, David McNally (2025) argues that colonial slavery was central to the rise of modern capitalism (p. 14). Rather than an outdated social form destined to be overcome by capitalist wage-labour, slavery represents a specifically *modern* form of exploitation, integral to world capitalism and the production of value (p. 216). This view of slavery understands global capitalism as a concrete and uneven totality containing multiple and contradictory temporalities. McNally demonstrates that modern technological innovation occurred alongside the growth and intensification of slave labour in the late 1700s to the mid 1800s, especially in the United States where the slave population quadrupled between 1800 and

1860 (p. 217). Not merely a remnant of the pre-capitalist past, plantation slavery was integrated into the capitalist world-market and subject to the same market imperatives as other capitals, necessitating technological innovation in order to keep up with global competition (p. 39).[40] Plantation owners were, therefore, *bourgeois* slaveowners who sought to maximize labour efficiency and minimize the cost of labour-power (p. 54). As a result, the integration of slavery into processes of capitalist accumulation only served to intensify forms of violent domination, transforming pre-capitalist relations into wholly modern forms of oppression. Both racism and slavery were entirely modern social forms central to US capitalism, and this relationship extends into the present. Todd Gordon and Jeffery Webber (2020) show that capitalist imperialism is internally related to racist ideology, highlighting the ways in which racism continues to underpin modern forms of imperialism (p. 115).

Other social reproduction perspectives have done important work developing the relationship between capitalist development, colonialism, and patriarchy at capitalism's inception, as well as in its current forms. Maria Mies (2014) presents a compelling account of how patriarchy has been incorporated into different modes of production, from increasing control over resources and women by Big Men in hunter/gatherer societies, to the large-scale appropriation of land and labour under feudal society, to the ostensibly peaceful wage-labour relations under capitalism (see Chapter 2). Early capitalist development was imposed through the slave trade in Africa and the witch hunts in Europe, and Mies shows how these processes produced disciplined subjects ready to act as domestic labourers, wage workers, or both at the same time (p. 69). Instead of transforming unwaged forms of work into free wage-labour, the

[40] Dale Tomich (2016a) highlights the ways in which technological innovation in the sugar plantations of Martinique occurred in an uneven, and often limited, way (p. 289). Unlike McNally, however, Tomich views slave-labour as constant capital, and so an obstacle to the increase in relative surplus-value through the implementation of technology (McNally, 2025, p. 93).

neoliberal international division of labour has reproduced and intensified these forms, incorporating them into processes of global value production.

Gender and race continue to be central to capitalist accumulation, not merely forms of extra-economic domination to be overcome by the rationality of capitalism. These relations have been appropriated and transformed by capital, and it is for this reason that they are best understood as contemporary forms of capitalist domination (Jaffe, 2024b, p. 206). Jaffe's view differentiates between the pre-capitalist forms of violence and domination that allowed for capitalist relations to develop in the first place from the "afterlives of primitive accumulation" (p. 208) that are central to capitalist reproduction in the present. Thus, rather than viewing patriarchal or colonial violence as transhistorical forms of domination, as ongoing forms of primitive accumulation which continue to subsume pre-capitalist relations, SRT views patriarchy and colonialism as having been transformed by, and integrated into, capitalist social relations, making them central to the current capitalist form of accumulation. Mies, on the other hand, holds to a transhistorical understanding of gendered oppression. Her view obscures the concrete forms that patriarchal domination has taken throughout history. It is for this reason that she maintains that it is not the capitalist form of patriarchy that must be overcome, but the "*exploitation* of women by men, of nature by man, of colonies by colonizers, of one class by the other" (Mies, 2014, p. 77). While Mies is correct that it is not enough to overcome capitalism as an economic system, by viewing patriarchal domination as a transhistorical phenomenon she concludes that the struggle against patriarchy can be separated from that against capitalism. SRT, by contrast, views capitalism as constituted by, and internally related to, patriarchal and colonial violence, and therefore inseparable from them (McNally, 2017, p. 107). This view is compatible with Mies' important insights on the ongoing relationship between capitalism, colonialism, and

patriarchy, while avoiding transhistoricizing patriarchal domination, thereby separating gendered oppression from a historical understanding of capitalist relations. By not overextending the concept of primitive accumulation and mistaking current forms of patriarchal, racist, colonial, or imperial violence for ongoing pre-capitalist forms of domination, SRT highlights the ways in which forms of oppression and domination have been transformed by capital, becoming integral elements of capitalist production and reproduction in the present.

Conclusion

The theory of history which forms the basis of this chapter runs against the dominant orthodox interpretation of Marx's work that views the capitalist mode of production merely as an economic system. Romantic Marxism understands capitalism as an uneven social totality, where economic factors are internally related to political, cultural, and social ones. Capitalism is a social form that shapes, *and is shaped by*, the concrete activity of human beings. Employing Thompson's logic of process allows for multiple and diverse possible trajectories to emerge. Against interpretations of Marx as a Eurocentric and unilinear thinker, Romantic Marxism draws from the works of the late Marx, reading these in conjunction with the first volume of *Capital* and his other fully completed works to demonstrate that Marx sees capitalist development as uneven and contradictory, containing multiple possible trajectories. Indeed, Marx's notes on colonialism and imperialism reveal that he viewed the development of capitalism in non-Western countries as constituted by colonial and imperial relations. From the perspective of the theory of uneven and combined development, the capitalist world system can only be understood by examining the contradictory nature of global capitalism, including the differential and uneven ways it has been expressed across time and space.

This multilinear perspective of history opens us up to a field of possibility with multiple possible trajectories. Against mechanical and evolutionist interpretations of Marx, where the past is viewed as an obstacle to be overcome by the development of the productive forces, Romantic Marxism sees the possibility of combining non-capitalist social forms of the past with modern ones, creating unique paths of development and alternative modernisms. As we have seen, modernity has not meant the complete overcoming of pre-capitalist forms of "extra-economic" domination. SRT helps us to explicitly theorize the ways in which these forms of oppression and domination remain central to the reproduction of modern capitalism.

Remaining attentive to the dialectical relationship between the past, present, and future allows us to explain the differences that exist across capitalist societies as particular expressions of capitalism's global logic of uneven development, while encouraging us to identify in these non-synchronous elements the possible counter-times that persist despite capitalism's tendency to subsume all temporalities to the logic of value. The persistence of concrete counter-times is only possible because of capital's reliance on concrete forms of labour in the process of value production. Regaining control over the labour process is central to the struggle against capitalism and requires reclaiming control over the very time of our lives. First, however, it is necessary to understand how capitalism has alienated us from the labour process, directing our time towards the production of value rather than the creation of a flourishing society.

Chapter 4 – Alienation as Abstract Labour-Time: Commodity Fetishism, Concrete Human Activity, and the Romantic Critique

> *For in the first place labor,* life-activity, productive life *itself, appears to man merely as a* means *of satisfying a need – the need to maintain the physical existence. Yet the productive life is the life of the species. It is life-engendering life. The whole character of a species – its species character – is contained in the character of its life-activity; and free, conscious activity is man's species character. Life itself appears only as a* means to life – Karl Marx (1988, p. 76).

> *To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger* – Walter Benjamin (1969e, p. 255).

> *Capital's heartbeat of valorization requires the alienation of labor powers. Even though this is not the only form of violence, it is a powerful and dominating one. It demands that our living personalities fit the contorting paths by which capital valorizes. Since the ways our powers are made and sustained are dominated by capital, all the specific ways that making and sustaining happens can also be understood as part of capital's violence* – Aaron Jaffe (2020, p. 41).

Introduction

Capitalist commodity production subordinates concrete and distinct forms of creative activity to the quantifiable and homogeneous category of abstract labour. In order for commodities to be exchanged on the market, products of specific types of human labour must be equalized as measurable units of abstract labour-time. Capital's logic of value separates us from the essential human capacity to labour, turning human activity into a means of obtaining a wage for workers and producing surplus-value for capitalists. Marx's theory of alienation shows that, under capitalism, workers have been alienated from their species-being, or their ability to fulfill biological and social needs through conscious activity in and on the world. In the process, their human life-activity becomes merely a means to survival.

The Romantic critique of alienation is grounded in a sense of loss for the non-capitalist past which, as we have seen in previous chapters, has been degraded by the spread of modern industrial capitalism. By viewing the past as an ongoing site of contestation, Romantic Marxism seeks to combine a living tradition of life and resistance with working-class organizing in the present, as part of a movement towards a qualitatively different communist society in the future. The revolutionary Romantic appeal to the past is not an effort to repeat an idealized or imagined history. Instead, revolutionary Romanticism strives for the realization of a utopian future built upon elements of a more communal, egalitarian, and sustainable past that has yet to be realized. The struggle against capitalist alienation is, therefore, not-just-nostalgic. By responding to, and emerging from, the concrete relations of the present, while also drawing upon a living tradition of alternative ways of organizing social life including forms of political struggle, material infrastructure, and organizational strategies, Romantic Marxism strives to transform the present through a selective recovery of the past.

Resisting alienation is only possible because capitalism continues to rely on concrete and specific forms of labour to produce commodities which satisfy a real human need. These non-synchronous elements might be recovered and re-directed towards human flourishing, rather than the production of surplus-value. In this respect, Romantic Marxism pairs fruitfully with Social Reproduction Theory, which looks to understand how labour has been alienated under capitalism and how this impacts our lives, both at the workplace and outside of it. While alienation is grounded in the labour process, it extends to all aspects of social life. The spread of modern capitalism has occurred through a process of dispossession, expropriation, and colonization, damaging pre-existing relations of mutuality and reciprocation amongst human beings, as well as between humans and nature. In order to overcome alienation in all its forms, capitalism must be

overthrown. But in order to overthrow capitalism, workers must overcome alienation. They must, in other words, regain control over the labour process, over the time in which they exert their labour-power, allowing for the complete reorganization of social relations.

Integrating the revolutionary Romantic view of the past with Marx's critique of alienation illuminates the relationship between utopian thought and communist freedom, while remaining grounded in the material conditions of the present. Romantic Marxism highlights the concrete counter-times that persist despite capital's tendency to subordinate all corners of the globe to its logic of value, while SRT identifies the necessity of concrete human activity to capitalist value production as the central contradiction of capitalism. As we have seen in Chapter 2, social reproduction represents a unique moment, internal to the production of value while also maintaining a distinct temporality. The persistence of creative human activity means that the human capacity to labour might be reclaimed and redirected towards the creation of a flourishing society, rather than capitalist profit.

The first part of this chapter traces the concept of alienation through Marx's work, largely drawing on the *Manuscripts of 1844* before moving to *Capital*. While Marx moves away from using the term alienation in *Capital*, I argue that the content of his critique of alienation is further developed in *Capital* through the concepts of the dual character of labour and commodity fetishism. The second section builds on the first by highlighting the relationship between the alienation of labour and the subordination of concrete times to abstract labour-time. The latter part of this section shows that the dual character of labour indicates the persistence of concrete-counter times, moments of potential struggle against the power of capital. The third section will engage with our four Romantic Marxists once again, this time on the concepts of alienation, the persistence of non-synchronous moments within capitalist totality, and not-just-nostalgic forms

of struggle. Because capitalist alienation is an uneven and incomplete process, non-capitalist social forms persist. Thompson, Benjamin, Lefebvre, and Schwarz help to reveal the ways in which the selective recovery of elements of the non-capitalist past might form the basis of anti-capitalist movements in the present. The last substantive part of the chapter will bring SRT into conversation with Romantic Marxism by way of alienation, which SRT theorizes as the contradiction between abstract value-producing labour and concrete forms of life-making activity. Pairing the two perspectives enriches SRT by highlighting the uneven relations of colonialism and imperialism that have, and continue to, underpin capitalist reproduction. Understanding alienation itself as an uneven process helps to reveal the ways in which concrete social forms of the past might be combined with contemporary forms of struggle. Romantic Marxism benefits from SRT's rich understanding of human life-making activity as an ongoing potential source of resistance to the logic of capital. While orthodox forms of Marxism understand labour primarily through its relationship to the production process, SRT encourages us to consider the ways in which human activity, broadly understood, produces and reproduces all social relations. Such a rich conception of labour highlights the ways in which capitalism has alienated the entirety of social life, while also pointing towards the various potential sites of struggle against alienation that go beyond – but do not exclude – the point of production.

Alienation in Marx

Romantic Influence on the Young Marx

The concept of alienation predates Marx, beginning with the Judeo-Christian notion of the "Fall from Grace" and the messianic project of reuniting humanity with the kingdom of God

(Mészáros, 2005, p. 28). This view was secularized through the notion of "saleability" (p. 33). The freedom to sell, or alienate, anything, including human labour-power, lead to what Thomas Carlyle calls "mammonism" (Löwy and Sayre, 2001, p. 35), or the worship of Money. The process of commodification requires divorcing creative activity from human beings, thereby transforming labour-power into a thing to be sold on the market. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, an early Romantic and one of the harshest critics of alienation prior to Marx, denounces the separation of the individual from freedom, from sovereignty, and from nature, linking these forms of alienation to the rise of market society (Mészáros, 2005, pp. 52-55). But while critical of existing institutions, private property remains at the basis of Rousseau's theorization of civil society, making him unwilling and incapable of questioning the legal forms that uphold property rights, thereby limiting his critique of alienation to an ideological one.

Marx's theory of alienation draws from the Romantic tradition and shares Rousseau's critique of saleability (Mészáros, 2005, p. 78). But unlike Rousseau and other early critics of alienation, Marx consistently places capitalist society and private property at the centre of his analysis. In his early works, Marx primarily focuses on the modern state and the division between the public citizen and the private individual (see Kouvelakis, 2003; Leipold, 2024; Leopold, 2007; Löwy, 2005; Mészáros, 2005; Raekstad, 2022). Against the view that the state represents the realization of universal human freedom, Marx (1978a) insists that it is a site of alienation (p. 18). Rather than an expression of the concrete will of the people, the state becomes "an independent entity, is objectified" (p. 18). Here, Marx locates the origin of alienation in the private property relations of capital, from which the political power of the state is derived (Benner, 2018, p. 77). Rather than being granted by the state, Marx (1978a) views universal human freedom as a product of the struggle of the working class against private property

relations (p. 20). In the Introduction to the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx shows that the demands of the proletariat are central to any political project striving for "the negation of private property" (p. 65) and "complete emancipation" (p. 64). Modern capitalist society separates political concerns from economic ones by dismantling pre-capitalist institutions and insulating the economic sphere from public control (Raekstad, 2022, p. 85). In the process, capitalism divorces the political subject from the economic sphere, creating an abstract public citizen with no substantive control over the labour process. Marx (1978d) argues this explicitly in *On the Jewish Question*: "Human emancipation will only be complete when the real, individual man has absorbed into himself the abstract citizen; when as an individual man, in his everyday life, in his work, and in his relationships, he has become a *species-being*; and when he has recognized and organized his own powers as social powers so that he no longer separates this social power from himself as *political* power" (p. 46).

By placing the working class at the centre, Marx defines alienation as a historically specific capitalist phenomenon, thereby distinguishing his theory from those that preceded him. Through their social activity, humans transform both themselves and the natural world, producing new historically specific conditions (Sayers, 2007, p. 67). This ability to consciously transform the world is what makes us human (Wills, 2024, p. 53). Human nature, so conceived, requires a historical account of the particular ways that people develop their social powers and fulfill their needs. While there are some unchanging biological features of human nature, humans differ from other animals in that they are capable of becoming conscious of this nature, enabling them to shape it in new ways through social interaction with each other and the world. Without an historical account of the diverse ways that people have enacted their social powers, human nature remains an abstraction incapable of describing the concrete social relations of any

particular society. Human nature, then, must be understood to be in internal relation with the historical process of development.

In the *Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx (1988) maintains that the human being is a "natural being" (p. 154). This is both "subjectively" true, in the sense that humans are able to enact their "essential powers" on the natural world and "objectively" true because humans, like the rest of nature, including non-human animals and plants, can only express their powers by interacting with an objective world outside of themselves (Soper, 1986, p. 35). In Marx's (1988) words:

> As a natural being and as a living natural being he is on the one hand furnished with *natural powers of life* – he is an *active* natural being. These forces exist in him as tendencies and abilities – as *impulses*. On the other hand, as a natural, corporeal, sensuous, objective being he is a *suffering*, conditioned and limited creature, like animals and plants. That is to say, the *objects* of his impulses exist outside him, as *objects* independent of him; yet these objects are *objects* of his *need* – essential *objects*, indispensable to the manifestation and confirmation of his essential powers. (p. 154)

While human beings must "objectify" their powers in all societies, in that they act on an objective natural world, it is only in capitalist society that these powers appear to exist outside the individual. Alienation is therefore a historical process that occurs as humans are separated from their ability to fulfill their needs and desires.

But the relationship between human needs and the necessity of fulfilling them is also, in part, transhistorical. Certain objective and biological needs exist throughout human history – hunger, for instance – and it is only possible for human beings to fulfill these needs through their inherent ability to act in, on, and with an objective nature outside of themselves. In other words,

objective biological needs are the most basic limit to the enactment of our social powers (Geras, 1994, p. 73). But humans are not only natural beings; they are also "*human* natural" (Marx, 1988, p. 155) beings, which is to say that they are conscious of the historical and social process of their own development through their interaction with the natural world. As humanity's social powers develop, the ability of humans to appropriate nature within the confines of objective limits, both natural and historically specific, grows. This increases the complexity and ability of humanity's powers while also expanding and diversifying their social needs. Consciousness of historical and social processes makes up a part of human nature, which is neither entirely determined by biological limits nor entirely outside of them (Soper, 1986, p. 35). David Camfield (2014) demonstrates that while there is a biological dimension to human nature, biology does not determine the entire range of what is possible (p. 291). There are "emergent properties" (p. 292), including gender, sexuality, and race, that are not derived from biological nature. From this perspective, human nature is neither merely the idealized and determining element of the form human activity takes in all societies, nor is it entirely shaped by the particular social relations of any given historical period. It "distinguishes itself both from idealism and materialism, constituting at the same time the unifying truth of both" (Marx, 1988, p. 154).

But what is Marx referring to specifically? What are these "powers" that have been alienated from us? In the *Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx (1988) identifies labour, or our ability to consciously and creatively act on the world, as the essence that has been alienated by capitalist society (p. 71). He highlights four ways in which humans have been alienated under capitalism; from the natural world, in that the products of labour appear to be external to them; from themselves, in that their own labour appears to confront them as an outside force; from their

species-being, in that human conscious, creative activity – labour – becomes merely a means to existence rather than the end goal of life itself; and from other people, in that once one's own labour is alienated, the activity of others likewise seems external and individualized. Each of these forms of alienation are related to the other, but it is species-being that represents our human essence:

> It is *its life-activity*. Man makes his life-activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness. He has conscious life-activity. It is not a determination with which he directly merges. Conscious life-activity directly distinguishes man from animal life-activity. It is just because of this that he is a species being. Or it is only because he is a species being that he is a Conscious Being, i.e., that his own life is an object for him. Only because of that is his activity free activity. Estranged labor reverses this relationship, so that it is just because man is a conscious being that he makes his life-activity, his *essential* being, a mere means to his *existence*. (p. 76)

Here, Marx is describing how capitalism has alienated workers from their ability to consciously act in, on, and with the world. Rather than appropriating and transforming the conditions of life as part of a self-directed process of social fulfillment, labour under capitalism becomes a mere means of survival, something external to us: "the more the worker *appropriates* the external world, sensuous nature, the more he deprives himself of *means of life* in the double respect: first, that the sensuous external world more and more ceases to be an object belonging to his labor – to be his labor's *means of life*; and secondly, that it more and more ceases to be *means of life* in the immediate sense, means for the physical subsistence of the worker" (p. 72). Under capitalism, labour, or the specific way in which workers appropriate the world and objectify their essential powers, becomes an expression of alienation.

Labour's alienation, the transformation of our essential human capacity to create into a means of survival, extends to *all* social relations under capitalism, distorting qualitatively distinct forms of human life and reducing them to homogeneous, quantifiable money relations (Sears, 2025a, pp. 5-6). In the *Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx (1988) argues that "since money as the existing and active concept of value, confounds and exchanges all things, it is the general *confounding* and *compounding* of all things – the world upside-down – the confounding and compounding of all natural human qualities" (p. 140). Marx's critique of alienation takes aim at the totality of capitalist social relations. His total critique retains the influence of Romanticism, mourning the quantification, mechanization, and dehumanization of the world that has occurred under modern capitalism. However, unlike many Romantic anti-capitalists, Marx maintains a dialectical critique of capitalism. While capitalism has created new needs and expanded our capacity to fulfill our needs, it has also alienated us from these more developed powers. This tragic-utopian dialectic flows from Marx's work earliest work into his later writings.

Alienation in Capital

The notion that a theoretical break can be found in Marx's work, between his early "humanist" tendencies and his later "scientific" developments, has been a subject of debate for decades. Most famously argued by Louis Althusser (2005), the contention that 1845 was the point when Marx rejected his ethical and humanist critique of capitalism is undergoing a revival today (see Mau, 2023). For Søren Mau, Marx's early critique of alienation is plagued by both humanist and romantic tendencies, "humanist in the sense that the concept of the essence of the human being occupies a central role as the basis of critique, and romantic because it is based on an idea of an original, lost, and natural unity which ought to be restored" (p. 82). According to Mau, this leads to a political project seeking a return to an imagined unity with an unalienated

human nature. However, as we will see later, Marx's theory of alienation is essential to understanding his conception of communist freedom, which views human emancipation as self-determined, unalienated activity. *Capital* is much more than a cold, objective account of the logic of capitalism. Marx describes, in great detail, the brutality and violence of capitalist alienation, while also pointing to moments of resistance against capital's logic. Such passages demonstrate that Marx's ethics cannot be neatly separated out from his critique of political economy (Wills, 2024, p. 10). Rather, his work is better understood as both an objective analysis of society and an ethical critique of the way things are. Only by reading both sides of Marx's work are we able to grasp the contradictory nature of the relationship between abstract and concrete labour as an objective problem emerging from capitalist relations of production, as well as an ethical problem of alienation.

Contrary to Mau's (2023) assertion that Marx "changed his mind" (p. 83) after 1845, Volume I of *Capital* makes many references to the separation of workers from their labour and its products that occurs under capitalism. Such passages bear a remarkable resemblance to the *Manuscripts of 1844* (Wills, 2024, p. 84). For instance, Marx (1990) describes the quantification of human labour that occurs under capitalist commodity production, where "definite quantities of product, quantities which are determined by experience, now represent nothing but definite quantities of labour, definite masses of crystalized labour-time. They are now simply the material shape taken by a given number of hours or days of social labour" (p. 297). By subordinating concrete human experience to quantities of labour, capital's logic of value erases the particular qualities of distinct forms of human activity, reducing the latter to measurable units of abstract labour-time. As a result, labour ceases to be an expression of our species-being. Instead of contributing to human flourishing, productive relations in capitalist society "distort the worker

into a fragment of a man, they degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, they destroy the actual content of labour by turning it into a torment; *they alienate from him the intellectual potentialities of the labour process* in the same proportion as science is incorporated in it as an independent power" (p. 799, emphasis mine). Here, capitalist labour separates humans from their essential powers, from their capacity to consciously and creatively act in, on, and with the world, making labour appear as an abstract force, an independent power outside of the worker. While capitalism has allowed for the development of human productive capacities to levels that were previously not possible, these powers have been directed towards the growth of capital rather than the enrichment of the lives of workers. Using the language of the *Manuscripts* to describe the tragic-utopian dialectic of capitalism, we might say that capitalist development has alienated humans from their developing species-being, from their heightened capacity to enact their social powers in and on the world.

As Marx (1990) shows in *Capital*, capitalism brings workers together in "co-operation" (p. 443), increasing the productive power of each individual worker as well as creating a new collective form that is greater than the sum of its parts. Rather than directing this increased power towards the creation and satisfaction of new needs, however, capital mobilizes it for the creation of more surplus-value. This not only alienates workers from their developing productive powers but also requires new forms of coercive and hierarchical control over the production process. This is because, as Marx states, "as the number of the co-operating workers increases, so too does their resistance to the domination of capital, and, necessarily, the pressure put on it by capital to overcome this resistance" (p. 449). Intensified labour discipline further alienates workers by making the labour process appear as something they are forced into, rather than what it actually is, an expression of their species-being.

The hierarchical nature of capitalist production is also found within the division of labour itself. As manufacture develops, a division of labour emerges which isolates individual parts of the production process into specific tasks performed repeatedly by the same worker. While this increases the efficiency of production and brings workers together in a way that did not exist before, it also begins to transform the labour process from one in which a full, creative act is realized from beginning to end into a series of disconnected tasks: “Instead of each man being allowed to perform all the various operations in succession, these operations are changed into disconnected, isolated ones, carried on side by side” (Marx, 1990, p. 456). This turns work into boring, repetitive tasks and separates workers from the product of their labour. Rather than seeing labour as their own self-directed activity that fulfills their needs, workers begin to view work as something they are made to do, something that is disconnected from their life activity. As Marx states, “constant labour of one uniform kind disturbs the intensity and flow of a man’s vital forces, which find recreation and delight in the change of activity itself” (p. 460). The hierarchical division of labour reaches new heights under industrial production, where workers are inserted into a mechanical production process and perform tasks according to the rhythm of machines. This process “converts the worker into a crippled monstrosity by furthering his particular skill as in a forcing-house, through the suppression of a whole world of productive drives and inclinations, just as in the states of La Plata they butcher a whole beast for the sake of his hide or his tallow” (p. 481). Here, labour becomes one task to be performed repetitively according to the mechanized time of production, as a means to producing value.

What appears to be the result of a mechanical process of capitalist development is, in fact, a product of the activity of workers themselves. But by subordinating workers to the logic of value, capitalist production creates a “state of complete indifference, externality and

alienation" (Marx, 1991, p. 178) in the worker, leading them to view the products of their labour, including the very machines and tools they employ in the labour process, as a hostile force. This results in what Marx (1990) calls "the struggle between worker and machine" (p. 553), the most notorious example of which can be found in the rise of the Luddite movement, to be examined more below through Thompson's work.

Labour Powers and Social Needs

The throughline from the *Manuscripts of 1844* to *Capital* exists in labour and its relationship to needs. In the *Manuscripts*, Marx identifies labour as humanity's essence. In *Capital*, he reveals the substance of value to be labour, measured in socially necessary labour-time, or the average time a society takes to produce something under normal conditions, including the level of productivity of society and the level of skill of its workers (Marx, 1990, p. 129).[41] But a commodity is not only a value. It must also be a use-value, it must satisfy a real social need. Marx describes the production of use-values as "a condition of human existence which is independent of all forms of society; it is an eternal natural necessity which mediates the metabolism between man and nature, and therefore human life itself" (p. 133). But, as we have seen above, Marx does not stop at the transhistorical character of labour. In order to grasp the specifically capitalist character of labour, it is necessary to understand how labour produces commodities. For the surplus-value contained in commodities to be realized, "the product must be transferred to [another] person, for whom it serves as a use-value, through the medium of exchange" (p. 131). Under capitalism, labour occurs as a means to produce commodities for

[41] For Marx (1990), socially necessary labour-time assumes the average time it takes to produce a commodity under the conditions of production of that society (p. 129). This includes the average level of skill and intensity of labour, meaning that a commodity produced by a lazy or incompetent worker would not contain more value than the same commodity produced in the average time: "Only labor-time expended under the average existing conditions of production *as well as* for the satisfaction of monetary social demand constitutes value" (Heinrich, 2021, p. 51).

exchange on the market. Production for the market alienates human labour from those who do the producing. Far from the realization of our species-being, capitalist labour becomes a means for us to obtain the wages we need to survive while producing profits for our bosses.

