

Slavery, Abstract Labour, and the Constitution of Capitalism¹

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ABSTRACTS

Kapital ist eine Form des „abstrakten Reichtums“ (Marx), es ist sozial und historisch spezifisch für die moderne Gesellschaft und basiert auf der undifferenzierten Verbrennung menschlicher Energie: der „abstrakten Arbeit“. Die historische Konstitution des Kapitalismus ist der weltweite Prozess der Schaffung dieses Nexus zwischen abstraktem Reichtum und abstrakter Arbeit, der die Menschen auf bloße Träger von körperlicher Energie reduziert, die für die Valorisierung von Wert mobilisiert werden soll. Ausgehend von einer theoretischen Reflexion über die Historizität von drei der Hauptkategorien der Marx'schen Kritik der politischen Ökonomie – Wert, Arbeit und abstrakte Arbeit – versuchen wir im Rahmen dieses Artikels, (1) eine allgemeine Interpretation des historischen Konstitutionsprozesses des Kapitalismus zwischen dem 16. und dem 19. Jahrhundert als Übergang von einem neu geschaffenen Weltsystem der Geld-Reichtum-Zirkulation zu einem Weltsystem der abstrakten Arbeit zu liefern; (2) die Rolle der Sklaverei in diesem Prozess und ihre Beziehung zur Konstitution der spezifisch modernen Kategorien von Arbeit und Arbeitskraft zu reflektieren; und (3) zu zeigen, dass trotz ihrer Vergangenheit und gemeinsamer Elemente der wesentliche Unterschiede zwischen der Ware Sklave und der Ware Arbeitskraft die Kategorie des Selbsteigentums ist, die letztlich entscheidend für die modernen Kämpfe um soziale Anerkennung und die historische Konstitution des Kapitalismus selbst wird.

Capital is a form of “abstract wealth” (Marx), socially and historically specific to modern society and based on undifferentiated combustion of human energy: “abstract labour”. The historical constitution of capitalism is the worldwide process of constituting that nexus between abstract wealth and abstract labour, effectively reducing human beings to mere carriers of bodily energy to be mobilized for the valorization of value. In this article, starting from a theoretical reflection

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on the historicity of three of the main categories of Marx's critique of political economy – value, labour, and abstract labour – I intend to (i) provide a general interpretation of the historical process of constitution of capitalism between the sixteenth and nineteenth century, as the transition from a newly created world system of monetary-wealth circulation to a world system of abstract labour; (ii) reflect on the role of slavery in this process and its relationship with the constitution of the specifically modern categories of labour and labour power; and (iii) show that, despite its past and common elements, it is the essential differences between the slave commodity and the labour power commodity through the self-ownership category that will ultimately become decisive for modern struggles for social recognition and the historical constitution of capitalism itself.

Not looking for totality is just code for not looking at capitalism. [...] [A]nd though we may forget about totality, we may be sure that it will not forget about us.²

1. Capitalism, Value, and Abstract Labour

It is known that Karl Marx only very rarely used the term *capitalism* not only because its use was still unusual at the time but also because he coined the expression “capitalist mode of production”, which was more in line with his theoretical structure. The notion of mode of production, in turn, was never defined unequivocally, which also ended up giving rise to numerous discussions that tend to be formalist and positivist within twentieth-century Marxism, especially after the Althusserian reading. Yet, as Jairus Banaji notes,³ it is still possible to identify in Marx two different levels of abstraction within the concept of mode of production: (i) a first level that seems to refer to the technical and material process of production or to labour organization regimes (the historical scheme “slave, serf and wage labourer” and the corresponding modes of production), being in a way the favourite version of Marxism; and (ii) a second level, much more broader, that seeks to account for the social form of production that dominates an entire historical epoch or structure of a historical social whole – “a general illumination which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity” or “a particular ether which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialized within it”.⁴ In this sense, Marx also speaks of the mode of production as a “mode of life”.⁵ By referring to the capitalist mode of production, Marx means the “mode of production founded on wage

2 T. Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Oxford 1996, pp. 11, 128.

3 J. Banaji, *Modes of Production in a Materialist Conception of History*, in: Id., *Theory and History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation*, Leiden 2010, pp. 50–52.

4 K. Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, London 1993, p. 107.

5 “[M]ode of production must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are”. See K. Marx and F. Engels, *German Ideology*, in: Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5: Marx and Engels 1845–47, London 1975, p. 31.

labour”⁶ or one that has wage labour as “its basis”.⁷ But Marx also says that the world market is the “very basis and living atmosphere of the capitalist mode of production”.⁸ This character of the world market does not contradict the foundation of the capitalist mode of production on wage labour but seems to point to something much broader and also marks in a fundamental way the whole history of modern society. In fact, Marx also says that wage labour, the selling and buying of labour power, “comprises a world’s history” and “announces from the outset a new epoch in the process of social production”.⁹ Accordingly, it cannot be only at the level of the strict notion of the capitalist mode of production, and even less of a purely sociologist interpretation of the category wage labour to be applied locally, that we can think about the capitalist historical totality. This challenge is not just a question of scale; it demands that we also think about the categories of the specific historical ontology of modern society. At this level, as shown by the paradigm known as “critique of value”,¹⁰ the Marxian categories of value and abstract labour remain fundamental.

Value is not wealth in general; value is a particular form of wealth, socially and historically specific to capitalism. The difference between wealth and value is one of the fundamental distinctions made by Marx, and yet its importance is rarely noticed, even by Marxists.¹¹ Marx repeatedly mentions the difference between real wealth or material wealth, on the one hand, and value or abstract wealth, on the other hand. But it is not a matter of opposing material wealth, as if it were an anthropological constant, to abstract wealth in value, as a variable social form. Material wealth also exists only in a certain social form. Use value is the form that material wealth takes within capitalist society dominated by the abstract form of wealth that is value. The dialectic between use value and value is the fundamental contradiction of the capitalist social form. Marx indicates that if there is a double character of value in commodities (use value and exchange value) as Adam Smith and David Ricardo state, then the objectified labour in them necessarily also has a double character: on the one hand, concrete labour, which refers to concrete and sensitive acts in the production of commodities (the side that produces material wealth); on the other hand, what Marx calls “abstract labour”, that is to say the process of combustion of human energy, “essentially the expenditure of human brain, nerves,

6 Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 833.

7 K. Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 2 (Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 36), London 1992, p. 418.

8 K. Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 3 (Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 37), London 1991, p. 205.

9 K. Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1 (Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 35), London 1990, p. 274.

10 See, among others, N. Larsen/M. Nilges/J. Robinson/N. Brown (eds.), *Marxism and the Critique of Value*, Chicago 2014; A. Jappe, *Les aventures de la marchandise: Pour une nouvelle critique de la valeur*, Paris 2003; R. Kurz, *The Substance of Capital*, London 2016; M. Postone, *Time, Labour and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory*, Cambridge 2003.

11 On this topic, see P. Murray, *The Mismeasure of Wealth. Essays on Marx and Social Form*, Leiden 2016; Postone, *Time, Labour and Social Domination*.

muscles and sense organs”.¹² According to Marx, it is this expenditure of abstract human energy that constitutes what he calls the “social substance” of value and which is represented in a fetishistic way in the “phantom-like objectivity” of money and commodities. Capital, in turn, is “self-valorizing value”, the process of “valorization of value”,¹³ that is to say the compulsive social relationship of transforming money into more money through the combustion of human energy in the production of commodities, which Marx sums up in the M-C-M’ formula.

It is important to immediately clarify the content of at least three categories: labour, abstract labour, and concrete labour. Now, all of Marx’s work is traversed by a profound ambivalence regarding the theoretical status of labour, appearing in many situations as an ontological category supposedly applicable to all human history, although on some occasions Marx does not fail to point to its specifically capitalist historical character, a fundamental moment of the modern fetish social form and something to be entirely “abolished”. A question arises: is labour a transhistorical and eternally valid abstraction or, conversely, are we dealing with a historically specific abstraction of modernity? In *Grundrisse*, in the only presentation he makes of his method, Marx tells us about the development of what he calls “rational abstractions”, through which we highlight and mentally isolate elements common to all forms of society. This is a delicate theoretical process because, as Marx warns, in this reflection, on the one hand, it is necessary to bear in mind the “specific” and “essential differences” of each society; on the other hand, with only these common elements so abstracted, it is not possible to understand any society.¹⁴ The question then becomes can we assume that labour is a rational abstraction – a “common element” to all societies? Marx seems to assume many times that it is, but in an important long reflection on the category that the Marxist tradition generally avoids citing, the problem proves to be a little more complex:

Labour seems a quite simple category. The conception of labour in this general form – as labour as such – is also immeasurably old. Nevertheless, when it is economically conceived in this simplicity, “labour” is as modern a category as are the relations which create this simple abstraction. [...] Here, then, for the first time, the point of departure of modern economics, namely the abstraction of the category “labour”, “labour as such”, labour pure and simple, becomes true in practice. The simplest abstraction, then, which modern economics places at the head of its discussions, and which expresses an immeasurably ancient relation valid in all forms of society, nevertheless achieves practical truth as an abstraction only as a category of the most modern society [...] This example of labour shows strikingly how even the most abstract categories, despite their validity – precisely because of their abstractness – for all epochs, are nevertheless, in the specific character of this abstraction, themselves likewise a product of historic relations, and possess their full

12 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, p. 164.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 711, 253.

14 Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 85.

*validity only for and within these relations. [...] Although it is true, therefore, that the categories of bourgeois economics possess a truth for all other forms of society, this is to be taken only with a grain of salt.*¹⁵

Marx's ambiguity here is notorious. After all, he says that the category labour is a product of modern social conditions, which only applies, only has "full validity", and only is a "practical reality" or "practically true" in modern society. But this ambiguity also tells us that, because of its high level of abstraction, it can also apply to all periods and have validity there, a validity that, however, he implicitly admits that it cannot be "full" or "true in practice" and which should be taken with reservations, "with a grain of salt". Marx does not even seem to equate the possibility that the "essential difference" of modern society is precisely the real social existence of the labour abstraction, which is why it is not a rational abstraction that can be applied to societies of the past.¹⁶ To overcome the aporia, Marx makes full use of the philosophy of history inherited from Hegel, who sees in the past only successive approaches by levels to modern society itself. This option is all the stranger when Marx himself fiercely criticizes the bourgeois political economy on the following page for making use of similar evolutionary arguments. In fact, it is extremely difficult to find a pre-modern notion equivalent to the modern concept of labour, and for a long time, several historians, anthropologists, and sociologists have drawn attention to the problem in different ways.¹⁷

If labour is, as Marx himself claims, "a mere spectre" and "nothing but an abstraction",¹⁸ what exactly does it abstract? It is not difficult to see that the abstraction labour has historically been constituted in modern society as any human activity that takes place in an abstract – that is, "disembedded" – social sphere dedicated to the production of commodities and the valorization of abstract wealth,¹⁹ from which an ontological concept of labour was derived that ultimately functions "as a black hole, collapsing other

15 Ibid., pp. 103–106.

16 Therefore, whenever Marx applies the term *labour* and all its derivatives (labour power, surplus labour, etc.) to pre-modern societies, it is somewhat anachronistic and, in fact, prevents us from fully understanding them and, thus, also modern society. It is necessary to recognize that Jean Baudrillard was perhaps one of the first authors to address this problem of Marx, as early as 1973, but neither he himself drew all possible conclusions (even going further away from them) nor did his criticism find at the time the deserved echo. See J. Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, St. Louis 1975.

17 D. Becquemont/P. Bonte, *Mythologies du travail. Le travail nommé*, Paris 2004; M. Bischoff, "L'humanité a-t-elle toujours 'travaillé'?", in: *Théologiques* 3 (1995) 2, pp. 45–69; M.-N. Chamoux, *Sociétés avec et sans concept de travail*, in: *Sociologie du Travail* 36 (1994), pp. 57–71; M. I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy* (Updated Edition with a Foreword by Ian Morris ed.), Berkeley 1999, p. 81; M. Freyssenet, *The emergence, centrality and end of work*, in: *Current Sociology* 47 (1999) 2, pp. 5–20; T. K. Hopkins, *Sociology and the substantive view of the economy*, in: K. Polanyi/C. M. Arensberg/H. W. Pearson (eds.), *Trade and Market in the Early Empires*, Glencoe 1957, pp. 276–279; D. Méda, *Le travail. Une valeur en voie de disparition ?*, Paris 2010; J.-P. Vernant, *Travail et nature dans la Grèce ancienne*, in: Id., *Œuvres. Religions, Rationalités, Politique*, Vol. I, Paris 2007, pp. 486–504.