In order to become exchangeable, value must be expressed as exchange-value, it must be quantified as abstract labour-time. In the process, its particular useful quality, its ability to satisfy human needs, is abstracted away:

> It is no longer a table, a house, a piece of yarn or any other useful thing. All its sensuous characteristics are extinguished. Nor is it any longer the product of the labour of the joiner, the mason or the spinner, or of any other particular kind of productive labour. With the disappearance of the useful character of the products of labour, the useful character of the kinds of labour embodied in them also disappears; this in turn entails the disappearance of the different concrete forms of labour. (Marx, 1990, p. 128)

The quantification of human life occurs through the capitalist category of exchange-value and the subordination of living labour to dead labour. The specific form of labour, that which makes it the work of the joiner, the mason, or the spinner, is erased by way of capitalist abstraction. This process turns human labour into a means of producing value, which appears to be the result of the movement of capital itself. The products of labour, from the standpoint of commodity production, could be anything: “There is nothing left of them in each case but the same phantom-like objectivity; they are merely congealed quantities of homogeneous human labour” (p. 128). Labour under capitalism is no longer an end in itself, the enactment of our species-being, the ability to fulfil our social needs and collectively enjoy the products of our free, conscious, and creative activity. It is alienated labour, a means to an end, directed only towards the individualistic and selfish need to realize value on the capitalist market (Chitty, 1993, p. 29). As

Pascal Brixel (2024) argues, this makes the content of labour insignificant to the worker, separating their creative activity from their own life (p. 49).

We have examined the dual character of labour in Chapter 2, the contradictory relationship between concrete, self-directed activity on the one hand, and abstract, value producing labour on the other. The dual form of labour embodies the tragic-utopian dialectic that a critique of alienation helps to reveal. While capitalism tends to reduce all types of human activity to the abstract and measurable form of value-producing labour, it does not – indeed, it cannot – fully eliminate the transhistorical human element of labour, that which fulfills human needs. But rather than being directed towards our needs and desires, our activity under capitalism is directed towards the production of surplus-value. This not only masks the relations between people which allow for commodity exchange to happen at all, it also creates new, alienated conditions, where social production can only occur if it is mediated by commodity exchange on the market (Rubin**,** 2019, p. 10). As David McNally (2012) shows, alienated production produces an irrational society, imposing market irrationality on the rest of the world (p. 130). Following Marx, McNally connects the irrationality of capital's market logic to Gothic imagery, an art form which often describes the invasion and mutilation of the human body (p. 138). Marx (1990) refers to capitalism in such terms when he states that capital "mutilates the worker, turning him into a fragment of himself" (p. 482), due to its "voracious appetite for surplus labour" (p. 344).

Alienation and the Fetishism of Commodities

Capitalist alienation, the monstrous process of subordinating concrete human activity to abstract labour, makes it so that labour begins to appear as a force outside the worker. While Marx (1990) largely moves away from using the term alienation in *Capital*, its content remains in the concept of commodity fetishism, which describes capitalist society as one where social

relations between people are expressed and viewed as relations between things (p. 164). Under capitalism, what are actually social qualities, relations between people, appear as intrinsic and natural qualities of commodities, relations between things. Furthermore, commodity exchange "seems to be the result of the movement of money" (p. 212). As the universal equivalent, money mediates the exchange of commodities on the market and appears to be driving the entire production process. As a result, the labour process seems to be the result of the exchange of things. As Marx puts it, "the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things" (pp. 164-165).

While some, including Mau (2023), insist that the concept of the commodity fetish should be interpreted merely as an "*ideological* form" (p. 193), such an approach fails to see that Marx's theory of fetishism is central to his theory of value. Rather than an ideological appearance under capitalism – a mere illusion in which social relations between people are masked by relations between things – capitalist social relations *actually are* mediated and expressed through things (Rubin, 2019, p. 41). This is so because the people who produce goods for society labour not in response to social needs but as isolated units producing for the market, only brought together by the need to exchange their products. In other words, they produce under conditions of alienated labour. In a non-capitalist society, where those who make social goods would not be separated from the means of production or from one another, production could respond directly to the needs of society. Labour would be social, in that tasks would be divided amongst the members of the community based on the biological and social needs of that society as well as their ability to fulfil them, or the level of development of that society's productive relations (and, indeed, the level of development of productive relations at the global scale). But

in a capitalist society, production does not respond to social needs. It cannot, because production is individuated by the market. No individual producer can know how much of any product is needed, nor how much is being produced in total. Producers are only brought together by the market, through the exchange of their products. In other words, they only relate to each other through things. Production under capitalism is directed by the logic of value and labour is organized according to the exchange of things on the market by isolated producers.

Fetishized relations are, therefore, an "appearance," but not just in the ideological sense. They are the surface-level but all-too-real way that people relate to one another in capitalist society. But social relations under capitalism are not reducible to this surface appearance. As Marx (1990) shows, classical political economists took these fetishized relations to be natural, viewing the form that social relations take under capitalism as essential to human society throughout history (p. 168). Marx's dialectical method allows him to get behind the commodity fetish and reveal the essence of capitalist value production, the productive relations between human beings. It is precisely these latter relations that have been alienated by capital. Under capitalism, concrete human labour is abstracted and quantified. It is measured as abstract labour-time, making the actual relations between workers appear to be the result of commodity circulation on the market. Rather than viewing commodities as the product of their own creative activity, workers view their labour as having a power over them. In order to gain access to the products of their work, they must continue to sell their labour-power for a wage. As Marx 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 relations between persons and social relations between things" (pp. 165-66, my emphasis). Fetishized relations, therefore, are both real and illusory. The subsumption of

concrete human activity to abstract labour that Marx describes in *Capital* is an extension of his theory of alienation. As Lucio Colletti (1972) states, "'abstract labour', in short, is *alienated* labour, labour separated or estranged with respect to man himself" (p. 84).

Alienation and Time

Abstract Labour and Abstract Time

Abstract labour, then, is not simply the reduction of particular types of labour to the general form of labour-power. It is the specifically capitalist way in which concrete labour can *only* be realized by way of its reduction to abstract labour-time, by exchanging the commodity labour-power for wages on the market. Thus, "abstract labor arises from the alienation of individual labor" (Rubin, 2019, p. 109), from the specifically capitalist way that human activity is quantified for sale on the market. Capitalist abstraction erases qualitatively distinct forms of labour and separates them from workers. Labour-power is alienated from the worker and becomes a thing to be sold. Through this process, labour comes to be seen as a power outside of the worker, one which dominates them through the power of abstract labour-time.

Because capitalist workers are not slaves,[42] they only sell their labour-power for a specific period of time. For that time, the worker's labour-power belongs to the capitalist and can be used to not only reproduce the capital that is paid out in wages – necessary labour-time – but to produce more value. This surplus-value is produced during what Marx (1990) calls surplus

[42] As we have seen in the last chapter, capitalism does not abolish all prior forms of labour. Dale Tomich's (2016a) *Slavery in the Circuit of Sugar* shows that slave labour was central to the expansion of global capitalism and forms part of the division of labour at a world scale (p. 5). Capitalism transforms all social relations through their integration into the world market. Through this process, so-called pre-capitalist social forms take on a capitalist character and become central to capital's reproduction.

labour-time (p. 325). It is in the capitalist's interest to maximize the time the worker spends at work, since the longer a worker labours (at the same level of intensity) beyond the time it takes to reproduce the value of their wages, the more surplus-value they produce. Labour's alienation, therefore, subordinates the activity of workers to abstract labour-time, allowing for capital to extract as much surplus-labour from the worker as possible.

Just as capital makes the exchange of qualitatively different forms of labour possible by subsuming them to the quantitative measurement of value, it subordinates multiple and diverse concrete times to the logic of value through the time of abstract labour. Drawing from Gothic imagery, Marx (1990) describes capital as "dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks" (p. 342), an apt simile for the tendency of capital to reduce concrete temporalities to the time of value production, the triumph of the dead and empty time of capital over the living rhythms of human activity. Abstract labour-time comes to dominate the worker as the measurement of value, limiting the time they have for themselves, for the enrichment of their own lives, and the creation of flourishing human communities. By reducing the worker to their labour-power, capital views them as "nothing other than labour-power for the duration of his whole life, and that therefore all his disposable time is by nature and by right labour-time, to be devoted to the self-valorization of capital" (p. 375).

Alienation and the Struggle Over Time

But as we have seen in the last chapter, capitalist relations are not passively accepted by those on whom they are imposed. The tendency of capital to extend the working day to its maximum limit in order to maximize the production of surplus-value is resisted by workers' struggle. The struggle over the length of the working day represents an attempt by workers to limit the time that they spend working for their bosses and increase the time they are able to

devote to themselves: “If the worker consumes his disposable time for himself, he robs the capitalist” (Marx, 1990, p. 342). As we have seen in Chapter 2, a central contradiction of capitalism lies in the conflict between labour directed towards the production of value and labour directed towards the reproduction of human beings. Social Reproduction Theory develops this point further by arguing that efforts to redirect life-making social reproductive labour towards human, rather than capitalist, reproduction represent important elements of class struggle today (Ferguson, 2023). The chapters that follow will build on these insights further and begin to elaborate a project of communist freedom. Such a vision requires a reorganization of time that is only possible by regaining control over the labour process. This would, as Marx (2023) argues, end the separation of work and life by making work not a means to survival, or even a means to leisure, but the essence of life itself (p. 59). This is only possible by reclaiming the time in which we live our lives through a struggle against the alienated time of abstract labour.

Viewing capitalism as an uneven and incomplete totality, as we have in the previous chapters, makes it possible to uncover the concrete counter-times that exist as possible sites of resistance to capitalist alienation. The subordination of the times of concrete labour to abstract labour-time is an expression what Jonathan Martineau (2016) calls “the *reification* of time” (p. 133), where time itself becomes an object to be exchanged on the market. But the reification of time is continually challenged, including at the workplace where workers often try to maintain and impose their own rhythms, both informally, during their time at work, and formally, by setting legal limits to the working day. And, following the insights of SRT, resistance to the imposition of abstract time takes place beyond the workplace, where unwaged social reproductive workers seek to regain control over their labour by insisting that it be directed towards human well-being, rather than the reproduction of capital (see Ferguson, 2023;

Martineau, 2016). Similarly, Indigenous resistance to the colonial imposition of capitalist relations – opposition to the Line 9 pipeline by North American Indigenous communities, for example – defends not-just-capitalist social forms of life, culture, and struggle that have not been fully subordinated to the logic of capital, while also pointing towards a future, non-capitalist society (Kipfer, 2018, p. 482). These diverse examples of resistance highlight the inability of capital to fully synchronize the multiple forms of concrete life. They all, in other words, represent the explosive possibilities inherent in the persistence of concrete counter-times.

None of these forms of struggle desire a return to an imagined state of unmediated relations amongst humans or between humans and nature. As Mau (2023) rightly argues, there "is no such thing as a natural unity of humans and the rest of nature" (p. 139). However, Mau assumes, incorrectly, that those who insist on the importance of alienation and the struggle against it desire the end of *any* form of mediation. As Martin Hägglund (2021) writes in response to a similar critique of his own views on alienation, "overcoming alienation does *not* mean overcoming objectification. For Marx, the need to objectify ourselves through material practices and social institutions is not in itself alienating" (section I). Marx does not argue for an end to objectification as such, which is simply the result of working on the material world. Rather, he is trying to explain why, under capitalism, the process of objectification has become alienating. The reason, as we have seen above, is that production under capitalism is mediated by the market, making it so that concrete labour must be expressed as abstract labour.

The struggle against alienation, therefore, is a struggle over how we labour. It is, in other words, a struggle over how we organize our time. This is not simply a romantic appeal to a more authentic form of time. The struggle against alienation is not seeking a return to an untouched natural state. Rather, it is an effort to exert control over the specific historical and social form

that our creative capacities take in the present. This requires control over the means of production, that which would allow us to reclaim the ability to employ them in a way that responds to the needs of society. Doing so is only possible if we have control over our time. Mau (2023) is therefore only partially right when he states that "the problem with abstract time is not that it is contrary to nature, but that it is a *means of oppression*" (p. 242). Abstract time is indeed a means of oppression, but it is also contrary to our nature. By subordinating our activity to the production of surplus-value abstract labour-time separates us from our essential human ability to consciously create the conditions of our lives. As Peter Hudis (2023) argues in the Introduction to Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program*, a disalienated society would be organized according to the *concrete* times of labour, the actual rhythm and pace of socially necessary tasks (p. 9). While, as Marx (1990) states in *Capital*, labour-time in a communist society "serves as a measure of the part taken by each individual in the common labour, and of his share in the part of the total product destined for individual consumption" (p. 172), this refers to the concrete activity and needs of the actually existing individuals that make up society, not the average time it would take an abstract individual to produce something.

Alienation and the Romantic Critique

Mau is therefore wrong that a politics of disalienation is necessarily based on the desire for an impossible return to an imagined past. But Romantic Marxism *does* look to the past for material and, in some instances, still living examples of less alienated forms of being. Non-synchronous moments and concrete counter-times have not been fully subordinated to the abstract time of capital. Revolutionary Romanticism highlights the possibility of selectively recovering some of these non-capitalist elements in the present and combining them with contemporary anti-capitalist movements. Romantic Marxism remains committed to a utopian

vision of the future that does not need to rely on ideal representations of human-nature relations. While both Mau and Hägglund are rightly critical of the reactionary tendencies that plague some of the Romantic tradition, not all forms of Romanticism contain this reactionary impulse. Romantic critique need not be premised on the literal desire to return to an idealized past. Revolutionary Romanticism represents a grounded recovery and forward-looking extension, a transformation of elements from moments in the past in which humans achieved a less alienated existence than in the present. As Vanessa Wills (2024) states, overcoming alienation is, in some ways, "a return – to life without economic classes and their attendant division of labor. And in other profound ways, it is something wholly new" (p. 73). Rather than opposing an imagined utopian future to the material reality of the present as the Utopian Socialists of Marx's time did, Romantic Marxism opposes the actual and material potential of human society to the limits of the current one. Of course, Hägglund (2020) is correct that a return to past forms of living is neither possible – because these forms have themselves been transformed by the development of capitalism – nor always desirable (p. 276). However, this does not mean that elements of the past cannot be included in present-day movements, as concrete examples of less alienated ways of life. Maintaining an ongoing relationship with a living history of non-capitalist forms of life and resistance allows us to remain open to possibilities that are often closed off to strictly forward-facing perspectives. Embodying the tragic-utopian dialectic, Romantic Marxism maintains a sense of hope in the possibility of realizing the potential of the past through anti-capitalist struggle in the present (Kompridis, 2015, p. 5).

It is certainly possible to articulate a theory of alienation and the struggle against it without incorporating the Romantic critique. Indeed, Hägglund (2020) defends a humanist Marx while rejecting the nostalgic impulse of Romanticism: "All such forms of nostalgia are

misguided and ignore Marx's fundamental insight that the commitment to social freedom for all became possible because of the historical advent of capitalism. There has never been a natural form of labor for spiritual beings and a primitive communism is neither possible nor desirable" (p. 276). While Hägglund is right that there has never been a natural form of labour, there have been other, non-capitalist varieties that have been more aligned with the project of communist freedom. However, Hägglund's aversion to Romanticism prevents him from seeing a relationship to the past as anything but reactionary. While Hägglund rightly insists that "capitalism cannot be overcome through a linear continuation of the same mode of production, accompanied merely by a redistribution of wealth generated by proletarian labor" (p. 276), he maintains that an increase in socially available free time can only be achieved through the development and implementation of new technologies (pp. 385-386).

For Hägglund (2020), the tragedy of capitalism is that while capital has created conditions which allow for a reduction in necessary labour time, the logic of value necessitates that living labour still be exploited, despite the alternative possibilities that technological development has opened up (p. 263). Rather than allowing for more free time, new technologies either expel workers from the labour process, increasing unemployment, or reorganize production in a way that pushes workers into lower paid, informal, and precarious jobs. At the same time, increased automation contains, according to Hägglund, "an emancipatory potential within itself" (p. 264). If placed under democratic control, it would allow for workers to be removed from the productive process and benefit from the increased free time created by automation. Thus, while careful not to reproduce the Eurocentric vision of linear development, Hägglund nevertheless remains committed to a project of strictly forward-looking progress. As

such, alternative paths towards communism remain outside of his framework.[43] The Romantic critique of capitalism remains open to these alternate possibilities, as we will see below. The tragedy of capitalism is not just that it has not allowed for the possibilities contained in capitalist development to be fully realized. It has also destroyed forms of living that were, in many ways, more democratic, sustainable, and egalitarian. But while the spread of capitalist relations has subordinated all social forms to the logic of value and to the temporality of capitalist production, resistance persists in various ways. These concrete counter-times often retain a connection to the past which might be recovered and integrated as part of a forward-looking communist movement intent on overcoming capitalist alienation in all its forms, thereby restoring our connection to our species-being, each other, and the natural world.

Romantic Marxism and Alienation

Marx's critique of alienation starts from, but goes beyond, economic relations. While Marx begins from labour, his critique extends to the entirety of bourgeois society, to the quantification and dehumanization of life that has occurred under capitalism. While *Capital* does not theorize alienation explicitly, the theory of commodity fetishism retains the content of Marx's earlier work. Capitalism abstracts away the specific qualities of concrete labour, reducing human activity to quantifiable units of abstract labour-time. No longer an expression of our ability to consciously and creatively act in, on, and with the world, labour under capitalism becomes a means to producing value. Through this process, concrete time is subordinated to the abstract time of production, as capitalism strives to synchronize all forms of human activity to

[43] See Benjamin Noys (2014) for a related critique of similar accelerationist perspectives which attempt to eschew Eurocentrism.

the logic of value. However, following from the dual character of labour, this process necessarily remains incomplete. Non-synchronous elements continue to persist within the uneven totality of global capitalism.

Romantic Marxism represents the link between Marx's ethical critique of alienation and the revolutionary Romantic tradition. Instead of desiring an impossible return to the past or the repetition of violent and unfree forms of life in the present, Romantic Marxism is not-just-nostalgic, in that it points towards a qualitatively different future, made possible by the selective recovery of non-capitalist social forms that persist into the present and their combination with global working-class resistance. This part of the chapter will bring together the work of our four Romantic Marxists as a way of developing a critique of alienation that explicitly engages with the contradictory and conflictual elements internal to capitalism.

Thompson argues that capitalism can only be understood through the historically specific social relations expressed in the everyday experiences of those living within it. For the working class of eighteenth-century England, these included the forms of resistance that emerged in response to the spread of capitalism. Such elements represented expressions of a rebellious culture, a class-in-formation. They cannot be properly understood unless "one employs the concept of the dialectical antagonisms, adjustments, and (sometimes) reconciliations of class" (Thompson, 1993, p. 72). While these forms of resistance occurred through an often-conservative reaction against the implementation of capitalist relations, including land enclosures, clock-discipline, and the free market, they also contained elements of new, liberatory social relations, making them exemplary of the not-just-nostalgic tendency of revolutionary Romanticism. Like Thompson, Benjamin (1969a) recognizes the persistence of non-synchronous elements internal to capitalist totality, what he calls "heterogeneous, conspicuous fragments" (p.

184). These fragments resist the full imposition of the homogeneous and empty time of capitalist progress, even as they exist in relation with it, underpinning its reproduction. Opposed to the empty time of capital is the "Messianic time" (Benjamin, 1969e, p. 263) of the unrealized past. Rather than a return to an idealized past, however, Benjamin argues that the possibility of the past might be realized through concrete class struggle. The struggle against alienation plays out materially in the realm of everyday life. Lefebvre recognizes the ways in which capitalist alienation goes beyond labour, while also pointing to the possibility of its overcoming. Like Thompson and Benjamin, Lefebvre argues that concrete social forms of the past might be selectively recovered as part of a project of disalienation. Like the other three, Schwarz views alienation as having roots in the capitalist form of labour. He examines the particular form alienation takes in Brazil, through the uneven spread of Western economic and cultural influence. Rather than creating a more full and robust society, modernity has, in various ways, hindered Brazilian development. But it has also created the possibility of alternative futures specific to Brazilian modernism, potentialities which might be realized through a combination of modern developments and persistent non-capitalist social forms.

Alienation and the Ongoing Relationship with the Past

Capitalist alienation requires the subordination of concrete social forms to the abstract logic of value. Thompson (1993) shows that capitalist development in England produced new forms of law and discipline as a way of gaining economic and political control over labour-power (p. 37). These new social relations required a separation between work and leisure. Yet these forms were implemented unevenly – in part due to resistance to their imposition – and people "retained many of the attributes commonly ascribed to 'pre-industrial labour'" (p. 40). While Thompson expresses a romantic appreciation of pre-industrial society, he does not seek a

return to the past. Indeed, he states that "we shall not ever return to pre-capitalist human nature" (p. 15). Such a return to past forms of life is not possible, because the way that human needs are fulfilled has changed through the emergence of what he calls "new patterns of consumption" (p. 12). New patterns are only possible as new social needs are created in concert with the development of new productive powers. Thompson views past social forms as containing alternative possible futures, living traditions which, in the process of being transformed in new ways, "may renew our sense of our nature's range of possibilities" (p. 15).

Benjamin (1969a) locates the possibility of such alternate futures in moments like the festival, which he describes as an "encounter with an earlier life" (p. 182). While capitalist alienation has attempted to eliminate such moments through the application of ultra-rational techniques of production, it has not succeeded in destroying them completely. Lefebvre (2014) similarly describes rural festivals in France as joyous occasions which "tightened social links and at the same time gave rein to all the desires which had been pent up by collective discipline and the necessities of everyday work" (p. 222). Both internal to everyday life and excessive of the alienated relations of capital, the festival hearkens back to a time where human and natural communities were more connected, less alienated, and retained a sense of joyful wonder (p. 223). Not just appeals to the past, festivals emerge from the contradictions of everyday life and express the human spirit that persists in the face of capitalist alienation. These not-just-nostalgic moments can also be found in the art of storytelling, which Benjamin (1969c) argues is being lost in favour of the exchange of information, which "lays claim to prompt verifiability" and reifies the present in order to ensure factual correctness, though "often it is no more exact than the intelligence of earlier centuries was" (p. 89). Storytelling, by contrast, moves between the present and the past, taking place "outside all real historical categories" (p. 97) while remaining

grounded in human experience. Thus, festivals and stories represent the possibility of a not-just-nostalgic relationship with the past, transforming it by bringing it into the present, creating new possible combinations and new possible modernisms in the process.

Alienated conditions block the realization of these alternate futures by separating workers from their capacity to labour at the same time that their powers have become more developed (Jameson, 2022, pp. 93-94). Rather than viewing alienation as just a "symptom of decay" (Benjamin, 1969c, p. 87). Benjamin highlights the tragic-utopian character of capitalism, that which has reduced humanity's essential ability to transform the world to a means of survival. By bringing people together in new and, potentially, more cooperative ways, modern society contains the possibility of human emancipation, even in its alienated state. Instead of viewing capitalism as the necessary form modern life must take, Benjamin's technique of montage shows that the combination of elements of the past, present, and future in new ways might create new liberatory trajectories that have been obscured by the linear view of progress (Buck-Morss, 1991, p. 77).

Lefebvre's view of alienation is similarly dialectical. He views labour under capitalism as both a condition of alienation and a potential site of human freedom. Here, "modern industrial civilization creates both a *general need for leisure* and differentiated *concrete needs* within that general framework" (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 54). While capitalism has created the potential for an increase in the amount of socially available free time, people's time (including leisure time) continues to be structured according to the time of work. The separation between work and leisure, the division of human life into distinct public and private spheres, "implies an alienation; and perhaps at the same time a differentiation – certain fruitful contradictions" (p. 54). On the one hand, leisure is seen merely as an escape from the time of work. In this sense, it "involves

passive attitudes" (p. 54) and is expressed in the time spent mindlessly scrolling through our phones, watching TV, or shopping. Passive leisure is easily integrated by capital as a means of making profit, and so these activities are the most obviously alienating. But leisure can also involve creative activities – Lefebvre uses photography as an example – which point towards the human potential for self-directed activity, "a cultivated or cultural leisure" (p. 54). Active forms of leisure are not entirely outside of capitalist relations, but they continue to express the possibility of a rich and fulfilling human life. Leisure, therefore, "embraces opposing possibilities and orientations, of which some tend to impoverish through passivity while others are more enriching" (p. 54).

The tragic-utopian dialectic between alienated conditions and the possibility of disalienation extends to the realm of daily life. Lefebvre (1994) views capitalism as having produced new possibilities for humanity, but "at this turning point of history, with such prospects ahead, alienation assumed a new and deeper significance; it deprived everyday life of its power, disregarding its productive and creative potentialities, completely devaluing it and smothering it under the spurious glamour of ideologies" (p. 33). Like Marx, Lefebvre (2014) shows how, under capitalism, all human activity, including leisure, is organized around the time of wage-labour (p. 52). Leisure becomes nothing more than the time of escape from alienated work. While time away from work seems to be when the worker is most themselves, even leisure itself is alienated, in that it is viewed merely as a time for relaxation or escapism and, therefore, distinct from the worker's own creative capacities. Thus, the time of leisure remains unfree so long as it is structured by the time of wage-labour.

But, as we have seen above, leisure represents both an extension of capitalist alienation into everyday life and a moment that is potentially more connected to our capacity for self-

directed creative activity. Lefebvre (2014) recognizes the desire for increased leisure due to its temporal separation from productive relations:

> Only the domain of leisure escapes the technical environment, escapes necessity, in other words, escapes depersonalization. In our leisure activities we are already beyond techniques. We achieve a leap from necessity to freedom, from the enslavement of the individual into whatever will permit his self-development. (p. 59)

But rather than seeking freedom by rejecting work and embracing leisure, Lefebvre views the overcoming of alienation *through* labour, by reuniting humans with their essential capacity to enact their creative activity on the world (p. 527). It is only through a reorganization of our time that it becomes possible to regain control over the labour process and harness our creative potential as human beings. In other words, our ability to fulfill our needs for leisure only becomes possible when we are able to fulfill our needs at work, through the application of our labour-power in a way that is directly connected with our biological and social needs, not through the mediation of the market. Otherwise, leisure will merely be an escape from work and will continue to be alienating itself.[44]

While alienation affects all workers, it is experienced differently across time and space. It is necessary, therefore, to consider the ways in which alienation is expressed through relations of colonialism and imperialism at a global level. Schwarz (1992b) argues that "Brazilians and other Latin Americans constantly experience the artificial, inauthentic nature of our cultural life" (p. 1). Rather than imposing an abstract theory of alienation, it is necessary to examine Brazil in

[44] Alan Sears (2025a) insightfully considers this relationship in terms of the time for sex (p. 42). While sex is perhaps one of the best examples of a time in which people exist "outside" the confines of capitalism, it remains structured by the time of capital, in that it (in general) occurs after work (both productive and social reproductive) and in the privacy of the home.

relation to its position within global capitalism. The colonial, and then imperial, relationship between Brazil and Europe and the United States has created a situation of dependency, whereby Brazilian society is constantly seeking to imitate European or North American social forms in order to catch up to their level of development. By desperately seeking to become a copy of Europe or the United States, Brazil becomes stuck in a cycle "of change and development with no inner necessity and therefore no value" (p. 2). Instead of seeking development on its own terms, Brazil, and other Latin American states, have become facsimiles of the Western model.

As we saw in the last chapter, Schwarz does not respond to the problem of Brazilian imitation of Europe and the United States by advocating for a narrow provincialism. However, despite his scepticism of forms of Romanticism that desire a return to what was undeniably an oppressive form of life, Schwarz articulates a not-just-nostalgic critique of modern capitalist society. Beginning from the subordination of use-value to exchange-value, he expresses a Benjaminian lament of the quantification and rationalization of modern society which has permeated all other aspects of life, including politics and culture (Schwarz, 1992e, p. 56). Alienation, for Schwarz, is grounded in what he calls "the automatic nature of the market" (p. 56), or the fetishism of commodities. Production for the market separates and isolates all aspects of life, turning labour, art, science, and love (to name a few that Schwarz identifies) into things to be bought and sold, while simultaneously making their alienated forms the only possible expression of human life. For Schwarz, like for Marx, alienated relations are the real form social relations take under capitalism, reducing human activity to a means of survival rather than an end in itself. At the same time, alienation remains a contradictory process. It is never total and non-synchronous elements persist as parts of capitalist totality.

Romantic Marxism and Non-Capitalist Social Forms

The uneven form of capitalist alienation indicates the existence of multiple and diverse temporalities, what Thompson (1993) describes as the perpetuation of differential "natural" rhythms (p. 358).[45] It is from these concrete counter-times that resistance to the quantification of capitalist relations springs forth. While Thompson expresses admiration for past social forms, he is careful not to uncritically describe them as ideal manifestations of unmediated relations. It is not that "one way of life is better than the other" (p. 399), nor do traditional ways of life represent a pure expression of an idealized human nature. Rather, they maintain a material relationship to "exploitation and of resistance to exploitation" (p. 399). They are, in other words, concrete examples of individuals and communities fighting to defend their values and ways of life.

Forms of resistance to alienation create what Benjamin (1969g) calls an "interruption of happenings" (p. 150). These interruptions, which as we have seen in Chapter 2 can be internal or external to the circuits of capitalist production, represent the persistence of non-synchronous elements despite capital's tendency to subsume all forms of time under the hegemony of abstract labour-time. In his short piece on epic theatre and the work of Bertolt Brecht, Benjamin shows that, like storytelling, epic theatre engages with the past, not to preserve it in some imagined authentic state, but to transform it, bringing its existing non-synchronous elements into new combinations with contemporary social forms (p. 148). This creates what Frederic Jameson (2022) calls a "radical discontinuity" (p. 74), a montage of past and present that contains the possibility of producing a qualitatively new type of society. The past-present dialectic can also be seen in the work of French novelist Marcel Proust, who Benjamin (1969b) interprets as

[45] These rhythms are, in fact, not natural but social, often timed according to the length of specific tasks, what Thompson (1993) calls a system of "task-orientation" (p. 358). Rather than being measured according to abstract socially necessary labour-time, time in task-oriented societies is measured according to the actual time it takes to perform concrete tasks.

describing “life as it was remembered by the one who had lived it” (p. 202). Such a view requires a living relationship with tradition, which is transformed through conscious and creative activity in the present.

The relationship between a transformed past and the present produces diverse possible trajectories of development. Through a combination of enduring non-capitalist relations and modern influences, Brazilian society has taken a form distinct from the Western model. In this sense, “social exclusion (the past?) and the globalized market (progress?) are not incompatible” (Schwarz, 2012, p. 90), but have been integrated in new ways, producing a uniquely Brazilian modernism. Instead of trying to ignore or paint over these contradictions, Schwarz (1992d) argues that they represent the potential for a uniquely Brazilian path of development and the realization of a truly universal humanism in Brazil (p. 118). Rather than rejecting modern development entirely, liberation struggles in Latin America represent efforts to realize alternative modern futures, the possibility of which is contained in non-synchronous moments, which are themselves products of the contradictory relationship between past and present. Because Brazil’s development is integrally related to the capitalist world-system, elements of its past might be combined with modern developments, allowing for a “non-bourgeois historical development” (Schwarz, 1992b, p. 7) unique to Brazil. In the same way that Benjamin views interruptions to the abstract time of capital as containing within them the possibility of alternative futures, Schwarz (1992f) sees “cultural discontinuity” (p. 43) in Brazil as the basis of a form of development capable of overcoming Brazil’s particular form of dependency.

In similar dialectical fashion, Lefebvre (2014) acknowledges the advances of modern society that have allowed for the creation and fulfillment of new needs, while simultaneously highlighting the fact that these advances cannot be separated from the destruction of, and

alienation from, prior social forms: “Wherever people are in the throes of liberation from the old oppressions, they are also sacrificing – there is no way they can avoid it – certain ways of life which for many years were great and beautiful. The tractor and the mechanical seeder must replace the gestures of the ploughman. Thus, when backward countries move forward, they produce ugliness, platitude and mediocrity as though that meant progress” (p. 66). While he occasionally expresses a hostility towards nostalgia (Lefebvre, 1994, p. 76), there is clearly a not-just-nostalgic element to Lefebvre’s critique of alienation which, like Thompson, admires pre-capitalist forms of life. For instance, in *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre (1991) points to ancient cities such as Venice as examples of concrete *works* rather than abstract products: “Venice can only be described as a work. It is a space just as highly expressive and significant, just as unique and unified as a painting or a sculpture” (p. 73). However, despite lauding aspects of old cities, Lefebvre does not desire a return to the past. On the one hand, he views modernity as a progressive development, one which has allowed for the possibility of the creation and fulfillment of new needs and laid the groundwork for emancipation from pre-capitalist forms of domination. On the other hand, however, Lefebvre insists that modernization has destroyed a less alienated relationship with each other and the natural world.

This tragic-utopian dialectic is expressed at the level of everyday life, where the activities of human beings have been reduced to what Lefebvre (2003) calls “habitat” or “a simplified function, which limited the ‘human being’ to a handful of basic acts: eating, sleeping, and reproducing” (p. 81). Organizing daily life according to the ideological and material expressions of habitat contributes to the spread of homogeneous and quantifiable abstract space. The infiltration of the logic of abstract space into daily life is part of a process which represses concrete forms of human activity, “the diversity of ways of living, urban types, patterns, cultural

models, and values associated with the modalities and modulations of everyday life" (p. 81). However, as we have seen, the subordination of the level of everyday life to abstract space remains incomplete. While daily life under capitalism appears to be reduced to mere acts of survival, people continue to "inhabit" concrete spaces where their activity goes beyond that which can be contained by the ideology and practice of habitat (p. 82). Like Thompson, Lefebvre locates such forms of concrete activity in non-capitalist social forms of the past, "in the dwelling and in habiting in temples and palaces, the woodcutter's hut and the shepherd's cabin" (p. 82). Lefebvre notes that while such an appeal to past forms of life may appear reactionary at first, it, in fact, points towards concrete relations between humans and the space in which they live, work, and resist, thereby illuminating the "relation to the possible and the imaginary" (p. 82).

The erasure of past ways of life obscures the tragic dimension of capitalist progress by hiding what has been lost behind a façade of rational objectivity. As Lefebvre (1994) states in *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, "if tragedy still exists it is out of sight; the 'cool' prevails. Everything is ostensibly de-dramatized; instead of tragedy there are objects, certainties, 'values', roles, satisfactions, jobs, situations and functions. Yet there are powers, colossal and despicable, that swoop down on everyday life and pursue their prey in its evasions and departures, dreams and fantasies to crush it in their relentless grip" (p. 65). The commodity fetish, that which masks the relations between people by making production appear as a relation between things, appears to be an objective fact of life. And, indeed, it is, for capitalist relations actually are mediated by the market. But fetishized relations are not natural. They are produced through a violent process that transforms the human capacity to labour into a means of producing value. This is what Lefebvre calls "a form of modernized rationalism" (p. 48), the view which asserts that industrial progress is the necessary and logical path of development. But despite the pervasiveness of

alienation, the potential to overcome it persists. While we have been estranged from the natural world, each other, and our capacity to labour, differential spaces and concrete counter-times continue to exist as potential sites of resistance. Lefebvre highlights the necessity of understanding the relationship between the past, present, and future in order to identify elements of the non-capitalist past that might be selectively recovered as part of a future-oriented revolutionary movement (p. 36). While pre-capitalist forms of life no longer exist in an untouched state, material residues of less alienated relations persist.

Recognizing these moments requires an "acknowledgement of *difference*" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 96). The production of difference under capitalism occurs both in "minimal" and "maximal" (p. 372) terms. Minimal difference is "induced," by which Lefebvre means that it "remains within a set or system generated according to a particular law" (p. 372). Minimal forms of difference emerge out of the production of abstract space, but do not escape its logic. They can be found in sections of suburban housing, demarcated only through superficial changes in appearance or quantitative distinctions of facilities available to those who live in there (p. 397). Kanishka Goonewardena and Stefan Kipfer (2005) identify forms of minimal difference in Canadian multicultural policy, which emerged, in part, out of a liberal and state-centric project of inclusion and diversity that remains confined within the bourgeois logic of national citizenship (p. 671). On the other hand, maximal or "*produced* difference presupposes the shattering of a system; it is born of an explosion; it emerges from the chasm opened up when a closed universe ruptures" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 372). Such forms of radical difference contain the possibility of producing new sets of relations, new forms of life that are qualitatively different from those out of which they emerge. Importantly, the two forms of difference are not completely unrelated. Maximal difference emerges out of forms of minimal difference, which in turn are transformed

by the new social forms produced by maximal difference. As Goonewardena and Kipfer (2005) show, while Canadian multiculturalism has largely remained a liberal project of diversity – exemplified in aesthetic differences in restaurants and other cultural forms of commodified life – it is also a response to the more radical demands of anti-imperialist and anti-racist subaltern groups from-below (p. 672). While such demands are often recuperated and redirected towards the liberal project of multicultural diversity, they are not fully contained by it. As such, they point towards a qualitatively different way of organizing urban life.

Not Just Nostalgia

The process of disalienation emerges from these moments of maximal difference and requires a complete reorganization of all social relations. It is neither a return to an imagined past nor the fulfillment of the capitalist version of progress. The latter is incapable of recognizing unevenness and difference, while the former ignores how the local context is always and already shaped by the global (Schwarz, 1992d, p. 116).[46] Against both views, Schwarz (1992b) insists that the past exists in a non-synchronous relationship with the present (p. 16). Understanding this relationship is essential for comprehending the current moment and, indeed, transforming it. In a discussion on Brazilian literature, Schwarz points to novelist Machado de Assis, who "knew how to make broad and critical use of their predecessors' work, which they regarded not as dead weight but as a dynamic and unfinished element underlying present-day contradictions" (p. 2). As Benjamin (1969e) states in the third of his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," "nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed

[46] Fernando Coronil (1997) makes a similar point in *The Magical State*, where he argues that there is a need to consider modern capitalist development from a perspective which views local, national, and global scales in dynamic relation with one another (p. 74). This allows him to view the development of the modern state in Venezuela as neither an isolated, regional case nor as fully determined by the general movement of an abstractly theorized global capitalism.

mankind receives the fullness of its past – which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments" (p. 254). In other words, social forms of the past persist today, in transformed ways, and can be redeemed as part of a different future. But this is only possible if combined with elements of the present and connected with contemporary movements. Like Schwarz, Benjamin insists that it is possible to transform the past by bringing together non-synchronous elements in new combinations as a way of producing alternative modernisms, ones that offer different possible futures than that presented by capitalism. This process is a struggle over history, "between those oriented towards the future and those oriented towards the past" (Benjamin, 2011g, p. 123). It is only by understanding the dialectical relationship between past, present, and future that it is possible to reorient the past towards a different future.

Benjamin's insistence that a more egalitarian future could occur through a selective recovery of the past is perhaps most famously outlined in the ninth of his "Theses." Here, he introduces the Angel of History, whose "face is turned towards the past" (Benjamin, 1969e, p. 257) while a "storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress" (p. 258). The storm of progress has destroyed the "Paradise" that the Angel of History looks back at, the pre-industrial, egalitarian societies that Marx refers to as primitive communism (Löwy, 2016, p. 63). While at first this may appear as an appeal to an idealized form of human-nature relations, Benjamin does not yearn for a return to an imagined state of harmony. Instead, he desires to stop the march of progress and the repetitive devastation that has occurred throughout history. While the Angel of History "would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed" (Benjamin, 1969e, p. 257), Benjamin insists that regaining what has been lost can only occur through the redemption of the past, by establishing a different future that would realize the

possibilities of past forms of life in a new, classless society. Benjamin's revolutionary Romanticism is, therefore, not-just-nostalgic. The selective recovery and transformation of elements of the past, "charged with the time of the now" (p. 261), represents the only possible way forward.

Similarly, Lefebvre (2014) highlights capitalism's multiple temporalities, including the discontinuous elements that persist at the level of everyday life, which contains both linear and cyclical forms of time (p. 801). As we have seen in Chapter 3, differential rhythms tend to be dominated by the linear time of production, but the former are never fully eliminated. These non-synchronous temporalities interrupt and, at times, oppose the linear time of capital. Linear time contains cyclical rhythms which continue to live on in our concrete activities.[47] Rather than opposing a naturalized cyclical time to the linear time of capital, Lefebvre (1991) acknowledges that "time as such is irreversible" (p. 805). Instead of idealizing natural time, Lefebvre's dialectical view of temporality insists that we must incorporate non-synchronous elements of the past into a future-oriented communist project as part of an effort to "reaffirm the certainties of human community" (p. 146). Not merely a return, this process is an effort to transform and redeem the past through political intervention aimed at changing the course of history (Bensaïd, 2009, p. 284). This can only be achieved through concrete struggle in the present, for it is only through struggle that we are given a "revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past" (Benjamin, 1969e, p. 263). Efforts to transform and reclaim the past, when combined with the

[47] Cyclical rhythms are often considered in terms of "natural" processes, including childbirth. As we have seen in Chapter 2, SRT points to the biological, social, and political limits of the ability of capital to commodify all forms of human activity. However, it is important not to naturalize what are actually historical and social relations (the role of women in social reproductive labour, for instance). See Aaron Jaffe (2020) for an internal critique of SRT which problematizes the notion of naturalizing certain forms of labour and tying women's oppression to biological reproduction (p. 66). SRT's focus on work in the home is not because it is inherently gendered, but because it *has* been, socially and historically.

struggles of the present, might be "enough to blast open the continuum of history" (p. 262), disrupting the march of capitalist progress.

Moments of discontinuity can also be found in times of creativity or play, often expressed in the activities of children. While certain values and ways of being are inevitably imposed on children growing up in capitalist society, childhood remains "a site of conflict" (Benjamin, 2005d, p. 118), where children can go beyond the narrow possibilities offered to them by adults, playing with toys in new ways, using their imaginations to create new uses and scenarios for them.[48] Play contains alternate rhythms which can only be fully realized through the abolition of capitalist social relations. Rather than a purely fantastical exercise, play remains grounded in the concrete relations of capitalist society, while also offering a glimpse into a different possible future (Benjamin, 2005c, p. 114). This represents, for Benjamin (2011f), an expression of the energy of youth, a concrete time in which one is able to interact in and on the world with others as an end in itself (p. 150). Like Benjamin, Lefebvre (2014) identifies play as an element of concrete and creative activity that exceeds the tendency of capital to subsume all forms of life to the logic of value (p. 432).

The discontinuous elements found in everyday activities can also be seen in the ways that ordinary people resist the imposition of capitalist relations. Thompson (1993) explores the ways in which class struggle connects social forms of the past to the struggle for a different future through the historical phenomenon of bread riots, what he calls "a highly complex form of direct popular action, disciplined and with clear objectives" (p. 188). While not an expression of a fully developed working-class consciousness, bread riots represent a valid form of protest against the

[48] As we will see below, SRT scholars have likewise identified the play of children as a moment capable of resisting the abstract time of capital. Play, as Susan Ferguson (2017) reminds us, is not merely the foolish actions of children; it represents a way of being that goes beyond that imposed by capitalist society, even as it is a part of it (p. 123).

rising market price of food. While the market in capitalist society is a site of impersonal exchange, it remained a *social* space in eighteenth-century England (p. 256). This made it a central site of struggle, particularly because increases in the price of bread were viewed as an attack on the traditional consumption patterns of poor people for whom bread was a dietary staple. While, as Thompson acknowledges, "riots were triggered off by soaring prices, by malpractices among dealers, or by hunger," (p. 188) they cannot be explained only as a struggle over bare survival. Instead, they are better conceived as having

> operated within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices in marketing, milling, baking, etc. This in its turn was grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor. An outrage to these moral assumptions, quite as much as actual deprivation, was the usual occasion for direct action. (p. 188)

Bread riots in England exceeded the law as it was imposed from above and sought to defend a way of life that was in the process of being eroded by the spread of capitalist social relations through land enclosure, the discipline of capitalist clock-time, and the subsumption of use-value to the law of the market. There was, therefore, a conservative element to bread riots, in that they were an expression of resistance to the destruction of a traditional form of life, one which was viewed by the rioters as superior to modern capitalism.[49] However, they were not-just-nostalgic

[49] Thompson (1993) goes to great lengths to show that, due to their centrality to social reproductive tasks, women often participated and, at times, led bread riots in order to "present their particular right, according to tradition and gender role, as guardians of the children, of the household, of the livelihood of the community" (p. 332). As the main provider of food for the household, women held a particular form of power in the family (Tilly & Scott, 1989, p. 54). Because women were the ones dispensing the family income at the market. they were often the first to protest

or, as Thompson puts it, "not *just* 'a traditional culture'" (p. 153), in that they represented more than defensive struggles against the norms imposed by authority from above: "The customs defended are the people's own, and some of them are in fact based upon rather recent assertions in practice" (p. 154). While they made appeals to paternalist legal forms, the demands of the bread riots went beyond a defence of these forms and, in fact, represented a form of class struggle.[50]

Importantly, bread riots were not isolated to the sphere of consumption. They occurred in conjunction with other forms of resistance at the point of production. For instance, food riots in London in 1812 occurred alongside Luddite resistance to the implementation of machinery, demonstrating the connection between forms of struggle over both consumptive and productive activities (Thompson, 1991, p. 620-623).[51] In *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson describes Luddism similarly to the bread riots, as "a form of direct action, which

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hikes in bread prices. As Louise Tilly and Joan Scott have argued, "bread riots flowed from the concrete and collective experiences of women as they carried out their family role of consumer and food provider" (p. 56). However, while it is true that men did not hold exclusive power in the household, they did maintain physical and legal forms of power, creating a situation where "the law tolerated male adultery and punished it in females; and it also tolerated violence by men against their wives" (p. 54). Thus, while Thompson's (1993) efforts to, rightly, portray women as active subjects rather than just passive victims are important, his insistence that "each sex's sphere of responsibility held the other's respect" (p. 320) perhaps overstates the point.

[50] The bread riot as a form of protest has appeared more recently as a response to the neoliberal debt crisis and so-called "structural adjustment" policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The first such protest, what John Walton and David Seddon (1994a) call "austerity protests" (p. 24), occurred in July 1976 in Peru as a response to rising prices of commodities necessary for survival (Walton & Shefner, 1994, pp. 105-106). Similar forms of protest occurred in Poland in June 1976 in response to a rise in food prices (Walton & Seddon, 1994b, p. 290). Like Thompson, Walton and Seddon (1994a) argue that austerity protests have not occurred solely in response to increasing poverty (p. 48). Rather, the urban poor draw from a moral economy grounded in traditional notions of community and the unfulfilled promises of capitalist development. These communities expect a certain standard of human life and dignity, and their forms of resistance have emerged as a response to an erosion of these values. Şahan Savaş Karataşli (2022) argues that food riots such as these should be viewed as constitutive of working-class struggle, rather than merely pre-capitalist forms of protest (p. 239). They too, therefore, are not-just-nostalgic, in that while they, like the bread riots of eighteenth-century England that are the subject of Thompson's study, resist the process of capitalist modernization by defending traditional forms of life, they are enacted by a class of people who are "gradually proletarianizing and joining the ranks of the working class" (p. 242). As such, they should be viewed as a part of the struggle against the reproduction of capitalist social relations.

[51] Tilly and Scott (1989) show a similar connection between food riots in France in 1911 and the trade union movement, where food riots led by women in response to rising food costs occurred alongside, and as a part of, union struggles (p. 208).

arose in specific conditions, which was often highly organized and under the protection of the local community" (p. 67). Rather than a reactionary response to technological development, Thompson views Luddism as "a manifestation of a working-class culture of greater independence and complexity than any known in the eighteenth century" (p. 658). By engaging with the Luddite movement seriously, he shows that it not only sought to defend traditional custom and resist the onslaught of capitalist modernity but also began to organize in new ways and demand new social rights (Webber, 2015). Indeed, Thompson (1991) refers to Luddism as "a transitional phase" (p. 658) connected to the emergent trade union movement.[52] The demands of the Luddites included minimum wage, labour rights for women and children, minimum working conditions, and the right to trade unions (p. 603). These demands were central to the creation of a *future* society, not simply the preservation of an old one, though they were grounded in the material, living tradition "of a democratic community, in which industrial growth should be regulated according to ethical priorities and the pursuit of profit be subordinated to human needs" (p. 603). Luddism is, therefore, a not-just-nostalgic effort to resist the spread of capitalist relations and establish a qualitatively different society.

As Gavin Mueller (2021) shows, workers' resistance to capitalism today often takes the form of Luddite resistance, as workers direct their struggles not just against their bosses but towards the machinery that increasingly controls their labour activities and time (p. 4). While a

[52] See Eric Wolf's (1999) *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* for an examination of defensive forms of protest aimed at protecting traditional customs that also opened up the possibility for a different future. Wolf shows that the efforts of peasants to preserve their ways of life against the expansion of capitalist relations, as occurred in the Mexican Revolution where resistance to the expansion of haciendas took the form of defending communal forms of landownership, have led to revolutionary struggles for a "a new and more humane social order" (p. 282). Like the bread riots and Luddite movement in eighteenth-century England, peasant rebellions in the twentieth century are not-just-nostalgic. While they may begin as defensive forms of resistance to the encroachment of the market on traditional ways of living, they often transform into struggles for new social rights and a qualitatively different society.

central component of Luddism is the act of breaking machines and other forms of sabotage, it goes beyond an aversion to technology as such (p. 14). Instead, Luddism represents a form of resistance directed against capitalist society as a whole, including the ways in which capital implements machinery in order to exert further control and domination over the lives of workers. Luddite forms of resistance, in both the past and present, desire an end to the alienated conditions of capital and demand the qualitative reorganization of the labour process. Rather than viewing technological development as a neutral process that would reduce or eliminate forms of drudgery once brought under the control of the working-class, Mueller argues that capitalist technologies are embedded in the social relations that give rise to them (pp. 47-48).[53] As we have seen above through Marx, technology under capitalism has increasingly centralized and de-democratized work while simultaneously transforming human creative activity into banal and repetitive tasks. Artificial Intelligence (AI) represents the most advanced form of this process, further divorcing manual labour (understood to consist only of easily repeatable tasks performed by precarious workers) from intellectual innovation (Pasquinelli, 2023, p. 112).

The reality of technology's implementation cannot be so easily divorced from the forms of technology themselves, which encourage the centralization and bureaucratization of the labour process. Processes of automation and the application of AI are embedded in capitalist social relations, developed as part of a broader effort to exert control over workers and increase production (Pasquinelli, 2023, pp. 240-241). It is for this reason that working-class forms of resistance continue to resist technologies of control at the workplace, such as the activities of dockworkers in Seattle and Vancouver in the early 2010s, who sabotaged freight cars and

[53] Similarly, Matteo Pasquinelli (2023) argues that Artificial Intelligence is best understood as an extension of capital's tendency to subordinate concrete human activity to abstract and quantifiable methods (p. 12).

conveyor systems as a form of protest against increasing automation (Mueller, 2021, p. 76-77). Such contemporary forms of struggle are best understood not as reactionary or irrational responses to technological innovation or automation, but as efforts to substantively reorganize the labour process, bringing the latter back under the self-directed and democratic control of the workers themselves (Pasquinelli, 2023, p. 253).

Social Reproduction Theory and Alienation

Re-establishing a less alienated relationship between labour and needs would bring us closer to regaining control over our essentially human capacity to consciously and creatively act on the world. This does not mean that we should return to a time when our social powers and needs were less developed. Instead, Romantic Marxism points towards the possibility of a not-just-nostalgic recovery of elements of the past as part of a future-oriented project intent on establishing an unalienated relationship with our labour, each other, and the world. In this respect, Romantic Marxism pairs fruitfully with Social Reproduction Theory, which seeks to understand the ways in which our labour has been alienated under capitalism and how this impacts our lives, both at the workplace and outside of it. Beginning from an examination of how concrete forms of labour have been alienated as abstract labour, SRT follows Marx's theory of commodity fetishism in identifying the need to sell our labour on the market as that which reduces the human capacity for qualitatively distinct types of labour to abstract and quantifiable units of abstract labour-time (Jaffe, 2020, p. 36). However, while there is an abstract logic to alienation under capitalism, this process plays out differently across lines of race, gender, and other social oppressions (Ferguson, 2020b, p. 116). By considering forms of oppression as

constitutive of the abstract tendency of capital to alienate labour, SRT is able to understand racism, patriarchy, and other forms of domination as internal to capitalist exploitation.

It is insufficient to theorize capital as an abstract form of economic compulsion, both because capital's economic power is internally related to forms of oppression and because the violence of capital is enacted on real people. By theorizing capitalism as a concrete totality, one composed of historically specific colonial, imperial, patriarchal, racist, and other social relations, it is possible to understand the specific ways capitalist alienation is experienced and, as we will see in the following chapters, the ways it might be undone. As we have seen in the two previous chapters, while a general logic of exploitation can be derived from an analysis of capital at a high level of abstraction, it is only possible to understand capitalist totality through the differential forms it takes, through the concrete experiences of the people living in capitalism today. At the same time, these differential experiences can only be fully understood as expressions of the whole. It is for this reason that McNally (2017) argues that it is pointless to imagine if a non-racist and non-patriarchal form of capitalism is possible (p. 107). Since capitalism has, in fact, been imbricated with racial and gendered forms of oppression, we must theorize it in relation to the specific historical form it has taken in relation to these relations of oppression.