18 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 3, p. 954.

19 At the same time, as Roswitha Scholz has shown, all everyday activities that are not likely to be integrated into the capital valorization process (raising children, managing the home, preparing meals, etc.) are not considered labour, are relegated to the feminine sphere, and are themselves feminized. See R. Scholz, *Patriarchy and Commodity Society: Gender without the Body*, in: N. Larsen/M. Nilges/J. Robinson/N. Brown (eds.), *Marxism and the Critique of Value*, Chicago 2014, pp. 123–142.

modes of conceptualizing human activity under its hegemonic purview”.²⁰ If we look closely, Marx’s concrete labour is a contradiction of terms; its purpose is to analytically separate the material side of the abstraction labour but this is already done under the presupposition of a real social separation from human practices historically specific to modern society (rigidly separating labour from other activities of social reproduction). Abstract labour, in turn, is a “double abstraction”, or as Robert Kurz calls it, a “logical pleonasm”.²¹ It refers only to the pure expenditure of human energy in the production of commodities “without regard to the form of its expenditure”²² and which must necessarily happen in any concrete labour. Accordingly, it also has a material side (human energy) that, however, is not empirically palpable as such, but rather a social abstraction represented in a fetishistic way in commodities and money. Abstract labour cannot, therefore, be interpreted as a mere physiological or natural abstraction. It is a question not just of the combustion of human energy in the abstract (if that were the case, being alive would immediately produce value), but also of the socially objective and fetishistic meaning of that combustion in the production of commodities. Abstract labour is thus a category that is *simultaneously social and physiological*, and only as such can it be the very “social substance” of capital.

2. Is the Slave the Originary Paradigm of Labour?

At first glance, it may seem that in pre-modern societies the undifferentiated activity of the slave is a kind of embryonic form of the modern abstraction of labour. This seems even more likely if we remember that abstract labour is the mere process of the combustion of human energy. In fact, it is not difficult to also see in pre-modern slavery a reduction of human beings to their pure *corporeality* and *instrumentality*, acting as an *energy source*, which is similar to what is required by abstract labour. In pre-modern societies, we can find slaves in the most diverse activities (both manual and intellectual) and apparently distributed in an undifferentiated way. They are often identified as mere animals,²³ something that is demonstrated even at the linguistic level.²⁴ In classical Greece, they are sometimes also referred to by the term *sōma* (body);²⁵ the slave as a body is also at the centre of Aristotle’s concerns and of his understanding of the slave as an

20 A. E. Wendling, *The Ruling Ideas: Bourgeois Political Concepts*, Lanham 2012, p. 10.

21 Kurz, *Substance*, p. 27.

22 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, p. 128.

23 D. B. Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*, New York 2006, pp. 32–35; K. Bradley, *Animalizing the Slave: The Truth of Fiction*, in: *The Journal of Roman Studies* 90 (2000), pp. 110–125.

24 One of the Greek terms from the classical period for slave, *andrapodon* (man-footed), derived by analogy from *tetrapodon* (four-footed), applied to cattle. See K. L. Wrenhaven, *Reconstructing the Slave: The Image of the Slave in Ancient Greece*, London 2012, pp. 13–17.