Broadening our understanding of alienation requires a similarly broad conception of labour. While traditional Marxist analysis locates the origin of alienation in labour, SRT expands the very notion of labour to include those forms of human activity that occur beyond the workplace (Sears, 2025a, p. 4). As we have seen in Chapter 2, while Marx's analysis remains focused on the circuits of capital's reproduction, SRT extends the circuits of reproduction to include the reproduction of workers themselves, thereby going beyond the moment of production (though remaining attentive to it). The reproduction of labour-power, of the workers who go on

to produce value for capital, occurs in spaces of social reproduction, including homes, schools, and hospitals. But even these activities that are unproductive of capitalist value are not immune to the power of capital. Under capitalism, social reproductive activities are directed towards the reproduction of capitalist workers. In other words, they, too, are alienated. The life-making labour of social reproduction is itself subordinated to the logic of value and becomes a means of survival, rather than an embodiment of a fulfilling and flourishing human existence. As such, social reproductive activities are subject to forms of discipline that seek to direct this work towards more efficient methods aimed at maximizing capitalist value production in the workplace (Ferguson, 2020b, p. 138). This process involves a specific organization of time, and so even unpaid social reproductive work remains, in various ways, structured by the wage relation.

In a recent work on *Eros and Alienation*, Alan Sears (2025a) emphasizes the need to extend SRT's framework even further. Going beyond the relationship between the workplace and the household, Sears demands that we include all aspects of life-making activity, including "caring, aesthetic expression, physical performance and social belonging" (p. 22) in our analysis. By remaining committed to a broad understanding of human labour as the capacity for productive, creative, and self-directed activity, Sears expands the scope of SRT. Rather than epiphenomenal categories determined by labour's alienation, the ways in which capitalist society suppresses and redirects our gendered and sexual desires play a central role in directing our creative potential towards the production of surplus-value. Likewise, the alienation of labour limits our ability to act in gendered and sexual ways that are representative of a fully flourishing human life.

However, as we have seen, capitalist alienation is never total. While our creative labour capacities have been directed towards the production of value, they have not been, and indeed cannot be, fully subordinated to capital's logic. This is because, following the dual character of labour, capital continues to rely on concrete human activity, both in the production of commodities and for the reproduction of workers. The persistence of concrete labour indicates that our activity might be redirected towards the satisfaction of social needs, rather than producing profits. SRT theorists have, like Benjamin and Lefebvre, identified play and the activity of children as an example of a moment that exceeds the limits of capital's productive logic. Susan Ferguson (2023) argues that while school is certainly a site where capitalist social relations are reproduced and children are taught (and disciplined) to be obedient workers for capital, it is also a space where children are encouraged to play, experiment, and act independently in order to become fully formed human beings. As Ferguson states, "time spent in school does not fully 'belong' to the student. It doesn't fully 'belong' to capital either." As such, it is possible to redirect the concrete forms of play and experimentation that occur at school towards human flourishing. Similarly, Sears (2025a) argues that the activity of children embodies the self-directed, autonomous, and experimental forms of organizing that will be essential to overcoming capitalist alienation (p. 94). It is for this reason that school must, in various ways, subordinate the activity of children to the logic of capitalist production. While a communist society, as we will see in the next chapter, should not be defined as one in which work has been fully replaced by play, forms of playful experimentation allow for people – both children and adults – to experience their concrete activity as fulfilling and enjoyable.

As we have seen above, capitalist alienation is not experienced in identical ways by all segments of the population. Sears (2025a) links the insights of SRT to the theory of uneven and

combined development in order to show that while alienation is experienced in a multitude of diverse ways, these differential expressions all represent parts of the social totality (p. 153). It is necessary, therefore, to consider the uneven ways that alienation has been expressed, including through relations of colonization and imperialism. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Maria Mies (2014) centres colonial and imperial relations in her analysis of social reproductive work and the women's movement, highlighting the ways in which capitalist modernity has integrated pre-capitalist forms of domination in new ways, rather than having eliminated them altogether (p. 119). In contemporary capitalism, the international division of labour has been reorganized through the transfer of production to the former colonies, while control over production remains largely in the hands of Western corporations (p. 113). The new international division of labour is itself gendered and racialized, creating a situation in which racialized women in the global South are increasingly exploited as cheap labour. In the case of agricultural labourers in India, women are stripped of their traditional rights without obtaining the status of free wage labourer (p. 128). Capitalist accumulation, according to Mies, continues to rely on pre-capitalist forms of work, though the latter have been transformed through their incorporation into the capitalist process of surplus-value production.

Aaron Jaffe (2024b) concurs with Mies on the point that capitalism continues to be underpinned by violent dispossession and the "legacy of primitive accumulation" (p. 210). However, as we have seen in the last chapter, these forms of domination are best understood as expressions of capitalism's current form. Colonial and imperial relations continue to reorganize global capitalism in new, uneven hierarchical patterns. Understanding this process requires an attentiveness to the specific expressions of imperialism and settler-colonialism that exist throughout the world (Gordon & Webber, 2020, p. 96). It is especially important to consider the

gendered ways that processes of colonization and imperialism have reorganized the global economy. However, because Mies (2014) views primitive accumulation as an ongoing process, she emphasizes the defense of non-capitalist practices and spaces as the primary strategy for anti-capitalist movements today (p. 219). It is for this reason that Mies, and the autonomist feminist school more broadly, view the possibilities for freedom as existing entirely *outside* of capitalism, as we will see in the next chapter. By contrast, SRT argues that overcoming alienation should be understood as occurring *through and against* the relations of capital (Ferguson, 2020b, p. 138). This does not mean that a communist revolution must begin with the working class in the most developed parts of the world. Indeed, as we have seen earlier, Marx himself does not hold to that position. A revolutionary movement could begin from the struggles of colonized subjects, unwaged workers, or other marginalized groups (Jaffe, 2024b, p. 211). But it will also necessarily involve the development of a global working-class movement, though the specific composition of such a movement cannot be determined in advance.

Conclusion

The Marxist theory of alienation begins from labour. It has separated workers from their species-being, or their ability to fulfill biological and social needs by enacting their social powers in and on the world. The ethical content of Marx's critique of alienation can be traced from his early work in the *Manuscripts of 1844* to *Capital*, where he shows that the commodity form requires the erasure of concrete, qualitatively distinct forms of labour in order to produce value. But commodity production still requires concrete labour, because commodities must fulfill a real social need in order to be sold on the market. Marx's theory of commodity fetishism shows that production under capitalism is mediated by the market and, as such, takes place in order to

realize value and not to fulfill human needs. Through this process, capital attempts to reduce all forms of human activity to quantifiable units of abstract labour, subordinating concrete and differential forms of time to abstract labour-time. But just as concrete forms of labour persist, so too do concrete counter-times. It is for this reason that a struggle against alienation is best understood as a struggle over our time, as an effort to reclaim control over the time of our lives and direct it towards the reproduction of human life rather than profit.

Romantic Marxism brings together the Romantic critique of modern capitalist society and Marx's critique of the alienation of labour. It remains attentive to the persistence of differential and concrete counter-times despite the tendency of capitalism to subsume these non-synchronous elements to the logic of value. The revolutionary Romantic relationship to the past is not a purely nostalgic desire for a repetition of the past in the present. Instead, Romantic Marxism insists that an ongoing connection to forms of life and expressions of human nature found in the non-capitalist past allows for the possibility of their selective recovery, a not-just-nostalgic process of redeeming non-capitalist social forms as part of a struggle against capitalist alienation.

In this sense, Romantic Marxism is complimentary to SRT. By expanding Marx's notion of alienation beyond the workplace and, indeed, beyond the home, SRT enriches both our understanding of alienation and the ways in which it might be resisted. By highlighting the possibility of directing our life-making activity towards human flourishing rather than profit, SRT, like Romantic Marxism, demands that recovering our species-being represents a central precondition for the realization of communism. Both perspectives view the project of communist freedom as only realizable through a process of disalienation. The end of alienation, necessarily, requires the realization of communism, the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 5 – Communist Freedom: Free Time, Concrete Utopias, and the Revolutionary Imaginary

In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and thereby also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; after labor has become not only a means of life but life's prime desire and necessity; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of cooperative wealth flow more abundantly, only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be completely transcended and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs! – Karl Marx (2023, p. 59).

It is socialist because it re-affirms the revolutionary perspectives of Communism, faith in the revolutionary potentialities not only of the Human Race or of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat but of real men and women – E. P. Thompson (1957, Stalinism as an Ideology section).

It is not about untethered dreaming, but an audacious envisioning of other possible futures grounded in the serious analysis of history and mapping of present conditions that allows us to find paths to realizable transformation – Alan Sears (2025a, p. 143).

Introduction

The view of communism elaborated so far must involve the self-directed, democratic, and collective control over the labour process. This follows Marx's own definition in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, where he declares that a communist society would end the separation of work and life, directing labour towards the satisfaction of the individual and collective needs of that society. Such a definition of communism is incompatible with the popular understanding of the term, which has become associated with economic underdevelopment, political repression, and the totalitarian and bureaucratic regimes of figures like Josef Stalin. At the same time, anti-communist sentiment has been developed and spread as a way of disseminating the belief that capitalism is the only viable way of organizing society. We must, therefore, reject the anti-communism propagated by defenders of capitalism without falling back on what David Camfield (2025) calls the "anti-anti-communist" (p. 5) perspective, which uncritically defends Communist

regimes of the past, including Stalin in Russia and Mao Zedong in China. The anti-anti-communist position often expresses a nostalgic desire for a return to a time when these societies appeared to present a viable alternative to capitalism. However, Communist regimes have never come close to approaching Marx's vision of communist freedom (Chattopadhyay, 2019, p. xii). Against both anti-communism and anti-anti-communism, this chapter follows the heterogeneous tradition of non-Stalinist Marxism, including Marx's own conception of communist society based on democratically organized and self-directed human activity.

Communist freedom, so conceived, follows from the analysis of the previous chapters. Orthodox forms of Marxism, exemplified in the work of G. A**.** Cohen and revived in eco-modernist perspectives, view communism as the full development of society's productive forces. Indeed, the growth in productive forces under Communist regimes in the USSR and China represents a major point of emphasis for those who view these states as examples of socialism in practice (Camfield, 2025**,** p. 87). However, while it is true that a certain level of development is necessary for communism to occur at a global scale, it is not the case that the industrialization that occurred under Stalin or Mao is indicative that Russia and China were ever transitioning towards communism. While the mechanical and productivist interpretation of historical materialism places its faith in abstract economic laws, viewing communism as the inevitable outcome of the linear movement of history, Romantic Marxism centres the concrete activity of actually existing people. It is for this reason that, in the epigraph to this chapter, Thompson insists that socialism must be humanist, placing its faith not in abstractions but in the material activity of real people.

Emerging from the actual struggles of the exploited and oppressed living in capitalism today, the revolutionary vision of communist freedom remains grounded in the potential of

ordinary people to transform the conditions of their lives through their own activity. Utopian thought is not merely an exercise in imagination, where any and all futures are possible. Instead, concrete utopias are formed by and through the lives and struggles of the people who envision a qualitatively different future. That horizon can only be pursued through the realization of the material potentialities of disalienated human activity (Sears, 2025a, p. 143). Like Thompson's socialist humanism, Alan Sears' understanding of utopianism places its faith in the capacities of people to direct and organize their own lives in new ways, creating futures that go beyond what is deemed to be possible by capitalist realism and, indeed, some forms of Marxism.

Romantic Marxism is committed to the utopian possibility of redeeming past movements by realizing their revolutionary potential in the present. Similarly, against abstract conceptions of class struggle and revolution that subordinate concrete human activity to productivist notions of progress, SRT insists that the movement towards communism is a product of the collective activity and struggle of the working class as it actually exists. While capitalist alienation is experienced by everyone who lives under global capitalism (which is to say everyone that lives on this planet), SRT interrogates the ways in which alienation is experienced in particular ways by the diverse segments of the working class, including people of colour, women, and queer people. By viewing the concrete struggles of the exploited and oppressed as constitutive of the universal movement towards communism, Romantic Marxism and SRT underscore the uneven nature of capitalist alienation while remaining committed to a project of universal human freedom. Realizing such a vision of communist freedom requires substantive control over the labour process, over the very time of our lives.

The first section of this chapter engages with Marx's view of freedom, drawing on his early works on wood theft in the Rhine Province and the *Economic and Philosophical*

Manuscripts of 1844, his most developed work in *Capital*, and his later writings including the *Critique of the Gotha Program* and his notes on national liberation struggles. Throughout all phases of his life, Marx consistently articulates a view of freedom rooted in the democratic self-realization of humanity's capacity to act in, on, and with the world as an end in itself. The second part of the chapter develops the revolutionary Romantic view of communist freedom. Centring the romantic tendencies within the Marxist tradition reinvigorates the utopian impulse that emerges from ashes of past defeats. Uncovering the utopian elements internal to Marx's work makes possible the selective recovery of past forms of struggle and institutional infrastructure as an essential part of the present-day movement towards communism. The third section will once again engage with our four Romantic Marxists on the need for an ongoing commitment to the project of revolutionary communism and the ability of ordinary people to transform the world. The last part of the chapter will bring in Social Reproduction Theory as a contemporary example of the living tradition of non-orthodox Marxism. Like Romantic Marxism, SRT desires the disalienation of labour and democratic self-control over the labour process, so as to direct human activity towards the fulfillment of our needs and desires, rather than the production of value.

Marx's View of Human Freedom

The Young Marx, Alienation, and Democracy

As we have seen in the last chapter, Marx's early work focuses largely on political forms of alienation arising from the division between the public state and the private sphere of civil society. While modern society has expanded the rights of those considered to be public citizens, it has isolated political rights from the economic sphere while destroying traditional forms of

community that maintained some degree of collective control over the labour process. This, for Marx (1978a), represents the modern form of alienation (p. 18). Until the division between the political and economic spheres is overcome, until the labour process is brought under collective control, modern society will continue to be alienated, and political freedom will remain an abstraction. This requires, as Paul Raekstad (2022) argues, a radical conception of democracy, upon which Marx bases his view of communist freedom (p. 91).

While Marx's early work is, at least initially, primarily a critique of political forms of alienation, it is still possible to locate the kernel of Marx's critique of political economy, where he identifies the social relations of production as the basis of his analysis. In the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx (1978b) notes that his work on the theft of wood and landed property represents the moment when his focus shifted to the economic sphere (p. 3). In his writings on the law in relation to wood theft in the Rhine Province, Marx (2021) argues that the gathering of wood only became theft under developing capitalist relations of private property, where propertied interests influenced the state to pass laws that deemed the collection of wood by peasants – a practice grounded in traditional custom – to be a crime (p. 83). Importantly, Marx does not defend the customary right of the poor to collect wood as a natural right (Bensaïd, 2021, p. 20). Instead, he views it as valid precisely because it opposes the *right of the poor* to the legal right to private property, the latter of which benefits the ruling class. As Marx (2021) states, "the customary rights of the poor are rights contrary to the custom of positive law" (p. 67), and so it is only because the poor do not benefit from formal law that the appeal to traditional custom is justified.

Marx's writings on the theft of wood are grounded in a conception of universality emerging through shared class experience (the poor). Not merely a nostalgic appeal to

conventions of the past, Marx situates traditional right within the conflictual and contradictory social relations of the present (Bensaïd, 2021, p. 19). As Daniel Bensaïd argues, Marx's appeal to customary right looks to restore the relationship between individuals and the products of their labour (p. 50). But as we have seen in the last chapter, overcoming alienation can only occur through existing social forms. Marx's recovery of traditional right, therefore, requires reclaiming control over the social and cooperative powers that have developed in the capitalist present. By engaging with the debates around wood theft in such a way, Marx begins to define the poor as having a collective material interest, insisting that they, as a propertyless mass, represent a universal subject-in-formation. While he does not yet define the poor as such, the writings on wood theft point towards the emergence of a revolutionary class (Löwy, 2005, p. 30). These writings are essential for understanding Marx's humanism and his radical notion that a universal movement for human emancipation might emerge from the struggle of a particular segment of society.

While Marx's earliest work contains the seeds of his critique of political economy, it is in the *Manuscripts of 1844* that Marx (1988) explicitly starts from "an *actual* economic fact" (p. 71) and begins to theorize alienation as the separation of humans from their capacity to labour. As we have seen in the last chapter, alienation, for Marx in the *Manuscripts*, is a *material* phenomenon rooted in capitalist relations of production. Labour under capitalism is no longer directed towards the fulfillment of biological and social needs. Instead, it becomes a means to an end, a way of obtaining the wages workers need to survive. While the productive powers of society have reached levels not seen prior to capitalism, they have been directed towards the production of value rather than the fulfillment of human needs and the enrichment of human community. Overcoming alienation, for Marx, requires substantive democratic control over the

labour process by the producers themselves: "for the socialist man the *entire history of the world* is nothing but the begetting of man through human labor, nothing but the coming-to-be of nature for man, he has the visible, irrefutable proof of his *birth* through himself, of his *process* of *coming-to-be*" (p. 113). This passage highlights the importance of self-directed labour to Marx's vision of communism, bringing together Marx's earlier work on political alienation and his more developed definition in the *Manuscripts*.

The definition of communist freedom we have developed so far through Marx's early work has not been realized in any of the Communist regimes that have existed to date. While production in the USSR under Stalin was ordered and directed by the state, it was still fundamentally based on alienated labour (Camfield, 2025, p. 40). Industrialization in Russia was made possible through the ongoing exploitation of the surplus-labour of workers and dispossession of peasant lands. Thus, while Communist Russia was not a bourgeois society, in that private property was removed from the hands of capitalists, it was still a *class* society. Property remained separated from the actual members of society and in the possession of the State (Chattopadhyay, 2019, p. 17). Industrialization in Communist China was likewise driven by the ongoing exploitation of surplus-labour and the dispossession of peasant land (Camfield, 2025, p. 62). While production was directed by the State under Mao, China began to integrate State-led production into capitalist markets after his death in order to overcome slow growth. As a result, contemporary China is best understood not as a society transitioning to communism, but as a State-directed market economy.[54] Disalienation requires not only the move away from a

[54] See Eli Friedman et al. (2024) for an analysis of China's role in global capitalism today.

market society but the substantive democratic control over the labour process. This requires, as we will see below, the reclamation of socially available free time.

The "Middle" Marx and the Democratic Control of the Labour Process

As we have seen in the last chapter, Marx's humanist critique of alienation extends beyond his early work into his later writings, including *Capital*. It is through his critique of political economy that Marx fully develops the ways in which capital comes to subordinate concrete forms of human activity to abstract labour. *Capital* retains the humanist and romantic tendencies of his earlier work, including a critique of the quantification and mechanization of labour. While Marx does not generate a blueprint for communism, he gives us occasional references to what a future communist society might look like once alienation is overcome. Locating these moments allows Marx' s vision of the future to come into focus.

As we have seen in the last chapter, *Capital* articulates a critique of the dehumanization of labour that has occurred under capitalism, where workers have become mere appendages to productive machines (Marx, 1990, Chapter 15). Rather than an expression of the essential human capacity for labour, the development of productive powers under capitalism alienates workers, turning them into an accessory to industrial production. The subordination of the activity of workers to the mechanical time of the machine is based upon the forms of cooperative work and division of labour that have developed under capitalism. We have examined forms of Luddite resistance in the last chapter, both of the past and the present. While Marx does not express the same admiration for Luddism as Thompson does, neither does he uncritically welcome the implementation of capitalist machinery. Marx spends many pages documenting the ways in which the machination of production deteriorates working and living conditions by expelling workers from the labour process, subordinating the rhythm of labour to the time of the machine,

and depressing wages by increasing the amount of unskilled work that can be done by women and children. While he is careful to point out that "it took both time and experience before the workers learnt to distinguish between machinery and its employment by capital, and therefore to transfer their attacks from the material instruments of production to the form of society which utilizes those instruments" (pp. 554-555), Marx nevertheless situates the Luddite movement in the context of a growing "direct antagonism" (p. 559) between worker and machine. Read alongside Thompson's detailed analysis of Luddism, it is possible to view Luddite resistance as a not-just-nostalgic effort to realize a society in which workers maintain direct control over the labour process, including the machinery employed therein (Traverso, 2024, p. 58). The Luddite struggle offers a glimpse into Marx's own vision of a communist future, where machines and other technological developments would not be uncritically employed in ways that dehumanize labour, but to improve work and life conditions, increasing socially available free time.

But because capitalist production is mediated by the market, because production occurs primarily to produce surplus-value, it is impossible to redirect production towards the concrete needs of real people and communities. The theory of commodity fetishism that Marx develops in *Capital* makes precisely this point, that production only occurs under capitalism when mediated by market exchange. But production does not have to occur according to the whims of the capitalist market. In *Capital*, Marx (1990) imagines a society where production is democratically planned:

> The total product of our imagined association is a social product. One part of this product serves as fresh means of production and remains social. But another part is consumed by the members of the association as means of subsistence. This part must therefore be divided amongst them. *The way this division is made will vary with the particular kind of*

> *social organization of production and the corresponding level of social development attained by the producers.* We shall assume, but only for the sake of a parallel with the production of commodities, that the share of each individual producer in the means of subsistence is determined by his labour-time. Labour-time would in that case play a double part. *Its apportionment in accordance with a definite social plan maintains the correct proportion between the different functions of labour and the various needs of the associations*. On the other hand, labour-time also serves as a measure of the part taken by each individual in the common labour, and of his share in the part of the total product destined for individual consumption. (pp. 171-172, emphasis mine)

This passage is lengthy but reveals much about Marx's vision for a communist future. Here, the division of the social product of labour does not occur according to the irrational logic of the market. Instead, it is based on the particular needs and form of organization of a given society. It aligns with a social plan that is designed to fit that society's needs, desires, and capacities. By regaining democratic and self-directed control over the production process, humanity's social powers become an expression of a flourishing society.

The passage from *Capital* cited above represents a rare moment in the book where Marx explicitly articulates what a post-capitalist society might look like. But, as Paresh Chattopadhyay (2019) highlights, Marx's vision of communism permeates throughout his work (p. 3).[55] As we have seen in the previous chapter, while Marx does not often use the term in *Capital*, the content of his earlier critique of alienation can be found throughout the book generally and in the cited passage specifically. The society Marx is describing is a *disalienated* society, where production

[55] While Chattopadhyay (2019) is opposed to a critique of alienation that might include a selective recovery of past social forms (p. 47), he articulates a strong defense of Marx's vision of communist freedom against both Marxist and non-Marxist perspectives.

and distribution are determined by those doing the producing. Such a society would (re)unite people with the products of their labour, their fellow human beings, and their species-being. By defining communism as a *social* organization of production, Marx outlines a society in which production no longer occurs according to the irrational logic of the market. Instead, production would respond to the concrete needs of society, integrating social distribution into the production process. Communist society would also take into account the needs of those members of society who are unable to engage in productive activity due to age or ability.[56] Labour under communism would finally become an expression of our human capacity for self-directed, conscious, and creative activity.

The Late Marx and Socially Available Free Time

In the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, Marx defines communist society as a new organization of time, where the fulfillment of needs would no longer be governed by abstract labour-time (Hudis, 2023, p. 7). Instead, as in the passage from *Capital*, production would be organized and divided according to concrete social needs. Marx (2023) criticizes the authors of the Gotha Program for their focus on distribution, insisting that, instead of viewing labour as a means to survival, labour in a communist society would become "not only a means of life but life's prime desire and necessity" (p. 59), thereby ending the division between work and life. Control over our time is essential, therefore, to a struggle against the abstract time of capital and, indeed, to overcoming capitalism itself. The two are connected, in that we will not have control over our time without the end of capitalism, while overcoming capitalism requires regaining control over the time in which we labour.

[56] See Aaron Jaffe (2024a) for SRT's approach to disability, stressing the need for a radically new conception of both the satisfaction of needs and enactment of social powers.

Rather than viewing work as the time in which we are forced to produce as many things in as little time as possible, all under the discipline of capitalist clock-time, labour in a communist society would be directed towards fulfilling existing needs and creating new ones. Here, surplus time would not be the time of surplus-labour and the production of surplus-value. Rather, it would be the self-fulfilling time of rest, art, conversation, and creating and developing new ways of acting in, on, and with others and the natural world. Free time is therefore not only idle or leisure time (though it can be). Instead, socially available free time includes any activity viewed as socially necessary for human flourishing (Hägglund, 2020, p. 323). Even activities that may appear as a means to an end, including what are now considered to be mundane tasks relegated to necessary labour-time, could belong to the realm of freedom so long as we see them as essential to our collective life project. Labour, so conceived, has not been realized by any Communist regime including Russia or China, both of which continued to exploit the labour-power of workers. These societies sought to justify their hierarchical, exploitative, oppressive, and repressive form of rule by claiming that it was needed for the development of society's productive forces, a necessary step on the road to communism (Chattopadhyay, 2019, p. 138). However, they only succeeded in suppressing the self-directed activity of the working class and, in the process, did significant damage to the project of communist freedom.

While communism has often been associated with the notion of a State-managed economy, Marx's view of communist freedom is, in fact, opposed to the State-capitalist regimes of many Communist societies that have actually existed (Hudis, 2023, p. 25). As Peter Hudis argues, the collectivization of private property is necessary, but not sufficient, for a communist society to be realized (p. 25). The process of collectivization must occur under the control of "*the freely associated producers*" (p. 25), not the decree of a Communist Party or State. It must, in

other words, be a self-managed, classless society, not a State-managed economy (Chattopadhyay, 2019, p. 130n53). Furthermore, the collectivization of property must occur alongside the disalienation of *all* social relations, including productive, gendered, and racial, amongst others, as well as the relationship between humans and non-human nature. For this to occur, the people who make up society must have substantive control over the labour process, as well as the political and social institutions that are created through the emergence of the post-capitalist society. Thus, as Massimiliano Tomba (2019) encourages us to do, we must think and practice democracy beyond the confines of the State (p. 1). While the State attempts to integrate struggles from below into forms compatible with capitalist reproduction, truly democratic practices persist in the activities and forms of resistance of everyday people (Sears, 2025a, p. 82). Indeed, while the insurgent possibilities contained in the Russian Revolution were unrealized, largely due to their suppression by Stalin, the potential for realizing the promise of 1917 has not been completely closed off (Tomba, 2019, p. 129).

Hope, Utopia, and the Possibility of the Past

Political Defeat, Melancholia, and the Persistence of Hope

The failure of Communism to realize a viable and liberatory alternative to capitalism has created the perception that communist politics as a whole are a relic of the past. As Enzo Traverso (2021) argues, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of Soviet Communism represented the failure of the entire historical tradition associated with communism (p. 2). As such, even its more liberatory expressions, including the Spanish Civil War and May 1968 in France, have been equated with Stalinist authoritarianism. The end of Communism marks the

rise and dominance of a particular view of history, a perspective which posits capitalism as the only possible future for humanity. This view was expressed by Margaret Thatcher's infamous slogan "there is no alternative" and, without the same sense of smug contentment, by Frederic Jameson's (2003) statement that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism" (p. 76). Deprived of a vision of a liberatory future, we have been relegated to visions of societal collapse as the best to hope for. Worse still, the spread of anti-communist sentiment has undermined the very notion that struggle against exploitative and oppressive conditions is worthwhile, or that autonomous movements for social change have any chance of succeeding. The history of Stalinist forms of Communism has made communism synonymous with authoritarian and bureaucratic forms of government, disconnecting it from any conception of radical democracy and self-directed activity from below, while limiting its politics to a State-led project of industrial development.

In such a world, politics becomes reduced to either defeatist nihilism or reformist realism (Post, 2025). Of course, it is possible to advocate for institutional reforms that improve the lives of real people and, in limited ways, help to mitigate the harm done to communities by capital's drive to maximize profit without abandoning revolutionary politics. As Rosa Luxemburg (2006) argues in *Social Reform or Revolution*, the struggle for better conditions is the only way in which workers can materially participate in class struggle in their everyday lives (p. 3). Not only are such reforms materially valuable for defending a minimum standard of quality of life, but they can also represent steps towards building a revolutionary movement by growing the capacity for future struggles (Camfield, 2025, p. 143). As Luxemburg (2006) states: "Between social reforms and revolution there exists for the Social-Democracy an indissoluble tie. The struggle for reforms is its means; the social revolution, its aim" (p. 3). It is through the process of struggle that

workers become aware of their collective power and begin to realize that reformist demands remain insufficient for the full realization of that power. The struggle for reforms is therefore part of the revolutionary process (McNally, 2018, p. 369).

However, when viewed as an end in itself, reformism is limited to attempts to improve our lives under capitalism, narrowing the scope of what is believed to be possible (Sears, 2025b). Efforts to install progressive governments in the hopes that they will implement policies that benefit the working class cannot, on their own, lead towards a communist future (Camfield, 2025, p. 107). Resigning to such a reformist politics is to accept the impossibility of revolutionary change. But for those of us who have not accepted that the defeat of Communism represents the end of all hope in a liberatory future, it is still possible to re-write the history of the left. While a communist society has never been realized, the struggle for communism persists as a living material tradition. Indeed, the Russian Revolution would not have been possible without the struggles from below, the victories and deaths of ordinary peasants and workers (p. 23). But in order for capitalism to be viewed as inevitable and eternal, the memory of those events, what Traverso (2021) calls the "street fighting years" (p. 13)**,** had to be erased. The history of the Russian Revolution has been reduced to Stalinism, whose victims are mourned by proponents of capitalist "freedom" (p. 10). Similarly, the history of the Spanish Civil War, a class-based movement fighting for revolutionary transformation, has been rewritten from the liberal perspective of human rights, effacing its class character (p. 16). The erasure of the revolutionary memory of class struggle has created, at worst, a sense of resignation to the inevitability of capitalism and, at best, the acceptance of a reformist realism, where any aspiration for a qualitatively different future is dismissed as naïve idealism.

The triumph of capitalist realism has been accomplished, in part, through the words and actions of those who took part in moments of revolutionary upheaval but eventually attained positions of power in government or other institutions, disavowing their former comrades who maintained their revolutionary aspirations. Such betrayal occurred following the events of May 1968 in France, where many participants found it difficult to cope with the return to ordinary capitalist life once the movement was defeated (Proctor, 2024, p. 85). While some were able to find a place in the system that they had struggled against, others were unable or unwilling to reincorporate themselves into society. However, political defeat need not result in a turn to either defeatism or reformist realism. Exemplifying the utopian commitment to a better future, Daniel Bensaïd (2015) rejected the defeatism that accompanied the end of Soviet Communism, while remaining committed to the possibility of reviving the memory of past struggles against the myth that equates communism with Stalinism. While many of his contemporaries in France integrated themselves into the government of François Mitterrand in 1981 and became what Bensaïd calls "militant anti-communists, under the new cover of defence of human rights and the democratic crusade against totalitarian dangers" (p. 198), Bensaïd remained dedicated to the living tradition of revolutionary communism. Against the "blasé wisdom of sober old men" (p. 7), which views revolutionary commitment as a passing phase, it is important to remember that collective struggle is a lifelong process. Of course, the utopian vision for the future does not presume the inevitability of victory. It requires a political commitment to the different possible futures that exist in the cracks of the present.

The recomposition of potentially revolutionary moments into the empty time of capital has led Hannah Proctor (2024) to associate left-wing melancholia with a form of defeatism, the result of having to deal with the reality of despair and the conversion of hope into "a hollow,

deadened thing" (p. 35). However, melancholia cannot be equated with acceptance of the narrative of the end of Communism and the inevitability of capitalism. Rather, left-wing melancholia represents a longing to overcome both the defeats of the past and capital's current expressions through the reinvigoration of a lost or forgotten tradition of struggle (Traverso, 2021, pp. xiv-xv). In the face of countless political defeats, a sense of hope remains, grounded in an ongoing commitment to the belief that the world can change for the better. As Terry Eagleton (2017) argues in his book *Hope Without Optimism*, an optimist remains cheerful by ignoring the actual conditions of the present, but hope persists *in the face of* injustice, maintaining allegiance to the possibility of a better future (p. 2). Optimism is entirely irrational, "a gut feeling" (p. 3), impervious to all evidence that contradicts its positivity. Hope, by contrast, maintains a rational basis, in that it is based in the material possibility of transforming present conditions. But it also exceeds the rationality of capitalist realism, which insists that no other future is possible. Despite an aversion to melancholia, Proctor (2024) likewise retains hope in this adversarial sense, what she calls "mournful militancy" (p. 189), action rising from the ongoing trauma and sense of loss that extends from the past into the present. Maintaining hope in the face of despair, political activity represents a moment of healing and resilience, an expression of the anguish of the tragic-utopian dialectic redirected towards revolutionary struggle.

Drawing on the "spectre of Communism" (Marx & Engels, 2002, p. 218) from the opening lines of *The Communist Manifesto*, Sarah Jaffe (2024) uses the term "haunting" to describe the dual character of labour, the persistence of humanity's capacity for creative activity despite capital's desire to subsume everything to the law of value (p. 7). While we are haunted by the violence of capital and its drive to transform our living labour into things, so too is capital haunted by its need for human activity. In a similar move, David McNally (2012) draws on

Marx's usage of monstrous imagery – specifically vampires and zombies – to show that while capital is "vampire-like" (Marx, 1990, p. 342) and drains us of our creative life-force, our humanity persists and can be re-animated. McNally (2012) likens revolutionary upheaval with a zombie uprising, where workers begin to rediscover their potential to act in their own interests (p. 254). Through struggle, people "begin to move to a new rhythm, not that of capital's machines, but one of its own making" (p. 256), bringing to mind the Luddite struggle against the imposition of the machinated time of production. These Gothic images highlight the persistence of multiple and differential temporalities, potential sites of rupture with the linear time of capitalist progress.

Jaffe (2024) examines the non-synchronous moments internal to capitalism through the stories of workers located in the United States who have seen their factories close and their jobs disappear. The 2022 Miners Gala in Durham, a "festival of labor" (p. 149) that celebrates the persistence of working-class culture while simultaneously mourning the decimation of the mining industry, is an example of workers using the defeats of the past as a starting point for future political struggle. While an element of nostalgia can be found here, the Miners Gala is primarily an example of how *current* working-class movements are materially built on the struggles of the past. It is an illustration of the not-just-nostalgic commitment to recovering forms of community organization and infrastructure in order to build a new future. Following Benjamin (1969e) – a central figure for Jaffe – revolution is a redemption of the past, a realization of past struggles through the creation of a different future (p. 254). It is this material relationship to the past, to a living memory of struggle and community, that Romantic Marxism seeks to recover. Not just an idealist fantasy, the past represents a living source of strategies,

infrastructure, community, and movement building that can be reappropriated in the current moment (Sears, 2014, p. 36).

The Tragedy of the Unrealized Past

The relationship between political defeat and hope is embodied in the tragic-utopian dialectic, moving between the possibility of a utopian future and the recurring failure of realizing that dream. Unwilling to rely on the belief in the inevitability of progress that underpins certain expressions of orthodox Marxism, Romantic Marxism places its faith in the capacity of people to struggle and act together to create a better world. This requires, as Eagleton (2017) puts it, "hope against hope" (p. 112), belief in the face of insurmountable odds, repeated defeat, and the prospect that the day of victory may never come. Such a commitment is tragic precisely because of its utopian vision, its transformative and liberatory aspirations (Toscano, 2013, p. 27). But utopian desire cannot be reduced to pure idealism. It is precisely because capitalist modernity has opened up new possibilities for humanity, while simultaneously producing a more alienating and dehumanizing society, that the tragic-utopian dialectic emerges. The struggle for the realization of concrete utopias is expressed as a contest between what exists (alienated capitalist relations) and what exists only as a possibility (disalienated communist society).

The relationship between tragedy and utopia is a recurring motif in Marx's work. In *The Civil War in France*, Marx (1978e) shows that the new possibilities created by industrial capitalism have developed alongside a more oppressive form of class rule: "At the same pace at which the progress of modern industry developed, widened, intensified the class antagonism between capital and labour, the State power assumed more and more the character of the national power of capital over labour, of a public force organised for social enslavement, of an engine of class despotism" (p. 630). In the 1891 Introduction to *The Civil War*, Engels (1978) highlights

the tragic character of the French Revolution. While it contained the possibility of a truly universal proletarian revolution, those elements were suppressed by the bourgeoisie, who quickly moved to disarm the workers (p. 620). Engels sums up the tragic-utopian dialectic nicely: "after every revolution won by the workers, a new struggle, ending with the defeat of the workers" (p. 620). But it is not only defeat, for as Marx (1978e) declares: "Working men's Paris, with its Commune, will be for ever celebrated as the glorious harbinger of a new society. Its martyrs are enshrined in the great heart of the working class" (p. 652). While Marx is clear that the Commune was not the result of an idealist utopic vision – there were "no ready-made utopias to introduce *par décret du peuple*" (p. 635) – the desire for a society which abolishes private property through the democratically controlled, self-directed activity of the producers was a materially possible utopia, what Marx calls "'possible' Communism" (p. 635). Concrete utopian thought is an expression of what Aberto Toscano (2013) calls "the living, agonistic relation between the ideal and the actual" (p. 28), the possibility of realizing universal emancipation through particular struggles.

The revolutionary Romantic impulse to materially recover the living histories of life and struggle emerges from the ongoing movement between resistance, repression, and recomposition. In *The Next New Left*, Alan Sears (2014) traces a history of social movements from the 1930s to the present in North America and Western Europe. The book is a tragic-utopian account of the left of the past century, where moments of revolutionary possibility wax and wane with moments of demobilization and defeat. Sears consistently underscores the importance of what he calls "an infrastructure of dissent, which provides spaces for activist learning, analysis that challenges dominant ideas, collective memory to draw resources from past struggles and effective communication independent of the state and corporate media" (pp. 1-2). While a rejuvenated and

vibrant anti-capitalist movement cannot be built by simply retreading the past, rebuilding an infrastructure of dissent for the present moment must look to the past, both to learn from its failures and to recover forms of organizing, strategy, theory, and revolutionary memory that can be used in the present.

Sears (2014) argues that we cannot hope to replicate past forms of revolutionary mobilization due to the defeats suffered under neoliberalism and the current weakness of the left, (p. 11). However, this does not mean that rebuilding political infrastructure in the present must start from ground zero. Interrogating the history of past revolutionary movements alongside rigorous investigation of the concrete conditions of the present will help us to better understand what might be recovered and what should be discarded. This is what Proctor (2024) calls "political nostalgia" (p. 43), or what I have been calling the not-just-nostalgic effort to selectively recover elements of a living past. While "moribund nostalgia" (p. 43) would attempt to replicate exactly the same forms of organization, party, and struggle as existed, for instance, in the Russian Revolution, revolutionary Romanticism looks to the past to draw inspiration from a living tradition of life and struggle, to re-learn and re-establish those forms of revolutionary institutions and infrastructure that might be deployed in the service of present-day movements. Indeed, the Russian Revolution itself drew inspiration from the Paris Commune, not just ideologically but materially as well (p. 47). Similarly, Sears (2014) shows that the revival of the left that occurred in the 1960s in North America recovered elements of the infrastructure of dissent from the 1930s, including theories and strategies from dissident Trotskyist and anarchist voices within the left, while simultaneously developing new forms of organization and struggle, many of which came out of the central role anti-colonial, feminist, anti-racist, and queer liberationist movements played in the left's revival (p. 76). While the destruction of

infrastructure of dissent and the erasure of revolutionary memory has occurred to a much greater degree under neoliberalism, the recovery of material elements of past struggles can still play an important role in the recomposition of the left today.

The Utopian Imaginary

The realization of concrete utopias must, therefore, involve a rational and strategic analysis of our history, in order to understand if and how elements of the past might be applied to the present moment. But utopian thought is also "non-rational," in that it envisions a different future, one qualitatively distinct from the present and excessive of our current conditions (Sears, 2025a, p. 137). In revolutionary moments, this excessive potentiality is unleashed in what Traverso (2024) describes as "animalized" (p. 85) forms of expression or what McNally (2012) calls "carnivalesque insurgency, horrifying disruptions of the ordered and predictable patterns of everyday life" (p. 254), including outpourings of joy, anger, and violence.

Here we have a tension between what appears as exuberant or even irrational activity during revolutionary moments on the one hand, and the tendency to associate Marxism with a scientific, rational account of human society on the other. At first glance, the Romantic critique of the rationalist abstraction of Enlightenment thought, that which seeks to quantify all social relations, is incompatible with Marxism, which is undoubtedly modern (Löwy & Sayre, 2001, p. 89). However, as Löwy and Sayre argue, the material basis of Romanticism's critique is found in the concrete relations of the past, and it is this grounding which makes the Romantic critique of modernity realist (p. 11). As we have seen in Chapter 1, Romantic thought does not always take the form of an anti-Enlightenment reaction. Revolutionary Romanticism desires the realization of a *different* modernism, one which is truly universal. But upholding "realism" as the basis for critique dismisses so-called "irrealist" perspectives, such as Surrealism, which intentionally

obscure reality in order to imagine a different future (p. 41). It is for this reason that Löwy and Sayre propose a "critical irrealism" (p. 12), offering a fantastical but total critique of the alienation of modern capitalist society. "Nonrational" (p. 41) critiques of capitalist abstraction, including appeals to love, creativity, and pre-modern forms of life, can serve as both material motivations to revolutionary struggle and the potential basis of a future society. While these revolutionary aspirations, like Eagleton's (2017) conception of hope, must be situated in relation to concrete reality, the utopian vision for the future exceeds the limitations imposed by the capitalist present, encouraging us to go beyond a politics of resignation or reformism.

However, we must be careful not to flatten all forms of non-rational activity. As McNally (2012) argues, the postmodern impulse to fetishize "monstrous" forms of revolt tends to de-politicize and de-historicize monstrous activity, leading to an uncritical valorization of any form of non-rational behaviour, whether that be street protests against the racist killings of Black community members by the police or the storming of the US Capitol by white-supremacists (p. 11). The latter is far removed from the commitment to a politics of communism grounded in an aspiration for *universal* human freedom, not just the particular and reactionary demands of one specific group.

It is also necessary to guard against appeals to the non-rational that might reinforce the binary between modern and traditional (or primitive) forms of life. Equating the non-rational with pre-capitalist societies both flattens the latter and reproduces the colonial notion that non-Western societies remain stuck in a pre-historical temporality. Drawing on C. L. R. James, Toscano (2013) shows that understanding the past requires grappling with the relationship between an unrealized revolutionary potential and the material relations of the present which prevent the realization of that possibility (p. 26). Because capitalist relations have not been

imposed in a uniform way, it is important to avoid viewing the struggle for communism as a homogeneous movement. As Stefan Kipfer (2023) argues, an anti-colonial Marxism must not reproduce the unilinear and mechanical view of development of orthodox Marxism (p. 5). This requires an examination of the particular dynamics of colonialism and imperialism that exist in relation to ongoing anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggles. Thus, rather than viewing indigenous traditions as static and unchanging things, it is important to understand them as *living* practices. Indigenous struggles in Canada against the Alberta tar sands or the Keystone XL Pipeline, for example, are therefore not just defensive efforts to preserve a traditional way of life, if tradition only means a return to pre-colonial lifeways (p. 177). Rather, they are not-just-nostalgic struggles intent on realizing a future, post-colonial, and post-capitalist society, drawing upon living traditions of life and resistance as an integral part of their movements. As Tomba (2019) argues, indigenous struggles represent efforts to realize the alternate modernisms that exist in their lifeways, institutions, and infrastructure, practices which are never static (p. 187). From this perspective, "tradition is not the mere repetition of the past; it is, rather, a dynamic net of practices that hold different generations in what is understood as a common legacy" (p. 188).

It is perhaps possible to understand Marx and Engels' (2002) appeal to "the spectre of Communism" (p. 218) alongside Marx's later writings on the Russian *obshchina*, as an expression of this processual understanding of tradition. Rather than the inevitable outcome of a mechanical unfolding of history, the struggle over the past becomes central to realizing communism in the present. Non-capitalist social forms persist, in subterranean ways, in the face of capitalist expansion. Concrete human activity continues to haunt the – always unsuccessful – attempt of capital to fully subordinate all ways of life to the logic of value. Marx's remarks on North American Indigenous societies indicate that he viewed them not as relics of the past, but as

living, material examples of what a future society might look like (Rosemont, 1989). Rather than fetishizing and reifying indigenous lifeways and struggle, we should view them as living histories, expressions of the concrete counter-times that continue to resist the alienating violence of colonial and imperialist capitalism.

The relationship between Marxism, colonialism, and imperialism is not without its contradictions, however. Orthodox forms of Marxism have reproduced unilinear understandings of history and denied colonial subjects revolutionary agency by insisting that all societies must first go through the same stages of industrialization and proletarianization before a communist revolution would be possible. This is not to say that all Communist regimes ignored the question of colonialism entirely. Bolshevik Russia attempted to integrate struggles for national liberation into a global communist movement in the July 1920 meeting of the Communist International (Traverso, 2024, p. 426). However, Russia's practical commitment to these movements was inconsistent. Communist Russia actively supported the Zionist project in Israel, while also denying support to anti-colonial struggles in China and Ethiopia (Camfield, 2025, pp. 48-49). Indeed, Indian Marxist M. N. Roy did not attend the 1920 Congress of the Peoples of the East due to a lack of material commitment to national liberation movements beyond ritualistic posturing (Traverso, 2024, pp. 426-427).

Marxism's fickle relationship with anti-colonial movements has led to the characterization of Marx as a Eurocentric, unilinear thinker. This view, found in Edward Saïd's (1979) *Orientalism*, maintains that Marx saw the English path of development as necessary for the entire world, leading to his justification of English colonial rule in India (p. 153). However, as we have seen in Chapter 3, Marx writes admirably of anti-colonial resistance in India, both militarily and regarding the persistence of communal traditions. Marx's evolving views on the

relationship between spreading capitalist relations, colonial violence, anti-colonial resistance, and communal forms of living represent a much more complex picture of development than the mechanical, linear, determinist perspective that is often foisted on him. And while Communist regimes, including China, have been far from consistent in their support for national liberationist struggles, as evidenced by their inconsistent support for Vietnam (Camfield, 2025, p. 67) and the decision to support the Sri Lankan (at the time Ceylon) government during the 1971 People's Liberation Front revolt (p. 68), anti-colonial struggles have often claimed Marxism as their own (Traverso, 2021, p. 166). As Sears (2014) shows, the emergence of national liberation struggles in the 1960s represented a central element of the recomposition of the new left of that time (p. 76).

How then should we view the relationship between Marxism and struggles for national liberation? Marx and Engels' (2002) statement in *The Communist Manifesto* that "the Communists are further reproached with desiring to abolish countries and nationality" (p. 241) has been interpreted as expressing hostility to national liberationist struggle. However, Marx's broader work demonstrates a more nuanced view which distinguishes the capitalist nation-state from national liberation movements for self-determination (Benner, 2018, p. 32). The proletarian struggle for national liberation, in concert with the broader movement against capitalism, is capable of both mobilizing militant working-class movements nationally and contributing to a global anti-capitalist movement. In Ireland, the struggle against capitalism and the struggle against English rule as one and the same, a fact that was recognized by Irish workers, making them "more revolutionary and more infuriated than in England" (Marx, 1975-2004, as cited in Anderson, 2025, p. 238). National liberation, so conceived, represents part of a project of *universal* emancipation, going beyond the narrow liberal rights granted by the nation-state and,

in the process, creating what Tomba (2019) calls a "post-national politics" (p. 147) of non-nationalist anti-imperialism. As Alan Sears (2025a) has insightfully demonstrated, the theory of uneven and combined development not only underscores the possibility of revolution beginning from less developed areas of the world; it also highlights the fact that multiple and diverse paths towards liberation exist as unrealized possibilities (pp. 152-153). The trajectory of current anti-capitalist struggles need not follow directly in the footsteps of past revolutionary moments. Instead, we can draw from past experiences, recovering institutional infrastructure, strategy, and theory in order to "make leaps" (Sears, 2014, p. 23) towards new modes of struggle and new possible futures.

Romantic Marxism and Communist Freedom

Communism, then, is not merely the full realization of the productive powers made possible by capitalism. The revolutionary process of communism is a *break* from the linear and homogeneous time of capital. Such moments of rupture have occurred throughout history, including in September 1792 during the French Revolution where public executions were accompanied by a festival-like atmosphere (Traverso, 2024, pp. 86-87), as well as in later uprisings, including the Russian Revolution and the Spanish Civil War (pp. 87-88). While a product of these moments of temporal rupture, the Communist regimes that have actually existed sought to restrain the excessive quality of the insurrections and restore a new form of order. Rather than allowing for the self-development of a future society that might emerge from moments of insurgency, Communist states became efforts to supress the revolutionary masses. The Military Revolutionary Committee of the Petrograd Soviet prevented the looting of the Winter Palace during the Russian Revolution, and the newly formed republican government in

Spain sought to restore order over the communist and anarchist militants who fought against Franco (pp. 87-88). This led to the re-establishment of an exploitative form of labour and an alienated society.

The sections that follow engage with our four Romantic Marxists in order to begin to generate a positive and liberatory vision of a communist society. The version of communist freedom elaborated here includes utopian elements that exceed the limits of what is possible under capitalism but remains grounded in the non-synchronous moments internal to capitalist society. While critical of the productivist and evolutionist tendencies of orthodox Marxism, Thompson (1957) retains a commitment to a project of what he calls "Socialist Humanism," which begins from the concrete and diverse activity of actually existing people. Rejecting both defeatism and reformism, Thompson maintains a sense of hope in the capacity of ordinary people to create a different world. While the actions of Luddite and millenarian movements might appear irrational to the logic of capitalist progress, they were grounded in the concrete activity of the poor and oppressed. Similarly critical of mechanical interpretations of historical materialism, Benjamin (1969e) shows that past forms of life and struggle might be reconstituted by their integration in the present, what he refers to as a Messianic potential (p. 263). Against the ultra-rational logic of capitalism, Benjamin's Messianic revolution represents a break with history as we know it, a process that includes the integration of non-rational elements including theology. The events of May 1968 in France represented an expression of this possibility, where people went beyond the limits of what was possible under capitalism (Lefebvre, 1969, p. 57). While capitalist alienation has penetrated the level of daily life, the possibility of redirecting our activity towards human flourishing persists (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 51). As always, Schwarz (2020) reminds us that while we must not reproduce the false universalism of Western modernity, it is

still possible to remain committed to a truly universal humanism, one which is attentive to the diverse paths that modernity might take (p. 35). Such a view enriches our vision of communism, encouraging us to consider the uneven and contradictory form that current social relations take, while urging us to move towards a truly universalist future, one representative of "the whole of humanity of our time" (Schwarz, 1992a, p. 191).

Romantic Marxism and Communism

Communist freedom is only possible through a process of disalienation, where workers themselves begin to regain democratic self-control over the labour process. It is, in other words, a humanist project which "places once again real men and women at the centre of socialist theory and aspiration" (Thompson, 1957, Stalinism as an Ideology section). Communism, so conceived, is opposed to the orthodox interpretation of historical materialism, which subordinates the real, contradictory, and uneven movement of history to an abstract and mechanical model of unilinear development. Stalinism – a phenomenon exceeding the figure of Stalin himself – is an expression of this tendency. In Soviet Russia, the power of ordinary workers was supressed by a bureaucratic regime, which subordinated the self-directed activity of the working masses to the mandate of the State and Party.

But while Thompson is critical of Stalinism and its expression in Soviet Russia, he never abandoned communism as a political project. Indeed, he rejects the "apology for quietism" (Thompson, 2008, p. 223) that can be found in George Orwell's *Inside the Whale*, which Thompson argues moves from disillusionment with Soviet Communism to a rejection of communism in all its forms. Orwell's sense of disenchantment with the left led him to a defeatist pessimism, causing him to relinquish any aspiration for a better future. As we have seen above, the other outcome of defeatism is accepting the limits of reformist realism, a position taken up by

those who "lose confidence in the revolutionary perspectives of socialism, take a more limited and humdrum view of human potentialities, and hence cease to struggle for that transformation in men's values and outlook which socialists once thought possible" (Thompson, 1957, 3rd para.). Against both of these perspectives, Thompson retains a commitment to the principles of self-organized democracy, derived from Marx's own work we have examined above. *The Making of the English Working Class* highlights many instances of these principles in the emergent struggles against the spread of capitalist relations. The values that would come to be central to what Thompson (1991) calls socialist humanism already existed in the customs and forms of life of the workers who were struggling to defend their culture and way of living: "they had a powerful reality, none the less, in the notion of what *ought* to be, to which artisans, journey-men, and many small masters appealed. More than this, the ideals lived in the sanctions and customs of the more traditional manufacturing communities" (p. 594).

A critique of counter-revolutionary expressions of Communism can be found in Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" as well. As we have seen in the last chapter, the "Theses" accuse the orthodox version of historical materialism of historicism, the linear understanding of history that views the past as "a mass of data" (Benjamin, 1969e, p. 262) rather than a living history with an ongoing relationship to the present and future. The mechanical view of historical materialism finds its expression in the theory and practice of what Benjamin calls Social Democracy, which views progress as a linear (or spiral, but always progressive) trajectory (p. 260). From this perspective, socialism is simply the necessary outcome of the evolutionary unfolding of human society. But despite his harsh critique of certain expressions of Marxism, Benjamin remains committed to the version of historical materialism opposed to the linear view of progress. He cites Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program* as evidence of Marx's rejection of

the notion that labour represents nothing more than a means to increasing the productive forces of society (p. 259). Like Thompson, Benjamin insists that the working class as it actually exists must be in control of the process of revolution. Rather than waiting for the interruption of history, Benjamin's conception of Messianic time underscores the urgent need for political action in order to create change (Löwy, 2016, p. 38). For Benjamin (1969e), "the struggling, oppressed class" (p. 260) remains at the centre of analysis, for "*they* are about to make the continuum of history explode" (p. 261, emphasis mine). Rather than waiting for the arrival of the Messiah, "it is we who are awaited" (Bensaïd, 2015, p. 288). The class struggle is a struggle for freedom, "for the very possibility of values, which is constantly threatened, and for culture, which lives in perpetual crisis" (Benjamin, 2011g, p. 123).