25 R. Zelnick-Abramovitz, *Greek and Roman Terminologies of Slavery*, in: S. Hodkinson/M. Kleijwegt/K. Vlassopoulos (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Slavery*, Oxford 2018, p. 8.

extension of the master's body and "instrument" for use,²⁶ going so far as to state that if the machines worked by themselves the masters would not need slaves. Cato and Varro also refer to slaves as *instrumentum vocale* (talking tools)²⁷ and sometimes present them only abstractly as just "hands". This reduction of a human being to a simple fragment of his own body is, in fact, extraordinarily persistent in Western slavery (we will return to this aspect later). Does all this mean that the "undifferentiated activity" of the slave of antiquity is somehow the originary paradigm of labour and that the use of his body is already abstract labour? Giorgio Agamben argues that, as far as the Greeks are concerned, the "use of bodies" of slaves can in no way be interpreted in terms of labour, this perspective being an "anachronism" and "extremely problematic".²⁸ Despite assuming labour as a transhistorical category, Orlando Patterson nevertheless says something pertinent:

*There is nothing in the nature of slavery which requires that the slave be a worker. Worker qua worker has no intrinsic relation to slave qua slave. This does not mean that the slave cannot be used as a worker. [...] But this does not in any way mean that slave necessarily implies worker. I have repeatedly stressed that most slaves in most precapitalist societies were not enslaved in order to be made over into workers.*²⁹

Manfred Bischoff, for his part, argues that the correct term for the slave's general activity is "service" (in the sense of "serving" and "subjection") and not labour, which separates the activity from its performer.³⁰ The jurist and legal historian Yan Thomas seeks to show that the first notion similar to the modern abstraction of labour is found in Roman legal documents regarding slave rental contracts, where jurists, in a significant way, sought to separate the body of the slave (which remained the property of his master) from his activity (the abstraction that was the legal object of the contract).³¹ This interpretation by Thomas led Agamben to state that "[a]t this point, the slave enters into the centuries-long process that will be able to transform him into a worker".³² But this is a Eurocentric view, and, however long it may be, there is no direct path that goes from the Roman slave to the modern worker, especially when the rupture that was transatlantic racial slavery is left out of the equation. This is certainly an extremely complex subject, but it is decisive to emphasize that the modern abstraction of labour does not concern the specific activity of a *determined group of individuals* considered dependent, inferiorized, and excluded from the "official" society, living in a "permanent condition of liminality".³³ It is exactly

26 G. Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*. *Homo Sacer*, Vol. IV,2, Stanford 2016, pp. 7–36, 75–79.

27 This dominant interpretation deserves reservations, with the strong possibility that the classification also applies to non-slaves. See J. P. Lewis, *Did Varro Think that Slaves were Talking Tools?*, in: *Mnemosyne* 66 (2013), pp. 634–648.

28 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*. *Homo Sacer*, Vol. IV,2, pp. 19–20.

29 O. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death. A Comparative Study*, Cambridge 1982, p. 99.

30 Bischoff, "L'humanité a-t-elle toujours travaillé?"; pp. 61–62.

31 Y. Thomas, "L'usage" et les "fruits" de l'esclave. Opérations juridiques romaines sur le travail, in: *Enquête* 7 (1999), pp. 203–230.

32 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*. *Homo Sacer*, Vol. IV,2, p. 17.

33 Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, p. 60.

the opposite: labour as a specifically modern category is an abstraction placed at the level of social generality, applying by principle to *human beings in general* and as a category of “social mediation” and “social synthesis”.³⁴ There are two forms of social abstraction at play here: both situations imply a *reduction* of human beings to their mere corporeality, but only in capitalism is this reduction simultaneously a *generalization*. The basis of this fundamental difference is neither the culmination of a transhistorical logic originating in antiquity nor a mere mental abstraction made only in the modern era. What led to this simultaneous reduction/generalization was the broad and violent historical process of constitution of capitalism.