Communist freedom, therefore, must be grounded in the actual – and diverse – experiences of those who make up the global working class. As Schwarz (1992a) argues, orthodox Marxism's use of terms like the Proletariat and Revolution has, a times, been "empty of real workers and real social movements" (p. 191). While it is important to remain committed to a revolutionary project of universal emancipation, it is equally necessary to be attentive to the empirical realities that exist unevenly across the globe. In an engagement with Bertolt Brecht and his relevance in the Brazilian context, Schwarz (2009) shows that Brecht's work was "directly inscribed within the turn from capitalism to communism" (p. 85). Brecht's form of theatre sought to historicize modernity and subvert the perceived inevitability of bourgeois relations. Rather than a determined trajectory, Brecht understood that the possibility for global transformation was grounded in the material conditions of his time. However, Schwarz points to the failure of the USSR to live up to the aspirations of those committed to revolutionary communism as a difficulty for interpreting Brecht today (p. 89). Because it has become increasingly "difficult to

imagine that a better society might be gestating within the field of 'actually existing socialism'," Schwarz argues that "the place on the leading edge of history that Brecht's method presumed found itself without support in the real course of things, transforming clear-sighted critical superiority into an illusion" (p. 89). Indeed, in Brazil, progress occurred not through the overcoming of capitalism by communism nor through the policies of a liberal government, but through the imposition of a right-wing military dictatorship in 1964 (pp. 92-93). While the military government was surely reactionary, it also produced "a leap in manufacturing and its internationalization," as well as the "liberalization of sexual mores, a normalization of drug use, the partial – and precarious – incorporation of the poor into mass consumerism, and the desacralizing commercialization of culture" (p. 93). Rather than confirming the belief in historical materialism and the inevitable outcome of socialism, history in Brazil seems to have confirmed the opposite: that progress can come from the most reactionary elements of society. However, Schwarz maintains a revolutionary commitment to the possibility of communist freedom and argues that Brecht's work highlights the ongoing possibility of revolutionary change in the face of "permanent catastrophe" (p. 104), as well as the need for a political "commitment to making class conflict and canonical literature commensurable, so as to undo the conservative unctuousness that accompanied the latter and, therefore, return it to life" (p. 103).

Revolutionary activity arises from the self-directed actions of the working class and opens up possibilities not presented by either alienated capitalist relations or the top-down politics of the Communist Party. Lefebvre (1969) refers to "revolutionary spontaneity" (p. 94), or forms of activity and struggle that go beyond the limits of hierarchical institutions and even the material limits of life under industrial capitalism. As Lefebvre puts it, "self-management indicates the road toward the transformation of everyday existence" (p. 90). However, despite the

language of spontaneity, he insists that "the transformation of everyday existence also involves institutions" (p. 90). Through their own self-directed activity, the working class creates new revolutionary institutions which serve the interests of a future society in-formation. Rather than a spontaneous movement from nowhere, revolutionary spontaneity requires a "move from contestation to institution" (p. 82), from the negation of what currently exists to a positive politics based on radical democracy and self-directed activity.

Romantic Marxism and the Utopian Imaginary

While it is important to avoid implementing overly abstract notions of what communism will look like, we must not let the failures of Communist regimes lead to a complete rejection of communism as a political project or a lapse into a fragmented politics with no grounding in any conception of universal human emancipation. As Thompson (2008) argues, equating communism with the betrayal of the Soviet Union, as Orwell does, "denied the possibility of *hope* within the pattern of social change wherever Communist influence could be detected" (p. 226). Rather than defeatism or reformist realism, Thompson remains committed to the belief that human nature "is potentially revolutionary: man's will is not a passive reflection of events, but contains the power to rebel against 'circumstances' (or the hitherto prevailing limitations of 'human nature') and on that spark to leap the gap to a new field of possibility" (p. 239). Despite the defeats and failures of the past, this revolutionary potential persists within the essential human capacity to transform our conditions through labour and struggle. Embodying the concrete utopian vision of Romantic Marxism, Thompson (1959) states:

> The region of political choices is limited by the stubborn nature of the stuff with which we must work. And the value of utopianism is to be found, not in raising banners in the wilderness, but in confronting living people with an image of their own potential life, in

> summoning up their aspirations so that they challenge the old forms of life, and in influencing such social choices as there are in the direction that is desired. Utopianism and realism should not form into rival contingents; they should quarrel in a constructive way in the heart of the same movement. (Whole Way of Struggle section)

Lefebvre (1969) identifies this utopian belief in the liberatory potential of human activity in the "*possibilist* tendency" (p. 57) that emerged in the moment of 1968 in France. In contrast to both the "archaic" (p. 54) right-wing reactionary tendency and the broad "modernist" one (p. 55) – which included political liberals, elements of the capitalist class who wanted to "catch up" (p. 56) to American capital, and the Soviet Marxists who desired a centralized State-Communist society – the possibilist tendency "covers all those who viewed or view the 'realm of possibilities' as still open" (p. 57). For Lefebvre, the Communist elements of the modernist perspective committed "a great historic betrayal" (p. 58) by aligning themselves with the State and against the self-directed activity of the movement itself. While the modernists sought to redirect the revolutionary energy of May 1968 towards the recomposition of the State form, the possibilists remained faithful to the total transformation of society "from the bottom which was changing, to the top which should be destroyed, beheaded, democratized" (p. 59).

Rather than viewing the betrayals of Communist regimes as reason for despair, Romantic Marxism insists that class struggle begins from the memory of past defeats. While "Social Democracy thought fit to assign to the working class the role of the redeemer *of the future generations*, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength" (Benjamin, 1969e, p. 260, my emphasis), Benjamin insists that the past represents the starting point for working-class struggle in the present. It is for this reason that Benjamin's Angel of History looks mournfully to the past, to previous forms of life that have been destroyed or stunted by the spread of capitalist modernity

(p. 237). By remaining committed to the living memory of their "enslaved ancestors," the working class renews "both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice" (p. 260). The revolutionary commitment to our enslaved ancestors is part of not-just-nostalgic struggle in the present, grounded in the material history of the left. This includes past anti-capitalist movements but also the pre-capitalist history of those who struggled for human freedom, including slaves and peasants (Löwy, 2016, p. 79). Thompson's commitment to the living tradition of humanist socialism likewise includes the possibility of recovering past forms of theory and practice for the present moment. It also involves identifying "Marx's notion of human potential within the actual context of pre-existent social formations" (Thompson, 2008, p. 351). For Thompson, as for the late Marx and Benjamin, social forms of the past can represent material examples of a less alienated way of life that might be integrated into our vision of a future communist society.

The potential for revolutionary activity persists in the face of defeat, even in situations of dictatorial right-wing rule. In an interview on the socio-historical context of Jair Bolsonaro's rise to power in Brazil in 2018, Schwarz (2020) returns to the 1964 coup that led to the formation of a military dictatorship lasting until 1985, showing that the left in Brazil suffered two consecutive defeats (p. 37). The first was due to the failure of the Communist Party to mobilize effectively against the dictatorship, choosing concession over resistance despite the existence of a broad-based movement. The second followed a period of radicalization in response to the first defeat. While initially opening up new possible avenues for struggle, the radical left-wing response to the collapse of the Party was violently repressed by the military dictatorship. As Schwarz argues, this two-stage defeat handed "socialism a knock-out blow and [announced] what would be the contemporary horizon – that of capitalism with no alternative in sight" (p. 37). However, the utopian vision of revolution persisted in Brazilian culture, where the dream "for a vanguardist

rupture and popular inclusion found a deep echo, a greater density" (p. 38). This movement was grounded in the modern aesthetic tradition inherited from Europe and the United States but remained attentive to the particular conditions of Brazil. Schwarz, like Thompson and Benjamin, maintains a revolutionary commitment to communism from-below, a culture that has persisted due to the activities of ordinary people.

Romantic Marxism and Non-Rational Elements

Such a commitment requires a type of faith in the ability of people to engage in the forms of self-directed activity and struggle that will make up the basis of a future communist society. The utopian vision of a liberatory communist future requires a Thompsonian belief – what Martin Hägglund (2020) calls "secular faith" (p. 7) – in the ability of humanity to realize and embody the flourishing human society envisioned by Marx, where human labour would be democratically organized towards the collective fulfillment of biological and social needs. Thompson (2008) asks "why we should select from the possibilities disclosed by history one particular set and acclaim these as 'truly human' *potentia*" (p. 358). It is, for Thompson, "a matter of 'faith' that I choose to identify with this *potentia* and not those others, and I may say as a historical investigator that the chosen *potentia* is one of the empirically-observable possibilities of choice, and I may then add that I am, in my choosing and valuing nature, an outcome of this *potentia*" (p. 358).

Revolutionary commitment is a political choice to believe in the activity of actual human beings which can be, at times, unpredictable, and, indeed, non-rational (Thompson, 2008, p. 384). Such a view requires an openness to the possibility of a heterogeneous and differentiated global society, where "the institutions, the culture, and the socially-endowed 'nature' will not be identical in all parts of a socialist world" (p. 380). This open vision of a communist future is

incompatible with the Communist regimes of Russia and China, as well as the version of Communism advocated by those who remain committed to the reproduction of Stalinist forms of Communism today. Stalinist Russia and Maoist China remained constrained by what Thompson calls "a 'realism' which is derivative from an obsession with men's evil propensities" (p. 381). In an attempt to shelter society from the unpredictable and, at times, non-rational elements of human activity, Communist regimes intensified forms of repression, limiting the potential for the realization of a flourishing human society even further (Chattopadhyay, 2019, p. 4). By trying to impose a singular linear vision of revolution onto the rest of society, the leaders of Communist states ignored or violently eliminated the messy, uneven, contradictory, and non-rational elements that inevitably make up a communist revolution. As Thompson (2008) remarks, "the world is made up of intellectual barbarians, romantic nostalgics, illiterate peasants, manic students, racist blacks, and mute consumerized workers" (p. 384), but this does not mean that they will remain so, or that they can only become revolutionary subjects once they have been gifted revolutionary consciousness from Party leadership. Rather, revolutionary consciousness comes through the process of struggle for a better world: "the values of *égalité* are not ones which can be thought up, they must be learned through living them" (p. 385).

Through rigorous historical investigation, Thompson (1991) uncovers the non-linear relationship between activity and consciousness, highlighting the uneven nature of class formation, a process that often includes non-rational elements, including religious traditions (p. 199). As we have seen in the last chapter, the struggle against capitalist expansion in eighteenth-century England often centred around cultural forms of resistance. One of these was millenarianism, an unorthodox religious tradition rooted in the belief in a future utopia where the kingdom of God will be realized on Earth (p. 52). Millenarianism has often been dismissed as

fantastical, but Thompson insists that it was not just an idealist fiction. Millenarianism sought the realization of a concrete utopia through political struggle and was grounded in the actual experiences of the history of the oppressed. Thompson shows that Owenism, the movement surrounding the Utopian Socialist Robert Owen, mobilized society's most marginalized elements (p. 857). Born out of the contradictory relationship between traditional, often religious-based, forms of contention and developing secular ones, Owenism represented a mobilization of these two forces, reviving the millenarian vision of a future utopia in a secular manner: "With the Owenites the Millenium was not to arrive, it was to be *made*, by their own efforts" (p. 883).

In a more explicitly theological register, Benjamin (1969e) integrates theology and historical materialism, showing that, by enlisting "the services of theology" (p. 253), historical materialism might be redeemed and no longer subordinated to the mechanical interpretation of orthodox Marxism. As Löwy (2016) argues, Benjamin looks to integrate theology, not as a religious or theoretical exercise but as a way of fusing it with the material struggle of the working class (p. 27). Like Owenism's secular millenarianism, Benjamin desires what Löwy calls a "spiritual activation" (p. 28) of historical materialism. The Messianic overcoming of capitalist history not only redeems Marxism; it also "comes as the subduer of Antichrist" (Benjamin, 1969e, p. 255). For Benjamin, it is only through a redemption of past forms of life and struggle that the Antichrist (capitalism) will be vanquished.

Parallels can be drawn between Benjamin's Messianic historical materialism and liberation theology in Latin America, which influenced the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua in 1979,[57] as well as other uprisings, including in El Salvador and Guatemala (Löwy, 2016, pp. 28-

[57] See Roger Lancaster's (1988) *Thanks to God and the Revolution* for an exposition of the relationship between religion and revolutionary Marxism in Nicaragua, during and after the Sandinista Revolution of 1979.

29). As Löwy (1996) shows in a study of liberation theology in Latin America, the connection between Catholicism and Marxism emerged in the late 1950s with the pontificate of Pope John XXIII in 1958, which marked the opening of a more socially progressive Church, coupled with the Cuban Revolution in 1959, which began a period of liberationist movements in Latin America (pp. 40-41). Not simply a result of the growing influence of Marxism in Latin America, liberation theology, or what Löwy calls "*liberationist Christianity*" (p. 33), represents a new synthesis of religious culture and political praxis. Rather than passively waiting, liberation theology recognizes that the poor represent active subjects capable of realizing the Kingdom of God on Earth (p. 46). The fusion of theology with Marxism often resulted – as it did in the rise of the Brazilian "Catholic Left" in the 1960s (p. 82) – in a more radical version of both Christianity and Marxism. While the Brazilian Communist Party insisted on waiting until Brazil had sufficiently developed its productive forces through an imitation of Western industrial capitalism, the Catholic Left called for the complete transformation of Brazilian society and the end of capitalism (p. 75).

Rather than dismissing the integration of theology and Marxism as irrational, Benjamin and Thompson encourage us to recognize the diverse ways in which individuals and communities respond to the destruction of their traditional ways of life, including the material and cultural practices that sustained them. As Löwy (1996) argues, both Christianity and revolutionary communism are opposed to the irrationality of market society while also containing non-rational elements themselves, in that they require faith in the possibility of realizing their utopian visions in the present (p. 17). Roger Lancaster (1988) shows that religious traditions in Nicaragua include "social leveling mechanisms" (p. 51), which prevent the formation of unequal hordes of wealth through redistributive gift-giving practices. Such practices

are irrational according to the logic of capitalist accumulation and are, in a sense, conservative, in that they attempt to resist the imposition of capitalist markets. However, they might also represent the basis of a new socialist society. Not merely an effort to return to pre-capitalist communal life, the Nicaraguan revolution represented the religious redemption of the oppressed "fused with the prophetic vision of a new state, a new order, and the reign of justice" (p. 79). Like Christianity, the commitment to socialism requires an "irrational" (p. 94) faith in the possibility of realizing its desired future.

While the critique of modern progress as the rationalization and mechanization of past social forms is valuable, especially to utopian visions which look to expand the horizon of possibility beyond the limited options presented to us by capitalism, there is a danger of flattening and fetishizing the irrational, equating anything that escapes reason as potentially liberatory (McNally, 2012, p. 10). Indeed, capitalism has itself become increasingly crisis-prone and irrational, increasingly monstrous. Precariousness, according to Schwarz (2024), has become the status quo (p. 132). In a discussion on Theodor Adorno's analysis of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, Schwarz argues that while the dominant interpretation of Beckett highlights the subversive potential of human precarity and irrationality, Adorno's analysis demonstrates that precarity has become the norm. Not content with uncritically valorizing the absurd or irrational against bourgeois realism, Adorno insists that the absurd has become the real. This is what Adorno, according to Schwarz, views in Beckett's play. Neither comedy nor tragedy, *Endgame* transcends genre and, in doing so, reveals the monstrous irrationality internal to bourgeoise society that emerges from fetishized production for the market, rather than for the satisfaction of human needs.

While Schwarz remains hesitant to oppose capitalist realism with an irrational and anti-modern revolt, his analysis of the integration of Western literature in Brazil points towards a critique of modernity that goes beyond the limits of European realism. Examining the work of Brazilian writer Machado de Assis, Schwarz (2005) argues that while many would consider Machado to be an anti-realist, it would be more accurate to view him as a realist who interprets the modern condition through a specifically Brazilian lens (p. 105). Machado's work "raises the question of what happens to realism in a peripheral country where the sequences of European social and literary history do not strictly apply, losing their inner necessity – or to put it more generally, how modern forms fare in regions that do not exhibit the social conditions in which they originated and in some sense presume" (p. 92). Because, as we have seen in previous chapters, modernity is expressed unevenly, its specific manifestation in Brazil does not exactly replicate the European trajectory. By remaining attentive to the historical conditions particular to Brazil without losing sight of Brazil's place in the capitalist world system, Machado achieves a critique of modernity as a general tendency without ignoring the particularities of its Brazilian form. In doing so, Machado moves beyond a copy of European realism while resisting the descent into a provincialist perspective desirous of a return to a purely Brazilian literary style, thereby severing Brazil from its global context. By moving beyond Western realism, Machado represents a modern critique of Eurocentric modernity, excessive of the rational limits imposed by capitalism. However, Schwarz is careful not to create a false binary between modern rationalism and a primitive irrationalism embodied by the global South, thereby reproducing Eurocentric conceptions of tradition and modernity (p. 102). Instead, his analysis of Machado's work shows that it is possible to remain critical of the Western modern project without flattening non-Western societies into a universal site of irrational resistance. McNally's (2012) dialectical

interrogation of monstrosity complements Schwarz's view of the irrational nicely. Rather than flattening irrational or monstrous forms of insurgency, opposing them to capitalist rationality in a binary way, McNally sees monstrosity as "a site of contestation" (p. 10), containing both reactionary and revolutionary potentialities. We might interpret Schwarz's view of the irrational in a similar fashion. While the Brazilian path towards revolution could include elements that are considered anti-realist according to European standards, it would still embody the realist tradition of attempting "to capture contemporary society in motion" (Schwarz, 2005, p. 92).

While Schwarz emphasizes the irrational nature of capitalism, Benjamin (1996c) maintains that the crisis-prone character of the capitalist economy does not mean that capitalism has become less rational or even less stable (pp. 450-451). Fluctuations between growth and crisis are internal to capital's logic, meaning that, even in times of economic prosperity under capitalism, many poor and working people merely experience "stabilized wretchedness" (p. 451). Against the monstrous rationality of capitalist society, Benjamin argues that any attempt to overcome it must become "extraordinary, verging on the marvelous and incomprehensible" (p. 451). Such an incomprehensible break requires going beyond the limits of capitalist rationality. Benjamin (1996a) locates elements of this excessive quality in the imagination of children who, as we have seen in the last chapter, transform the images and stories they see and hear, interpreting them in their own way (p. 50). In doing so they engage in a process of social learning capable of changing the world (p. 50).[58]

This process of transformation occurs in moments of daily life, a phenomenon Benjamin (1996b) observes in Naples:

[58] As we have seen in the last chapter, SRT has similarly described the playful activity of children as excessive of capital's logic. See Susan Ferguson (2017).

> Irresistibly, the festival penetrates each and every working day. Porosity is the inexhaustible law of life in this city, reappearing everywhere. A grain of Sunday is hidden in each weekday. (p. 417)

He compares such moments to magical spells and erotic human capacities, what he calls "the binding element in nature whose energies run free wherever he is not in control" (Benjamin, 1996d, p. 400).[59] These non-rational elements contain within them the potential to break with capitalist history and with the crisis-ridden structure of capitalist society.

It is important to remain attentive to the fact that such moments of excess do not come from nowhere. They are not conjured out of thin air by the sheer will of revolutionary activity. The revolutionary break that Benjamin hopes for can only be made through the material activity of the exploited and oppressed working class. While the concrete struggles of workers often begin as specific efforts to improve their conditions of work and life, they nevertheless contain the possibility of growing and expanding into more transformative movements. Lefebvre (1969) shows that the revolutionary transformation desired by the possibilists of 1968 in France emerged out of the more minimal and reformist demands of the modernists (p. 62). Viewing minimal and maximal difference relationally, rather than as an oppositional binary, reveals that modernist demands for a more equal distribution of the benefits of capitalist modernity began to expand what might be possible and, in the process, "the movement subsequently went beyond its original framework" (p. 76). While Lefebvre emphasizes the importance of contesting the power of the State and capital, he insists that resistance never comes from nowhere: "the explosion of spontaneity arises out of prior conditions" (p. 69). It springs forth from "lags" (p. 70), which are

[59] See Alan Sears (2025a) on the relationship between *Eros and Alienation*.

themselves internal to the uneven and contradictory character of global capitalism. The appearance of spontaneous resistance, in other words, emerges out of non-synchronous moments that exist within capitalist totality. It is the product of the concrete counter-times that contain within them the explosive possibility of a revolutionary break with the linear time of capital.

Social Reproduction Theory and Communist Freedom

The Romantic Marxist vision of communism elaborated in this chapter must emerge from the concrete activity of the working class as it actually exists. It is what David McNally (2012) calls "the *concrete universal*" (p. 256), a truly universal humanism inclusive of the multiple and differential experiences that make up the global working class. Realizing such a vision of communist freedom requires a belief in the capacity of people to transform their conditions through their own self-directed activity, as well as a political commitment to the living tradition of revolutionary communism, including those who theorized, strategized, and struggled before us. While the utopian perspective encourages us to think and act beyond what is considered possible under capitalist conditions, and so may seem irrational in an environment conditioned by the logic of capital, it remains grounded in the material relations of the past and present.

Social Reproduction Theory represents a powerful framework for theorizing the concrete struggles of working-class communities as integral parts of the universal movement for communist freedom. As Aaron Jaffe (2020) argues, the struggle for the "socialist horizon of emancipation" (p. 91) requires both a universal demand for the democratic self-control over the labour process and specific demands of particular segments of the working class in response to the concrete forms of oppression and exploitation that they experience. SRT insists that the

struggles of women, people of colour, queer people, and indigenous people, amongst others, contain centrally within them class struggle dynamics, even as they are irreducible to class. These workers make up a large part of the working class, and their experiences of oppression and domination represent elements of the universal experience of alienation in capitalist society. Truly universal human emancipation can only be fully realized when *all* members of the working class are recognized and included in the struggle for communist freedom.

Overcoming alienation would mean, as Marx argues in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, full and self-directed control over the labour process by the working class as it actually exists. The need to grapple with the question of free time represents an important link between Romantic Marxism and Social Reproduction Theory. As we have seen in Chapter 2, the struggle over time goes beyond the workplace, and it is for this reason that what Lebowitz calls the circuit of wage labour is actually better described as the circuit of labour-power. However, while the reproduction of labour-power extends beyond the wage relation, it remains connected to it, meaning that working-class movements must remain focused on the contradictions *internal* to capitalism. This is so because the circuits of labour-power and capital remain linked even though the reproduction of labour-power is not entirely subsumed to the value relation.

The insistence that working-class movements struggle *against* the relations of capitalism distinguishes SRT from other theories of social reproduction. Maria Mies (2014), for example, argues for the need to establish "an alternative economy" (p. 219), one which operates autonomously and outside of the capitalist economy. Such an economy would be built by communities themselves, through the self-directed production of projects like urban gardens, as well as through selective consumer boycotts of commodities that reinforce women's exploitation and oppression (pp. 225-229). Overcoming capitalism, from this perspective, is to occur through

a withdrawal from it, by establishing existing alternatives in the present. Of course, Mies is right that we must begin to create new ways of living, relating to each other, and meeting our needs. However, her assertion that it is possible to create "a more or less self-sufficient economy" (p. 220) autonomous from global capitalism implies that it is more or less possible to live in a way that is fully outside of capitalist relations.

In contrast, SRT argues that a struggle against capital requires a coordinated effort to reclaim control over our labour through actions like workplace and social reproductive strikes, which directly and indirectly impact capitalist profits while acting as a starting point for regaining democratic self-control over the labour process (Ferguson, 2020b, p. 134). To be clear, the two views need not be diametrically opposed. Workplace and social reproductive strikes represent moments in which the working class can begin to realize their collective capacity to meet social needs through their own activity. Through the process of struggle, people begin to form new communal bonds and create new ways of living (Sears, 2025a, p. 154-155). As movements grow, the struggle against capital and the search for alternative ways of living occur in concert with each other. As a part of the process of revolutionary social transformation, new organizations and institutions will be created, allowing for a positive project of communism to develop through the total reorganization of all elements of society. Such a transformation would allow us to become "the authors of our own social reproduction" (Jaffe, 2020, p. 98), the producers of our own collective lives. The development of these new social reproductive institutions will take different forms dependent on the concrete needs and abilities of our communities. However, such a commitment to difference does not preclude the creation of a global communist community. Instead, a meaningful politics of solidarity would bring together

the multiple and diverse expressions of what a communist society might look like and unite them as part of a global network.

The internationalist commitment to bringing together multiple and diverse forms of revolutionary struggle is expressed in the theory of permanent revolution (see Trotsky, 1969). As we have seen in Chapter 3, the theory of uneven and combined development allows for the possibility of combining different uprisings across the globe into a global revolution against capital as a whole. Alan Sears (2025a) translates Trotsky's notion of permanent revolution into a permanent struggle against alienation in all its social forms (p. 153). While struggles often begin over issues affecting a particular segment of the working class, they contain the potential to spread far beyond their local context. The next chapter will engage with some specific examples of this, but the teacher's strikes in West Virginia and Chicago in 2018 and 2019 were effective precisely because of their ability to demonstrate that the issues they were fighting over affected their broader communities (Jaffe, 2020, p. 100). The process of permanent revolution requires linking struggles against alienation that go beyond the point of production, encompassing the full spectrum of our human life-making capacities (Sears, 2025a, p. 154).

The need to remain attentive to the specific experiences of particular segments of the global working class and maintain a consistent internationalist politics becomes especially urgent in conditions of ongoing colonial genocide. As Adam Hanieh (2024) emphasizes, the movement for a free Palestine is central to broader imperial interests in the region, as well as to shifting dynamics of the world system and the place of the United States therein. Because of Israel's strategic importance to US interests in the Middle East, the struggle for liberation in Palestine is at the forefront of other left-wing movements in the region. Situating Palestine within the broader context of the fossil fuel economy highlights not just its centrality in the regional conflict

in the Middle East, but as "the leading edge of the fight for the future of the planet" (Thinking Forward section). Recent protests have mobilized people around the world, creating a sense of global solidarity and commitment to a shared vision of a flourishing human society. The struggle for a free Palestine goes beyond the particular struggle against Israel's ongoing genocide; it is an expression of the struggle for *universal* human emancipation.

As we have seen in Chapter 2, SRT's focus on the centrality of life-making social reproductive labour to both the reproduction of capital and the reproduction of human beings highlights the incomplete nature of capitalist alienation, while also pointing to social reproduction as a moment that is less subordinated by capital's logic of value. However, as Tithi Bhattacharya (2024) emphasizes in a powerful piece on Israel's ongoing war on Palestine, the genocide beginning on October 7, 2023 represents an attack on the very life-making capacities that SRT views as essential to a flourishing society. This is most obvious in the number of Palestinians killed, which has reached an official count of 70,373 as of the time of writing this chapter (Al Jazeera, 2025), but extends to Israel's focused attacks on social reproductive institutions including schools and hospitals (Bhattacharya, 2024). As Bhattacharya shows, the destruction of both life-making institutions and life itself occurs in relation to the ongoing effort to suppress the ability of Palestinians to reproduce themselves as full human beings, so that even when they are allowed to live, they are not allowed to thrive. But against these horrific conditions, Palestinians continue to engage in heroic acts of resistance. A central component of their struggle is the production of works of culture and resistance that demonstrate the inalienable human spirit that persists despite capitalist violence and alienation. The ability of Palestinians to continue to struggle and produce creative works in the face of genocide is

grounded in the dream of a return to the land, a living relationship to a material tradition of resistance.

The centrality of poetry and art to the Palestinian movement highlights the importance of cultural forms that often escape the logic of capitalist rationality. Like our Romantic Marxists, Sears (2025a) insists that thse struggle against capitalist alienation involves elements that go beyond what are often understood as rational by modern society (p. 137). Love, passion, grief, and anger are all excessive of the logic of capitalist production, but are nevertheless important to our struggle against it, strengthening our dedication to the collective movement against the capitalist relations that alienate us from our ability to engage in fully developed human relations with one another.