3. The Historicity of Capitalism

Marx leaves no doubt that the historical constitution of capitalism is the historical constitution of a world system of abstract labour associated with the universalization of value as a form of abstract wealth. Perhaps at no time prior is Marx clearer than when says in *Theories of Surplus-Value* (1862/3) that “it is only foreign trade, the development of the market to a world market, which causes money to develop into world money and abstract labour into social labour. Abstract wealth, value, money, hence abstract labour, develop in the measure that concrete labour becomes a totality of different modes of labour embracing the world market”.³⁵ But this long process of constitution and development of a world system of abstract labour did not occur in a structural or geographically uniform way, but with discontinuous jumps over several centuries, having the world market as “presupposition of the whole as well as its substratum”.³⁶ It is a world process but its historical constitution and development, however, unevenly affect countries and regions, which can thus present both internal and external historical non-simultaneities. Despite this, Marx is quite clear that there are at least two distinct historical phases that, although difficult to delimit empirically and in their individual moments, must always be present in historical reflections.³⁷ The first period is that of the “formation process” of capital, of its “historical genesis” or the “so-called original accumulation” (which Marx generically marks between the sixteenth century and the last third of the eighteenth century, even if it was still only sporadically developed).³⁸ With regard to this period, we must first bear in mind its profoundly contingent nature.³⁹ Capitalism did not have to emerge as a supreme historical necessity and apogee of human history, and even the

34 See Kurz, *Substance*, p. 27; Postone, *Time, Labour and Social Domination*, pp. 148–158.

35 K. Marx, *Economic Manuscript of 1861–1863*, in: Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 32: Marx, 1861–63, London 2010, p. 388.

36 Marx, *Grundrisse*, pp. 227–228.

37 “The process of capital becoming capital or its development *before* the capitalist production process exists, and its realisation in this process itself belong to two historically different periods”. Marx, *Economic Manuscript 1861–63*, p. 492.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 327.

39 Marx was well aware of this contingency and that is why he says about this historical period that “the dialectical

events that we retrospectively recognize as part of the process of constitution of capital also did not necessarily have to lead to what we call capitalism, although as these were unfolding the amplitude of the contingency was getting narrower. Second, when Marx speaks of the “so-called original accumulation of capital”, the capital mentioned there is not yet and cannot be the capital of the logic of the movement of valorization of abstract labour that Marx expounds in *Capital*. As Marx says: “Before accumulation by capital, there is presupposed an accumulation which constitutes capital”.⁴⁰ The “prehistory of capital” cannot, therefore, be the accumulation of something previously existing, but the socially blind and extremely violent process of constituting something entirely new.⁴¹ The second period is already based on the existence of the capitalist mode of production itself, in the sense of “based on wage labour”, where the system already “stands on its own feet”⁴² or “is already moving on its own foundation”⁴³ and “capital is *taken for granted, and its* existence and automatic functioning is presupposed”.⁴⁴ It is also as a result of this “automatic functioning” that Marx will call capital the “automatic subject” and *Capital* is the theoretical exposition of its logic. In this context, the contingency is also much narrower because “individuals are now ruled by *abstractions*”,⁴⁵ constituted by themselves unconsciously through social practice, and act more and more within the capitalist social form and according to its categories. Obviously, direct and personal violence does not disappear but starts to be mediated by an impersonal and abstract form of domination that constitutes and cuts across all modern society. We have to keep in mind that both periods are global in scope and give rise to hybrid social situations and forms that are difficult to conceptualize.⁴⁶ Various aspects of pre-capitalist societies were extended within the process of historical constitution and, in a similar way, several specific mechanisms of the constitution process, taken in isolation, can continue to be seen when capitalism “stands on its own feet”, but in this case already presupposing capital and wage labour, therefore having a completely different historical logic and frame. It is precisely because of this difference, determined by the social whole

form of presentation is right only when it knows its own limits”. K. Marx, From the Preparatory Materials, in: Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Vol. 29: Marx 1857–61, London 2010, p. 505.

40 Marx, Grundrisse, p. 590.

41 Marx’s use of the terms *merchant’s capital* and *interest-bearing capital* and its application to various pre-modern times not only generates several mistakes but ends up diminishing the tremendous later historical novelty of the real capital relationship. These ambiguities of Marx continue to allow countless discussions around a so-called mercantile capitalism already in the European Middle Ages or even before and in other regions of the world. These positions are not so far from Weber’s “methodological individualism”, which sees “capitalism of various forms [...] in all periods of history”. Still, Weber also says that “the provision of the everyday wants by capitalistic methods is characteristic of the occident alone and even at has been the inevitable method only since the middle of the 19th century”, recognizing that only from that period one can speak of capitalism as anything that resembles a social whole. See M. Weber, *General Economic History*, Glencoe 1950, p. 276.

42 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, pp. 874, 928.