In an essay on the process of trans bodily formation, Richard Seymour (2017) argues that desire is both a longing for something and an indication that something is missing. Desire, understood in this way, is both the recognition of a positive need and an expression of a negative lack, though it is not always clear what is lacking or how that need might be fulfilled. In this sense, trans desire goes beyond capitalist rationality. As Seymour suggests, trans people often do not come to the realization that they are trans through a linear process of recognizing that they have always been in the wrong body, nor is the solution always medical transition. The State-imposed notion that trans people need to justify their identity by living according to the norms of the "other" gender might impose new restrictions to their bodily desires, confining them in new ways and producing new feelings of lack. But as Noah Zazanis (2021) argues, "trans identification is not determined by our biology" (p. 33). Not merely a biological error, trans bodies are socially produced, both in relation to the gendered norms and regulations imposed by capitalist society, and as a life-affirming process of collective identity formation with other trans

and queer individuals. Queer desire, therefore, goes beyond capitalist rationality but remains grounded in material practices. While the practice of trans bodily formation may appear irrational to trans exclusionary feminists and others, it is representative of the potential of human self-realization through collective activity and struggle (O'Brien, 2021, p. 56). Indeed, processes of trans formation point to the ongoing potential for human beings to change the conditions of their existence. Trans struggles for survival and recognition, like the movement for a free Palestine, are constitutive of the universal movement for communist freedom.

Conclusion

More than a purely imagined fantasy, the revolutionary vision of communism represents a concrete utopia founded on an ongoing relationship to past forms of struggle and ways of life that might be recovered as part of a project of reconstituting a new left (Sears, 2014, p. 113). This will include forms of play and experimentation with new ways of relating, acting, and struggling with one another that go beyond static and stagnant forms of organizing (Sears, 2025a, pp. 154-155). By participating in the revolutionary struggle for a different future, we begin to transform ourselves, creating new ways of relating with each other and the world (Sears, 2025b). Through this process, we change the world by resisting the exploitative and oppressive social relations of capitalism and creating new, democratic, and sustainable forms of organizing social life.

The utopian vision of communist freedom goes beyond a transition of economic systems and includes the total transformation of all social relations. It is grounded in Marx's own vision of a communist future, glimpses of which can be found throughout his work. The democratic self-directed control over the labour process, over socially available free time, is essential to

overcoming alienation and establishing a communist society. While critical of the Utopian Socialist perspective which begins from an idealist dream of a purely imagined future, Marx's vision of communism can still be considered utopic, in that it envisions a qualitatively different future while remaining grounded in the material possibilities of struggle and actually existing ways of living that have endured throughout history.

The notion of concrete utopia is central to Romantic Marxism, which highlights the dialectical relationship between the past, present, and future rooted in the uneven and contradictory nature of global capitalism. While communists, and the left more broadly, have suffered countless defeats in their struggle against capitalism, a living tradition of non-Stalinist Marxism persists. The political commitment to a communist future emerges from the tragic-utopian dialectic, a belief in the human capacity to transform their conditions through their own activity in the face of ongoing exploitation and oppression. Romantic Marxism remains open to the possibilities inherent to the human spirit of resistance, including elements that go beyond capital's logic of linear and quantitative growth, encompassing love, rage, grief, passion, art, and play.

While the movement for communism may take a variety of forms depending on the uneven and differential concrete relations from which its various articulations emerge, it remains a project of universal human emancipation. Social Reproduction Theory situates the multiple and diverse struggles of the various elements of the working class within the broader movement for universal freedom. SRT insists that the lived experiences of the working class, including forms of gendered, sexual, racial, and other types of oppression, are working-class issues in their own right. Doing so reframes class as a historical and processual social relation, rather than an objective and static category, thereby recentring the experiences of those members of the

working class who have often been excluded from orthodox forms of Marxist analysis and strategy.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion: The Social Reproduction Strike, Non-Nationalist Anti-Imperialism, and Degrowth Communism

In all states other than democratic ones the state*, the* law*, the* constitution *is what rules, without really ruling – i.e., without materially permeating the content of the remaining, non-political spheres. In democracy, the constitution, the law, the state itself, insofar as it is a political constitution, is only the self-determination of the people, and a particular content of the people* – Karl Marx (1978b, p. 21).

When an institution loses its birthplace, its original space, and feels threatened, it tends to describe itself as 'organic'. It 'naturalizes' itself, looking upon itself and presenting itself as a body. When the city, the state, nature or society itself is no longer clear about what image to present, its representatives resort to the easy solution of evoking the body, head, limbs, blood or nerves. … Fascism sought to enthrone an organic fantasy of social life based on the notions of blood, race, nation, and an absolute national state – Henri Lefebvre (1991, pp. 274-275).

This is not a call to for a simple return to first nature, but rather the development of third nature as part of the revolutionary mobilization through which people take democratic and collective control over the means of production and end alienation. This development of third nature must re-establish relations of reciprocity with other humans, other species and the environment – Alan Sears (2025a, p. 132).

Introduction

The vision of communist freedom developed so far requires that the people living in society reclaim full and democratic control over the labour process. Not merely the socialization of the means of production under control of a Communist State or Party, communism requires the complete disalienation of all social relations and, following Marx, the ability of the people to self-determine their own individual and collective lives. Marx's critique, found in the epigraph to this chapter, of the view that it is only through the state form that true human freedom and community can be realized also applies to the Communist regimes that understood State and Party control over production as the realization of, or at least the path towards, communism. Far from a democratic process, the Party-State form in Soviet Russia represented the *ongoing*

alienation of workers from the labour process and, in its worst expression under Stalin, the full adoption of the nation state under the 1936 Stalinist Constitution (Tomba, 2019, p. 129). As Erica Benner (2018) shows, Marx's use of the term state or nation is distinct from its capitalist expressions, referring instead to truly democratic relations of concrete human community, not an abstract notion of formal citizenship (p. 32). It is for this reason that Marx (1978b) declares that "in true democracy the *political state is annihilated*" (p. 21).

As we have seen in previous chapters, Marx's critique of political alienation and the state form did not prevent him from actively supporting national liberationist struggles, including those in India and Ireland. Indeed, Marx demanded that those under colonial rule be able to self-determine their own activity and resistance (Benner, 2018, p. 180). This does not, however, mean that Marx uncritically supported any and all forms of nationalist struggle. Anti-colonial struggle must seek to overcome both colonial rule and traditional forms of hierarchy that existed prior to colonization. In the case of India, Marx rejected both the purely nostalgic desire of a return to a pre-colonial past and the notion that British imperialism would destroy traditional forms of domination, thereby ultimately resulting in modernization and freedom for the Indian people. Instead, Marx's (1978c) insistence that a "regeneration" (p. 662) of India would only occur once it was no longer under British rule points towards the possibility of a truly self-determined India that would revive communal forms of life in new ways. This is obviously quite different from what Lefebvre (1991) calls the nationalist "myth of origins" (p. 275), fascistic attempts to restore an imagined and naturalized community based on racial purity and national identity.

Instead of a return to an imagined and idealized past we must build new forms of democratic organization and community, allowing us to fulfill our current needs and desires while also creating new ones. This process of building a more communal, egalitarian, and

democratic society will also involve defending forms of life that have not yet been fully destroyed or subordinated to capital's logic of value (Sears, 2025a, p. 111). Such a commitment to the selective recovery of past social forms is what makes the revolutionary Romantic vision of communist freedom not-just-nostalgic. It is possible and necessary to reject the notion of a nostalgic return to an imagined past, while also remaining open to the possibility of recovering and restoring non-capitalist social forms in combination with anti-capitalist struggle in the present.

Romantic Marxism and Social Reproduction Theory both insist on the persistence of concrete forms of time, activity, and struggle, despite the totalizing tendency of capitalist alienation. These alternate possibilities can only come into focus if we view global capitalism as an uneven, contradictory, and incomplete totality. Marx's dialectical method helps to uncover the general logic of capitalist reproduction while also revealing the counter-tendencies internal to that logic, including the concrete counter-times produced by anti-capitalist struggles. These non-synchronous elements contain within them possibilities that have, so far, been blocked by capitalist modernity but might still be fully realized as a universalist, humanist communism. Both Romantic Marxism and SRT represent utopian efforts to resist the alienation of capitalist social relations, while simultaneously creating new ways of acting, struggling, and living in the world.

What Massimiliano Tomba (2019) calls non-national anti-colonialism includes efforts to realize alternate modernisms located in the concrete counter-times containing possibilities that have been stifled by the imposition of global capitalist relations (p. 186). Grounded in a living tradition of communal life and struggle, these movements draw from the past, not in order to repeat it, but to fully realize the struggles of people around the world who have fought for a

different way of life than that imposed by capitalist modernity. Non-national anti-imperialism is therefore not-just-nostalgic, in that it is a wholly modern, but definitively non-capitalist project.[60] This, of course, does not preclude support for national liberation struggles, but it distinguishes the not-just-nostalgic character of Romantic Marxism from other variants of Romanticism whose visions of the future emerge from a desire for racial purity and national supremacy.

Similarly, social reproduction represents a concrete counter-time to the abstract time of capitalist production. As we have seen in Chapter 2, the circuit of labour-power is central to both the reproduction of capital and of human beings. Under capitalism, social reproductive activities are, in various ways, directed towards the reproduction of capitalist workers and, therefore, the reproduction of capitalist relations of production. But they also reproduce human beings and so represent the persistence of our capacity to enact our concrete labour powers in a self-directed manner aimed at benefiting human society. Thus, struggles over social reproductive activities are strategically important because they encompass the life-making activities that have not been – and cannot be – fully subsumed by capital. It is for this reason that the strike activity of mothers, teachers, and nurses to be examined below, have been identified as key sites of working-class politics today (see Moody, 2017). Because struggles over social reproduction include demands for higher wages alongside the insistence that activities such as raising children, teaching, and health care are valuable as ends in themselves, because social reproduction strikes are for both "bread and roses" (Arruzza et al., 2019, p. 10), they represent a political intervention on the terrain of capital, while at the same time pointing towards a way of life beyond capitalism, where human creative activity would be directed towards producing a flourishing human society rather

[60] I have modified Tomba's non-national anti-colonialism to non-national anti-imperialism. Following from the view of imperialism developed in Chapter 1, capitalist imperialism is no longer primarily enforced through direct military or political control (see Gordon & Webber, 2020).

than surplus-value. Reclaiming control over social reproductive activity, for SRT, is decidedly different from right-wing appeals to traditional notions of family and the role of women in the home (p. 26). It is an effort to create new ways of caring for one another and, in the process, to produce new, collective, and democratic ways of relating to each other (Sears, 2025a, p. 155).

Degrowth communism similarly looks to create new, sustainable, and egalitarian relationships amongst humans, and between humans and the planet (see Foster, 2000; Saito, 2022). The persistence of non-capitalist social forms includes nature, which continues to exist in concrete spaces and times despite capital's drive to commodify it (Saito, 2022, p. 24). But while capital attempts to fully subordinate the natural rhythms of the planet to the abstract time of production, this process remains incomplete and spaces of relative wildness continue to exist (Malm, 2018, p. 9). The degrowth perspective is becoming increasingly necessary today, as capital's need to constantly expand and develop exacerbates the planetary crisis. But it is essential that it be connected to an explicitly eco-socialist politics of self-directed democratic control over the means of production and the qualitative transformation of social relations that would direct human activity towards an increase of socially available free time, the satisfaction of human needs, and a more sustainable relationship with the natural world. Doing so will avoid the tendency of some variants of degrowth that embody a conservative and reactionary Romanticism, expressing a misanthropic politics of population control and xenophobic nationalism (see Foreman & Carroll, 2014; Kingsnorth, 2017).

Drawing from the not-just-nostalgic methods developed throughout the dissertation, this final chapter represents the beginning of an attempt to apply those practices to concrete struggles in the present. Bringing together Romantic Marxism and Social Reproduction Theory highlights the concrete, life-making forms of labour that are essential to both the reproduction of capitalism

and the reproduction of human beings. Under conditions of alienation, our conscious and creative activity is directed towards the production of value for capital. However, the possibility of reorganizing society in a way that channels our labour towards the production of a flourishing human community persists. Both Romantic Marxism and SRT remain committed to this potentiality – the "possibilist" perspective in Lefebvrian terms – which demands the complete transformation of society and the re-enchantment of social life. Such a view is utopian, but not in the sense of a completely idealistic fantasy. Instead, it is grounded in the concrete possibilities of the present, the capacity of ordinary people to engage in self-directed labour and organize their activity in democratic, egalitarian, and sustainable ways. Examples of this can be found today, and we will examine some of them below. But not-just-nostalgic practices can also be found by looking to the past. Applying Thompson's method of excavating concrete practices of resistance from historical movements allows those practices to be applied, in new ways, to the present moment. Doing so represents the Benjaminian techniques of montage and storytelling in practice, appropriating and transforming elements of the past by bringing them into relation with the present to create new combinations. Rather than viewing tradition as a static and unchanging thing, not-just-nostalgic practices allow for the possibility of realizing alternate modernisms, diverse possible futures which, as Schwarz encourages us to do, challenge the Eurocentric notion of unilinear progress. Bringing the past, present, and future together in this way redeems the past by regaining control over present forms of labour, play, and struggle. Messianic redemption gives new hope and life to "traditional" practices by reviving them in new and imaginative contexts.

This final chapter begins with a brief examination of right-wing forms of Romanticism, including its fascistic expressions. Doing so is important so as to remain aware of, and politically guarded against, other appeals to the past that have been mobilized for reactionary, rather than

liberatory, ends. The next section will consider recent anti-imperialist, social reproductive, and ecological struggles which embody the utopian and not-just-nostalgic character of Romantic Marxism. Each of these represent a struggle over the concrete times of human (and non-human) activity and life. Finally, I return to our four Romantic Marxists one last time to put them into conversation with the more concrete political forms examined here. Bringing the strategic insights of SRT into conversation with Romantic Marxism reminds us that the possibilities contained within the concrete counter-times of anti-imperialist, social reproductive, and ecological struggles might still be fulfilled, even though they have so far not been fully realized.

Right-Wing Romanticisms

As we have seen in the first chapter, Romanticism is a diverse and heterogeneous phenomenon. While this dissertation is focused on its revolutionary and Marxist expressions, it remains necessary to consider some of Romanticism's right-wing and reactionary forms, so as to distinguish them from the liberatory ones we have examined so far. Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre (2001) identify multiple conservative variants of Romanticism, including restitutionist, conservative, and fascistic (p. 58). Restitutionist Romanticism expresses nostalgia in its most pure form, desiring the actual restoration of the pre-capitalist past. While not explicitly counter-revolutionary, it is nevertheless committed to an attempt to return to a past that was decidedly unfree. This view was held by French writer Georges Bernanos, who desired the return to the Christian monarchy of the Middle Ages (p. 62). While distinct from many of his contemporaries of the twentieth century who were drawn to fascism, Bernanos nevertheless remained committed to the (impossible) project of recreating a hierarchical and oppressive society. Conservative Romanticism, for Löwy and Sayre, desires the preservation of pre-modern social forms that

persist today (p. 63). Exemplified by Edmund Burke, Conservative Romanticism seeks to uphold ancient values that underpin the laws and institutions of the present (p. 65). Lastly, Fascistic Romanticism rejects both modern capitalism and communism in favour of an idealized, ultra-masculine, and racially pure vision of the past (p. 68). While Löwy and Sayre insist that Nazism (and fascism generally) should be differentiated from Romanticism due to the former's infatuation with modern technology and industrialization, it is undeniable that Nazism appealed, in various ways, to the Romantic tradition (p. 67).

As Alberto Toscano (2017) shows in his work on fanaticism, the non-synchronous nature of appeals to the past might turn to defeatism or, worse, explicit support for the far right and fascism (pp. 52-53). The appeal to broad sentiments of discontent can be, and has been, effectively used by reactionary forces to mobilize this anger in a counter-revolutionary way. Fascism appeals to the sense of loss that exists within non-synchronous elements of capitalist society, those who have experienced the negative effects of modernity and the uneven form that capitalist development has taken. It is therefore insufficient to merely identify moments of non-synchronicity and assume that they all contain the revolutionary potential from which a communist society will emerge. As we have seen in earlier chapters, this flattens all non-capitalist forms, de-politicizing them, and, as David McNally (2012) argues, begins to equate irrationality with liberation (p. 12). Instead, we need to identify the specific non-synchronous elements that contain within them liberatory possibilities, and differentiate them from their reactionary expressions (Toscano, 2017, p. 55). The not-just-nostalgic character of Romantic Marxism, therefore, is grounded in a *political* project of universal human freedom emerging from the elements of society that have so far been denied access to that universality.

Unlike revolutionary Romanticism, fascistic Romanticism's vision of what Toscano (2023) calls "*fascist freedom*" (p. 51) desires liberty for a *particular* (white, male, national) segment of the population. Fascistic Romanticism is also not-just-nostalgic, in that it does not desire a return to the past but the realization of the national myth of racial purity in the future (p. 101). Like left-wing forms of Romanticism, this appeal to the past is expressed in the desire for a not-yet-existing future. But unlike the revolutionary current of Romanticism, the fascism is an effort to repeat the past through a "racial-national rebirth" (p. 109). In this sense, fascism is an eclectic and contradictory ideology, nostalgic for an imagined past but desirous of an ultra-modern technological future. As such, it is capable of bringing contradictory class elements together under an ideology of racial and national purity (p. 110).

While fascism is not yet the primary threat from the far-right, some of its features are on the rise today (Gordon & Webber, 2025). The growth in ultra-nationalistic rhetoric and, in particular, the reframing of class along national and racial lines, represent substantial obstacles to working-class movements (Toscano, 2023, p. 21). Attacks on women and queer people based on appeals to "traditional" notions of family pose a real danger to those communities.[61] Those who attempt to remake the family in a hetero-patriarchal image view social reproductive labour (particularly child-birth and child-rearing) as essential to repopulating the nation (p. 144). Right-wing notions of the family have also found support amongst trans exclusionary feminists who view trans communities as a threat to binary understandings of gender.[62] The ecological crisis has only exacerbated existing issues, contributing to the rise of right-wing environmentalists advocating for the creation of insular green-nationalist spaces (see Foreman & Carroll, 2014;

[61] Sarah Jaffe (2024) highlights that the heteronormative and patriarchal relations central to the "traditional" nuclear family are very much a modern creation, tied to the rise of capitalism (p. 160).
[62] See Sophie Lewis (2025) for a critical engagement with *Enemy Feminisms*.

Kingsnorth, 2017). All of these expressions appeal, in certain ways, to idealized visions of the past and are attempts to realize, in a way never accomplished before, the racially pure nation-state. Thus, while it is true that both fascistic and revolutionary typologies of Romanticism draw from the past to create a new future, the fascistic current desires the repetition of past, unfree forms of life. Revolutionary Romanticism, by contrast, attempts to incorporate non-synchronous elements within the current struggle for a truly universal vision of freedom, against both the abstract power of capital and the forces of reaction that falsely claim to be a solution to capitalism's crises (Toscano, 2017, p. 56).

Revolutionary Romanticism and Politics

Non-National Anti-Imperialism

Far-right movements today represent attempts to resynchronize the non-synchronous elements of society, so as to restore the white masculine worker and repeat "*national or racial Fordism*" (Toscano, 2023, p. 9). The myth of the golden age of capitalist industry ignores relations of colonialism and white supremacy, which act as the basis of the false image of the white male proletariat (Jaffe, 2024, p. 161), restricting visions of freedom to the creation of a pure nation state, a repetition of the past in new ways. However, as we have seen, non-national and non-statist forms of resistance continue to occur against both the logic of capital and right-wing movements. Rather than reproducing the nation-state form, non-national anti-imperialism moves beyond the narrow confines of formal liberal notions of freedom and attempts to create new forms of truly democratic and collective liberation (Tomba, 2019, p. 55). Against both the false universalism of liberalism and the narrow, insular "freedom" of right-wing forms of

Romanticism, non-nationalist anti-imperialist movements express a desire for universality that emerges from the particular struggles of the exploited and oppressed, an attempt to realize the alternate futures that have been blocked by both capitalist modernity and right-wing reactionaries. Grounded in a living tradition of communal life and struggle, these movements, exemplified for Tomba in the Zapatistas, draw from the past not in order to repeat it but to fully realize the struggles of indigenous peoples around the world who fought (and continue to fight) for a different way of life than that imposed by capitalist modernity (p. 188). Thus, while the Zapatistas draw from indigenous traditions, they simultaneously *transform* those practices by centring the role of women and the fight against patriarchy, both within their movements and the world more broadly.

While processes of colonialism and imperialism seek to subordinate all forms of life and time to the abstract temporality of capitalist production, what Fernando Coronil (2019d) calls "subaltern echoes" (p. 101) endure in the memories of those who resisted the colonizers and in the living traditions that persist in present-day indigenous communities. Anti-imperialist struggles are, therefore, representative of alternate, non-capitalist pathways of development that desire a qualitatively different, democratic, and egalitarian way of life (Coronil, 1997, p. 18). Understanding capitalist totality as a fragmented and contradictory whole allows for these alternative possible trajectories of development to begin to come in to focus. However, rather than viewing these competing histories as fully outside the scope of capitalist modernity, Coronil (2019b) insists that we understand them in relation to the development of global capitalism (p. 403). This not only destabilizes the Eurocentric conception of modernization as emanating from a European centre to the periphery, but it also highlights the need to situate anti-imperialist resistance in a global, rather than provincial, context. It is only through the formation of a global

anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist force that the goals of non-national anti-imperialist movements will be realized.

Mass movements in Latin America, such as indigenous-left resistance to the neoliberal privatization of water and gas in Bolivia in 2003 and 2005, have attempted to build a new egalitarian society, qualitatively different from the neoliberal development model (Webber, 2012, pp. 289-290). The forms of radical democracy that developed in the apex of the indigenous-left movement in Bolivia went beyond reformist demands, in that the forms of democracy and liberation that the movement struggled for were seen to be irreconcilable with capitalism (p. 296). The "freedom-dreams" (p. 289) of the Bolivian social movements of 2003 and 2005 were expressions of the desire to transform society and realize a liberatory future, emerging from the concrete conditions of the time while also expanding the definition of what was possible through concrete struggle.

Like the Bolivian uprising, which was a response to the privatization of gas and water, the Venezuelan Caracazo beginning on February 27, 1989 occurred in response to a crisis of social reproduction, in this case an increase in the cost of petrol by 100 per cent, which resulted in a rise in transportation fares by 30 per cent (Maya, 2003, pp. 120-121). The inability of workers to make their way to work in the morning, coupled with existing discontent with the government of Carlos Andrés Pérez, led to five days of mass protest, "a battleground between different moral and economic orders" (Coronil, 2019a, p. 195). Drawing from the experiences of the student movement, workers and students attempted to assert their universal right to basic necessities of survival and human dignity, looting stores to distribute food and other consumer

goods, as well as reclaiming public space for parties and celebrations (Maya, 2003, p. 126).[63] The state responded with targeted violence, killing and arresting workers from poor neighbourhoods (Coronil, 2019a, pp. 204-205). The bodies of unnamed workers were dumped in garbage bags and collected in the Caracas public cemetery, symbolically erasing their attempts to affirm a different way of life (p. 205). Estimates count the number of arrested in the thousands, deaths ranging from 310 to 396, and wounded approaching 2,000, though exact numbers are unclear (Maya, 2003, p. 129-131). Protesting workers were described by the state as a "primitive tribe," while state actors were referred to as "civilizing generals" (Coronil, 2019a, p. 202). This language sought to transform the people of Venezuela into an undesirable Other that must be extinguished, while concealing the ongoing barbarism that underpins modern capitalism behind the language of "civilization."

As we have seen earlier, it is important not to flatten anti-imperial and indigenous forms of resistance from the global South, or to view them as only defensive efforts to preserve a pre-modern way of life. While indigenous resistance often involves defending traditional customs, it takes place in a modern context, combining tradition with modernity in new ways (Coronil, 2019e, p. 245). Recentring anti-imperialist movements as expressions of alternative possible modernities reveals that the counter-times internal to capitalist totality are not ahistorical remnants of a pre-capitalist past, merely to be romanticized in a purely nostalgic sense. Rather, they are living traditions that exist in relation to modern society, representing possible futures that have been prevented by the unilinear path of capitalist modernity. In the Bolivian Gas-Wars of 2005, for instance, urban proletarian infrastructure was supported by the rural struggles of the

[63] The mood was not always joyous. Some cases of targeted violence towards immigrant populations were reported, specifically directed at Chinese, Lebanese, and Portuguese shop owners (Maya, 2003, p. 126).

Aymara peasantry in order to strengthen the movement (Webber, 2012, p. 310). Such combinations contribute to the formation of new radical conceptions of democracy and new possible futures that might emerge from their concrete struggles.

Of course, these movements do not take place in a vacuum. They remain in dynamic relation with the changing relations of colonialism and imperialism. Social movements in Latin America in the 2000s must be understood alongside the broader rise in centre-left and left-wing governments in Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil, and other Latin American states, as well as in relation to the structural changes in the global economy that have occurred under neoliberalism (Webber & Souvlis, 2016). The crisis of neoliberalism has severely impacted the extent to which progressive governments in Latin America have been able to implement their redistributive policies and maintain their place in office, as well as the response of the State to social movements from below. But while social movements have been, in various ways, suppressed by both capital and the state, the commitment to a radical and processual conception of democracy remains central to the elements of those movements that remain (Coronil, 2019c, p. 130). Thus, while the forces of capital and the State constantly attempt to recuperate non-national forms of resistance, movements from below are capable of going beyond statist limits by engaging in democratic, collective, and liberatory forms of struggle. Remaining attentive to the ways in which anti-imperialist movements resist the specific form of their exploitation within the global capitalist system better equips us to support these forms of struggle as part of an internationalist anti-capitalist movement, one which views particular struggles as part of the universal fight against capitalist domination in all its uneven and diverse forms. Understanding forms of colonialism and imperialism as essential to capital's social reproduction recentres the struggles

of elements of the working class which have often been ignored by orthodox Marxism (Jaffe, 2024b, p. 211).

The Social Reproduction Strike

The response to capitalist alienation must, therefore, begin from the actual experiences of the working class, those who endure the various forms of exploitation and oppression enacted under capitalism. Responding to these particular expressions requires attentiveness to the structural changes that global capitalism has undergone since the late 1970s, including the reorganization of accumulation by finance capital, the reallocation of global production, and a rise in "flexible" employment (see Chesnais, 2017). These changes have occurred in relation to transformations in the global working class. Neoliberal attacks on workers' organizations have led to a relative decline in working-class power and the reorganization of manufacture has decreased the power of unions further in traditional demographics (Moody, 2017, p. 3). At the same time, the composition of the working class in the global North has become increasingly diverse due to globalization. These developments have led to debates over the centrality of class, with some arguing that Marxist conceptions of class have been guilty of economic and class reductionism, making them incapable of accounting for the proliferation of "identity" struggles that centre race, gender, and the environment, amongst other issues.[64] Against the perceived – and, at times, real – move away from any class analysis, structuralist Marxism has reasserted the need for understanding the primacy of class struggle (see Chibber, 2024). Other perspectives internal to Marxism have sought to incorporate the insights of the New Social Movement approach into a theory of class capable of integrating the concrete experiences of workers,

[64] This has been broadly termed New Social Movement theory (see Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Offe, 1985).

including forms of oppression such as structural racism and patriarchy (see Camfield, 2004-2005). Following from the latter perspective which holds to a historical, processual, and relational view of class, the recent revival of SRT has centred the role of the social reproductive strike in contemporary working-class movements (see Arruzza et al., 2019).

The Women's Strike. While the far-right views the family as an important space for preserving traditional moral values and stability, *The Communist Manifesto* calls to abolish the family (Marx & Engels, 2002, p. 239). But to abolish is not synonymous with complete elimination (M. E. O'Brien, 2019). Rather, it involves preserving (in new ways) some elements of past family forms which provide a network of care and community, while destroying others which are expressions of capitalist alienation. The authors of *Feminism for the 99%* show that social reproductive strikes fight for such a reorganization of social relations by demanding a new organization of labour based around fulfilling social needs rather than increasing profits (Arruzza et al., 2019, p. 24). Inspired by the 1975 strike in Iceland, the manifesto argues in favour of a women's strike, such as those occurring in 2016 in Poland and Argentina (p. 6). While strikes, as they are most commonly understood, involve a withdrawal of productive labour – productive, in the capitalist sense, of value – the women's strike is a political strike capable of showing that while the reproduction of capital requires labour-power, the reproduction of human beings does not necessarily require capital (Jaffe, 2022, p. 164). The women's strike is a struggle against the dehumanizing force of abstract labour-time and a demand that human labour-power be self-directed by those who enact it. Instead of striking for an end to social reproductive work, the women's strike simultaneously reveals capitalism's dependence on such work and points towards a new way of organizing these activities, directing them towards human flourishing rather than profit. In this sense, all of the social reproductive struggles examined below contain a

utopian impulse, a desire to create new forms of relating to each other and the world through the process of struggling against the concrete social relations of capitalism. As we have seen in Chapter 2, social reproductive labour is unique, not because it is the only moment where concrete human activity persists – the dual form of labour applies to value-producing labour as well – but because social reproductive work is still often conducted outside the workplace and, even when performed for a wage, requires more attentiveness to real human beings. This potentially gives social reproductive workers a higher degree of autonomy from the temporal regulation imposed on those who are directly producing commodities. It allows them to be more connected to the concrete rhythms of those under their care as well as to their own tempo, the specific times of their labour.

While inspired by the Wages for Housework campaign, the women's strike is not primarily concerned with receiving a wage.[65] As organizers of the 2019 "My Mum is on Strike" (MMIOS) events in 2019 in London explain:

> Reproductive work is both gruelling and tiring but, unlike much paid work, it also holds a prefigurative kernel. It is essential labour that must be done. Communities must be formed around care, around love, around collectivizing social reproduction. (English & Campbell, 2020, p. 155)

In this sense, the women's strike bears similarities to the efforts of Utopian Feminists of the 1970s to create new collective ways of performing social reproductive labour (see Hayden, 1978). But it goes beyond prefiguration by combining demands for the collectivization of social

[65] Neither was the initial Italian formulation of Wages for Housework, which sought to use the demand for a wage to expose capital's reliance on unpaid social reproductive labour (see James, 1972). See Susan Ferguson (2020b) for a critique of Wages for Housework from an SRT perspective.

reproduction with the withdrawal of labour, thereby withholding the life-making activity that capital requires for its reproduction but does not pay for (Arruzza et al., 2019, p. 8). Importantly, the social reproductive strike is neither a wholesale rejection of work nor a demand to be paid for social reproductive labour. Rather, it is an effort to redefine the ways in which the activities necessary to reproductive tasks – raising children, in this case – are performed, an attempt to prioritize the reproduction of human community not capitalist workers. By organizing collective childcare alongside discussions connecting the emotional and physical labour of raising children with the demands of wage labour (English & Brown, 2023, p. 1948), MMIOS represents an effort to reclaim childcare as self-directed activity and highlights the potential that social reproductive struggles have to connect forms of working-class politics both in and outside of the workplace.[66] It is an effort, in other words, to regain control over the concrete times and rhythms of human activity against abstract labour-time.

Of course, raising children in capitalist society necessarily implies preparing children for the world of work through socialization at home and at school, and in this sense raising children is not entirely separate from raising future workers (Ferguson, 2017, p. 128). But children are not only raised to be workers; they are raised to be human beings and, as such, the home and broader community is a space (and time) that is more open to play, self-directed activities that are oriented towards human self-development. Play, as we have seen above, represents an example of the concrete rhythm of social reproduction, different and distinct from capital. Since childcare still takes place largely in the home, it represents a unique site of potential resistance to capitalist reproduction, in that it is, along with school, the primary site of child-rearing. In isolation, this is

[66] It is important here to avoid reproducing bourgeois notions of family. See M. E. O'Brien (2019; 2023) for a communist approach to family abolition and the importance of collectivizing social reproductive labour as part of the movement towards communism.

clearly not enough to stop the reproduction of workers or the production of value, but the women's strike attempts to overcome this shortcoming by building connections with broader community and workplace struggles (Jaffe, 2022, p. 165).[67]

The Teacher's Strikes of the 2010s. In response to neoliberal austerity measures and attacks on wages, a wave of teacher's strikes occurred in 2018. Beginning in West Virginia, the strikes spread to other states, including Oklahoma and Arizona (Bhattacharya et al., n.d.). While public education is not productive of value, teachers have been increasingly proletarianized, and the rise in service sector jobs has made social reproduction workers a sizeable and potentially influential segment of the working class. As Kim Moody (2017) argues, the Chicago teacher's strike of 2012 represents one of the most militant in recent years (p. 173). Like the women's strike and the struggle for better childcare, teacher's strikes go beyond wages, even though demands for higher wages may appear as the initial spark (Bhattacharya et al., n.d.). As Tithi Bhattacharya states in an interview about the 2018 strikes, "people choose to be teachers because they are actually happy teaching young people and being around them. Neoliberal school reforms, such as high stakes testing, data driven instructional models, have attacked precisely the joy and dignity a good teacher associates with her classroom" (question 5). Like child-rearing, teaching is a site of human development, even as it is also a space where children are socialized in preparation for the world of work (Ferguson, 2017, p. 128). This has become even more evident under neoliberalism, as teachers have become more responsible for ensuring the health

[67] See Nat Raha's (2021) examination of the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), a queer collective started in 1970s New York which made the collectivization of queer social reproductive labour the basis of their political activity. STAR "combined caring labour, sex work, prison solidarity, and political activism" (p. 102), creating new ways of meeting the needs and desires of queer people while also engaging in political struggle within and against capital. It is important, however, not to idealize the creation of alternative ways of meeting needs *apart from* explicit political struggle. The creation of new forms of community must occur alongside the struggle against capitalism. As M. E. O'Brien (2019) argues, "in a society where capitalists dominate people's lives, gender freedom is impossible" (Afterward section).

and safety of their students, whose families are increasingly facing declining living standards (Bhattacharya et al., n.d.).

As Sarah Jaffe (2019) reported on the 2019 Chicago teacher's strikes, the demands of the union went beyond wages, including smaller class sizes to benefit students, better resources for black and brown students, and increases in resources for homeless students. Despite not being located in structurally essential or value-producing industries, teacher's strikes have been both militant and effective, connecting their struggles with those of the broader community. And while teaching is subjected to a higher degree of discipline than raising children in the home is, the classroom is still a space and time where children are encouraged to play, think, and create in ways that go beyond the world of capitalist work (Ferguson, 2017, p. 128). Because public school teachers do not produce value and must remain directly attentive to the needs of their students, they are more able to remain connected to the actual needs of the children under their care. Their struggles for better working conditions for themselves, as well as better learning conditions for their students, represent efforts to impose their own rhythms of work and to direct their time towards human flourishing rather than profit. Like the women's strike, teacher's strikes combine the utopian vision of a different way of organizing social reproductive activity with a struggle within and against capitalism.

Nursing Strikes During Covid Times. While much social reproductive work is either unwaged or waged but unproductive of value, nursing strikes in the United States during the Covid-19 pandemic were examples of social reproduction strikes in a value-producing industry (Jaffe, 2022, p. 167). Nurses working in St. Vincent's Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts went on strike in 2021 over staffing cuts which resulted in unsafe working conditions (Jaffe, 2021), while nurses at Albany Medical Center in New York protested the lack of access to personal

protective equipment (PPE) (Crossley, 2022). As with the mothers and teachers discussed above, these nurses understood their demands as part of a broader struggle for control over how their activity is directed. Like raising children and education, health care is directly connected to human well-being, even when it takes place for profit. While the autonomy that nurses have in a for-profit industry is more limited than mothers or teachers – pressure to release patients once the most profitable time of their illness has passed follows the just-in-time model of the auto industry – they must remain responsive to their patients (Jaffe, 2021). As Sarah Jaffe states: "hospitals are not factories and patients are not widgets. Illnesses, as the coronavirus is reminding us again and again, are idiosyncratic things, requiring constant innovation and a human touch" (para. 23).

Like the strike activity of mothers and teachers, nursing strikes represent efforts to reclaim control over the labour process, directing health care towards the needs of human communities rather than capitalist profits. As such, the demands of nurses historically have tended to go beyond wages, insisting on the ability to properly care for their patients. By connecting workplace demands with the concerns of the community at large, nursing strikes during the pandemic were able to generate broad-based support (Crossley, 2022). Their demands for better working conditions occurred alongside community-based mutual aid efforts to provide PPE to the public (Bhattacharya & Dale, 2020). By insisting on the ability to properly care for their patients at the same time that communities developed new ways to care for themselves, nursing strikes contributed to the effort to reclaim the time and space where health care occurs, insisting that it be organized according to human well-being. Like striking mothers and teachers,

nursing strikes embody a utopian struggle attempting to create a better future in the present, while simultaneously striking against capital's ability to make profit off of their labour.[68]

Degrowth Communism and the Struggle Over Time

The struggles we have examined so far all occur amidst the looming backdrop of environmental catastrophe. While climate change denial is a common position amongst political conservatives, increasing numbers of the far-right employ a nationalistic, racist, and anti-immigrant type of environmentalism (Seymour, 2022, p. 120). In its most fascistic expressions, right-wing environmentalism romanticizes a pure untouched nature that has been defiled by foreign capital and immigrants. Their solution is a return to national identity and the recovery of a pure relationship with nature for the select few who possess such a national birthright (see Kingsnorth, 2015). Against both a reactionary primitivism which would have us return to an imagined and impossible pre-modern relationship with nature (see Foreman & Carroll, 2014), and a right-wing technological-modernism which asserts that authoritarian leadership is best suited to encourage the type of scientific and technological revolution necessary to save the masses from their short-sightedness (see Shearman & Smith, 2007), degrowth communism argues for the reclamation of our capacity to meet the needs of humans, non-human animals, and the planet in a sustainable and egalitarian way. It is also opposed to new forms of left-wing eco-modernism which maintain that the solution to the ecological crisis is to be found by accelerating the development of productive forces that has occurred under capitalism (see Phillips, 2015). Rather than following the path of capitalist development, degrowth communism argues for a qualitatively different type of development, one which would allow for the growth and

[68] In this way, the social reproductive strike actively contributes to the creation of new ways of meeting human needs without merely "helping to create the austerity state" (Illner, 2021, p. 108) by allowing the state to offshore the responsibility of social reproduction onto communities.

satisfaction of human needs in a way that is environmentally sustainable, both in the global North and, crucially, in the global South (Löwy, 2023).

As we have seen in Chapter 4, capitalist alienation begins from the labour process but extends to all aspects of social life. Alienation also disrupts the relationship between humans and nature, transforming nature itself into means of production (Saito, 2022, p. 24). Just as capital's logic of value reduces human creative activity to abstract and quantifiable units of labour-time, it also transforms concrete nature into means of production, inputs into the process of surplus-value creation. Marx (1991) describes the fracturing of human-nature relations as "an irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism, a metabolism prescribed by the natural laws of life itself" (p. 949). The notion of metabolic rift refers to the fact that capitalist value production has undermined the relationship between humans and nature that underpins all social life (see Foster, 2000). The separation of humans and nature due to metabolic rift occurs along spatial and temporal lines (Saito, 2022, 26-27). Urban development requires intensive farming and resource extraction in the rural periphery, as well as continuous transportation of these resources to the urban core. Globally, metabolic rift is intensified by relations of colonialism and imperialism, where the natural resources of peripheral states are harvested, mined, and siphoned for the benefit of developed nations (Coronil, 1997, p. 35). This exacerbates the depletion of natural resources in the periphery while also creating excess waste and pollution in the productive centres. These extractive processes are intensified as capital constantly strives to shorten the times of production and circulation, creating a "temporal rift" (Saito, 2022, p. 27) between the abstract time of capital and the concrete times of nature.

But, as we have seen, alienation is never a complete process. Concrete forms of activity and life persist. As Kohei Saito (2022) argues, the persistence of non-capitalist spaces and times

includes nature, which continues to exist in concrete spaces despite capital's drive to commodify it (p. 108). While capital attempts to fully subordinate the natural rhythms of the planet, along with the concrete rhythms of human activity, to the abstract time of production, this process remains incomplete and spaces of relative wildness continue to exist (Malm, 2018, p. 9). Like human society, nature contains its own counter-times. The colonization of the island of Dominica in the late 1700s required that large swaths of forest be cleared in order for slave labour to be employed to plant and harvest sugar (p. 13). However, "the planters could never quite tame this island" (p. 15), and maroons, or escaped slaves, inhabited the forest, living and resisting in autonomous communities. These forms of resistance represent important efforts to defend more natural spaces from capitalist subsumption (and destruction).

Like Romantic Marxism, degrowth communism argues that selectively recovering more sustainable and egalitarian ways of relating with each other and the world from the non-capitalist past represents an important component of building a communist future (Saito, 2022, p. 228). Accessing these possible futures cannot occur by way of a purely nostalgic struggle for a return to an imagined state of wilderness (see Kingsnorth, 2017). Nor can it be achieved through an entirely future-oriented acceleration of technological development (see Srnicek & Williams, 2016). It can only be accomplished by uncovering elements of the past and combining them, in new ways, with existing anti-capitalist movements in the present. This will require a qualitatively new type of development, particularly in areas of the global South where capitalism does not satisfy even the most basic needs (Löwy, 2023). But it will also involve suppressing and reducing forms of industrial production that are unsustainable and harmful, including fossil fuels, nuclear energy, and private cars. Limiting production in certain respects would allow for social growth in a multitude of other ways, including the revival of a rich natural world, an increase in

socially available free time, and the flourishing of a self-directed communal society (Saito, 2022, p. 235).

While an actual return to a fully unmediated relationship between humans and nature is impossible, a "return" to the past can occur by recovering certain elements of past ways of living, transforming and incorporating them into modern society. Reviving more sustainable ways of producing and living in the present makes it possible to both increase our free time and decrease the strain on the planet. This will occur in different ways in the global North and global South, but development need not follow the Eurocentric path of capitalist growth (Löwy, 2023). While a more equal and collective division of labour might slow down production from capitalist levels, this would be an acceptable compromise, as it would enable the fair distribution of boring and difficult forms of work that continue to exist, though some of those tasks could be reduced through the development of new technologies created in a sustainable way (Saito, 2022, p. 237).

To be clear, degrowth communism does not reject the use or development of all forms of technological innovation. As John Bellamy Foster (2025) points out, degrowth cannot simply be a negative demand that we decrease production and technological development. Instead, it must also be a positive political project that allows for the development of new forms of wealth, new sustainable relations with each other and the natural world, and new technologies that meet the needs of humans, animals, and the planet. Löwy (2023) proposes that some technologies (fossil fuels, nuclear weapons) must be eliminated, others (cars, airplanes) should be reduced, while new technologies (efficient and sustainable public transportation, food, and housing) still need to be developed. While exactly what that looks like can only be determined according to the needs and capacities of those involved in building the new society (and in relation to non-human animals and the planet), the urgent need to combat the planetary crisis means that this certainly

cannot occur through the uncritical application of capital's unsustainable technological infrastructure.

Romantic Marxism and Not-Just-Nostalgic Politics

Non-national anti-imperialism, social reproduction, and degrowth communism all represent key moments for political intervention in the present moment. While structuralist accounts of class privilege the strategic power of workers located at the point of production, anti-imperialist, social reproductive, and ecological struggles go beyond these limiting formulations of working-class power to demonstrate the ways in which the working class, broadly understood, resists the imposition of the capitalist logic of value in a variety of ways, all of which make up a part of the working-class movement as a whole. Struggles over autonomy, social reproduction, and the environment, therefore, should be understood as part of a wider effort to create a qualitatively distinct, egalitarian, and liberatory society. All of these moments represent distinct and concrete temporalities not fully subordinated to the time of capitalist production. They are expressions of different ways of directing human activity and organizing society, attempts to realize alternative futures that have been blocked by capitalist modernity. Romantic Marxism remains open to the possibility that these possible futures might still be realized through the struggle of workers, the oppressed, the colonized, and other marginalized groups in the present. While our four Romantic Marxists engage with politics at different levels of abstraction, their work connects, in different ways, with the more concrete politics developed in this chapter.

Henri Lefebvre's notion of the right to the city represents a radical demand for the self-directed control over space, time, and human activity. It is a demand not merely for the right to

habitat, or access to the city, but the ability to *inhabit*, or the "appropriation by groups and individuals of the conditions of their existence" (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 79). To inhabit goes beyond basic human functions, encompassing a wide range of human activity directed towards human flourishing. From this perspective, institutionalized conceptions of the right to the city, like that enshrined in the 2001 City Statute in Brazil (see Fernandes, 2007), do not represent a substantive articulation of Lefebvre's vision of the self-directed and democratic control over production and life.[69] The right to the city requires a reclamation of human creative capacities as part of a movement towards a qualitatively new society where people would *inhabit* space, actively producing and transforming the material world.

While the right to the city must be a universalist project, in that communism must be global if it is to be at all, we must be careful not to reproduce the false universalism of Eurocentric understandings of modernity. As Stefan Kipfer (2023) argues, "demands for the right to the city must be channelled through demands for the right to difference: the quest for a different world expressed as the liberation from the alienated, minimal differences of the here and now" (p. 57). Such a view requires reading Lefebvre's call for the right to the city, the ability of people to maintain the self-directed control over the use of space, as both a universal demand and an affirmation of the diversity of those who would inhabit that space. In "The Right to the City," Lefebvre (1996) himself points to the experiences of a wide variety of social groups, including "youth, students and intellectuals, armies of workers with or without white collars, people from the provinces, the colonized and semi-colonized of all sorts" (p. 159). Viewed

[69] Nevertheless, such reforms represent important efforts to improve the lives of working-class people. Lefebvre's theory of minimal and maximal difference we have examined in Chapter 4 indicates that maximal difference often emerges from struggles over minimal difference, while at the same time being constrained by the latter. Applying this dialectical view to the right to the city in Brazil, we might say that while the City Statute is best understood as an expression of minimal difference it also includes elements which exceed reformist demands and, therefore, might be expanded upon to elicit a struggle to inhabit urban space, thereby creating new forms of maximal difference.

through an anti-colonial lens, the right to the city must respond, in diverse ways, to the uneven conditions that exist throughout the world. As Lefebvre (2003) shows in *The Urban Revolution*, conditions are not the same in North and South America, nor do black workers in the United States experience capitalism in the same way as their white counterparts (p. 145). As such, a revolutionary strategy will look different for different elements of society. Because urbanization is uneven, political strategy must emerge from the specific relations between processes of urbanization and rural elements (p. 146). As Kipfer (2009) highlights, Lefebvre's right to the city is an effort to reclaim self-directed control over the way production is organized in a way that transcends spatial scales (p. 74). Doing so affirms forms of maximal difference by allowing for a new form of self-management which "presupposes a new social practice at all stages and levels. This process involves the shattering of bureaucracy and centralized state management" (Lefebvre, 1969, p. 86). In its place would develop "a complex network of active bodies" (p. 86), producing new forms of organization across local, regional, and global scales. The right to the city formulated through non-nationalist anti-imperialism would seek to realize particular struggles as part of a universal demand for a qualitatively different and democratic society. This would allow for multiple and different pathways of development to take place according to the unique conditions of each movement.

Roberto Schwarz articulates such a possibility of a distinct trajectory of development in the case of Brazil. Rather than following the path of Europe or the United States, Brazil might forge its own way forward, made possible due to its particular history of development and its specific place in the world system (Schwarz, 1992d, p. 118). The combination of elements of the past and present in new ways creates social forms unique to Brazil, the possibility of an alternative modern future. Schwarz's analysis contains many parallels with Coronil's (2019c),

who insists that a nationalist struggle seeking to preserve an imagined view of a pure culture prior to colonization remains constrained by the limits of its place in global capitalism and, as such, is confined, as Venezuela was, to encouraging capitalism in the short term in order to promote national development (p. 131). Opposed to provincialist forms of national liberation, both Coronil and Schwarz argue for "the recognition of difference as a political principle" (Coronil, 2019c, p. 154), producing "freedoms unthinkable within the current climate of determinism" (Schwarz, 2007, p. 90). A uniquely Brazilian (or Venezuelan) path of development can only occur through a process of regaining control over the spaces and times of social life in a way that affirms difference, allowing for multiple and diverse new possibilities to emerge. This requires an attentiveness to the specific conditions and experiences of concrete segments of the working class, while going beyond narrow provincialism so as to situate these struggles in their global context.

The struggle over the right to the city will produce new temporal rhythms of life and struggle according to the concrete activity of those involved. Benjamin's (2005a) explorations of Soviet Russia in 1927 highlight his experiences of "the new rhythm that permeates the life of worker and intellectual alike" (p. 21). He contrasts the active and flourishing neighbourhoods of Moscow, where "goods burst everywhere from the houses; they hang on fences, lean against railings, lie on pavements," with the "deserted and empty" (Benjamin, 2005b, p. 23) streets of Berlin. The manner in which Benjamin describes Russian city life is akin to the aura of the festival described in Chapter 4: "day in, day out, children's festivals are provided for" while "food is distributed, games are played" (p. 24) as part of their education. However, as we have seen in the previous chapter, Soviet Russia was not a communist society. While Benjamin remains optimistic about certain aspects of Moscow, he also observes that time remained strictly

ordered by the trade-union institute for the study of work which "launched a poster campaign for punctuality" (p. 31). Rather than a democratic organization of time determined by the members of society, time in Soviet Russia remained controlled by the ruling class. While Benjamin notes the important distinction that power in Soviet Russia was not determined by what one owns, he nevertheless maintains that "Russia is today not only a class but also a caste state" (p. 35) in the sense that social standing was determined by one's place in the Party and State. Benjamin's analysis of Soviet Russia is similar to Coronil's view of Venezuela under Hugo Chávez. Coronil (2019f) describes Chávez as the bringer of "a new History" (p. 259) and a new set of values to Venezuelan society. However, while he is open to the possibility that Chávez might have moved Venezuela in a new direction, Coronil acknowledges that Chávez's proclamations and his achievements often did not align. Thus, while both Soviet Russia and Chávez's Venezuela represented possible alternatives to the trajectory of capital, their potential remained unrealized. However, despite the tragic ending of both cases, Coronil and Benjamin encourage us to remain hopeful about the possibility of realizing their potential in the future.

Maintaining hope in a liberatory future requires an ongoing commitment to political struggle. Thompson (1959) describes the struggle to completely remake society and transform its social relations as a battle between "competing moralities," (Competing Moralities section). Competing visions of the world exist between the working and ruling classes, as well as internal to the working class itself. Politics represents a contest between differing conceptions of human society, of what life should look like, what values should dictate our activity, and how that activity should be organized. We might also reframe Thompson's formulation as a struggle over competing *temporalities*, between the dominant conception of modernity that capitalism has imposed on the world from above, and the multiple, diverse, and unrealized possibilities that

might yet be fulfilled through the actions of those who continue to fight for a different, more liberatory future.

Conclusion

The strategic proposals made in this chapter are not meant to indicate that struggles at key points of production are no longer important. The ability to strike at the site of value-production remains central to the power that workers hold under capitalism. But these sites are not static and any effort at reviving working-class struggle today must remain attentive to capital's dynamic nature. Processes of globalization and the growing importance of unwaged and precarious work to the production of value has led to the informal segment of the international proletariat becoming increasingly central to accumulation. Meanwhile, the increase in service workers and the proletarianization of professions such as teachers and nurses has given social reproductive workers increased social power. Looming environmental catastrophe sits behind all of these developments, representing the most urgent issue of our time. Rebuilding an inclusive form of workers' struggle is especially important in today's climate, given the diversity internal to the working class as well as the urgent need to expand and broaden the definition of what counts as working-class politics. While these sectors are not always productive of value, they are indirectly tied to capitalism's reproduction and the ability of workers to continue producing for capital (Jaffe, 2022, p. 171). Perhaps most importantly, anti-imperial, social reproductive, and environmental struggles have been doing what traditional union organizing has often not done recently, building the connections that allow working-class movements to go beyond the workplace and into the broader community, thereby expanding what constitutes working-class struggle. But the relationship between union and community-based movements can be rebuilt.

Indeed, there is a history of such connections. In the mid-1900s, UAW demands included not just wage increases, but pension reform, the abolition of time clocks, and addressing the issue of industrial pollution (Glaberman, 1972).

The argument for centring non-productive workers, then, is not opposed to the ongoing need to organize in the workplace. Stopping the flow of productive capital at strategic locations must be central to any struggle against capitalism. Susan Ferguson (2020b) argues that "conventional workplace-based strikes in capitalistically 'productive' industries are critical to any anti-capitalist movement" (p. 134) and that there is a need to link social reproductive strikes with organizing in the workplace. The working class goes beyond those who are employed as wage labourers, including the relatives and dependents of waged workers, the unemployed, and unwaged, informal, and precarious workers (Moody, 2017, p. 33).

Due to the changing composition of the working class alongside the decline in traditional union organizing, social reproductive struggles have emerged as some of the most militant and effective in recent years. They also represent the possibility of reclaiming the life-making capacities that we have as human beings. Struggles against capitalist imperialism, for the ability to raise children in a full and healthy manner, for better and fuller education, for fair and safe health care, and for a sustainable relationship with the environment are all efforts to reclaim democratic autonomy, control over our labour-power, as well as the ability to direct our labour towards human self-realization rather than capitalist profit. Because the circuit of labour-power is distinct from the circuit of capital, social reproductive labour is more attuned to the concrete rhythms of human labour and social needs. This makes struggles over social reproduction central to a project of communist freedom seeking to reclaim control over the time in which we labour. Likewise, struggles against capitalist imperialism and for a sustainable relationship with the

environment emerge from the concrete counter-times internal to global capitalism, representing attempts to selectively recover non-capitalist social forms that continue to exist beneath the surface as part of a future-oriented project of communist freedom. Movements resisting capitalist imperialism in all its forms, social reproductive strikes, and degrowth communism are central to the struggle over time and against the alienating relations of capitalism. As such, they should be viewed as essential to the movement for communist freedom.

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