43 Marx, Grundrisse, p. 253.

44 Marx, *Economic Manuscript*, p. 492.

45 Marx, Grundrisse, p. 164.

46 These situations are at the basis of Marx’s reflections on “forms of subsumption” to capital. See Murray, *Mismeasure of Wealth*, pp. 301–317.

in process, that Marx states, on the one hand, that slavery in the New World was the “pedestal” of European wage labour and, on the other hand, that from a given moment of the history of the “bourgeois system of production” it becomes an “anomaly”, only possible in some points because it does not exist in others.⁴⁷

What successive controversies surrounding the relationship between slavery (or other forms of “unfree” labour) and capitalism seem to have difficulty in assuming is that (i) the term capitalism names a world social totality in movement and (ii) there is not really capitalism without wage labour, but not all labour in the capitalist system necessarily has to be wage labour.⁴⁸ While the foundation of the system is abstract labour, the different particular forms of social labour cannot be treated as interchangeable and equally fundamental to the constitution and reproduction of capitalism.

4. Slavery and the Constitution of Capitalism

According to Marx, “[c]apital comes initially from circulation, and, moreover, its point of departure is money”,⁴⁹ but Kurz’s historicization of these categories makes this genesis perhaps clearer.⁵⁰ We know that money existed before capitalism, but by no means can its social function be considered the same as that in capitalism. Even well into the medieval period, money mediated relations of reciprocity and personal obligation (sacrifices, gifts, counter-gifts, offerings, etc.) and had a very demarcated religious character and cannot be considered identical to modern money.⁵¹ In the long process of constitution of capitalism, money lost all of its religious traits and associations with personal obligations and became autonomous as a fetish and purpose of all social production, that is to say capital. The constitution of capital is therefore a qualitative transformation of the social function of money, becoming the real first fully autonomous commodity, accompanied by its generalization and accumulation. Several combined historical processes contributed to this end, but Kurz argues that the violent social transformations associated with the

47 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, p. 925; K. Marx, *Economic Manuscript of 1861–63*, in: Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 34: Marx, 1861–64, London 2010, pp. 246–247; Marx, *Grundrisse*, pp. 464, 513.

48 “Even though the form of labour as wage-labour is decisive for the shape of the entire process and for the specific mode of production itself, it is not wage-labour that is value-determining. What matters in the determination of value is the overall social labour-time, the total amount of labour which society has at its disposal and whose relative absorption by the different products determines, as it were, their respective social weight. But the particular form in which social labour-time plays its determinant role in the value of commodities coincides with the form of labour as wage-labour, and the corresponding form of the means of production as capital, in so far as it is on this basis alone that commodity production becomes the general form of production”. Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 3, p. 1022. See also P. McMichael, *Slavery in capitalism: the rise and demise of the U.S. Ante-Bellum Cotton Culture*, in: *Theory and Society* 20 (1991) 3, pp. 321–349; D. Tomich, *Slavery in the Circuit of Sugar. Martinique and the World-Economy, 1830–1848*, 2nd edn, New York 2016, pp. 35, 44–35; D. Tomich, *Through the Prism of Slavery: Labour, Capital, and World Economy*, Lanham 2004, pp. 24, 50–52.

49 Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 253.

50 R. Kurz, *Geld ohne Wert. Grundrisse zu einer Transformation der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie*, Berlin 2012, pp. 112–156.

51 See J. Le Goff, *Le Moyen Age et l’argent. Essai d’anthropologie historique*, Paris 2010.

so-called military revolution from the fifteenth century onwards and the establishment of “fiscal-military states” were truly decisive, coercing people to “earn money” to pay taxes⁵² and forcing a violent and progressive monetization of all social reproduction.⁵³ The original constitution of capital was thus marked by an arms race and a gold (and silver) rush at the same time, that feed on each other and have the whole world as a stage and Europe at war at its centre.⁵⁴ It was the hunger for money of modern states at birth, associated with wars and the implantation of new military devices, that truly created modern money and that autonomous social sphere that Marx calls “circulation” and which we have gotten used to calling “market”.

But this sphere of circulation that had just been born, with gold as the first “world money”, was unable to survive on its own for a long time and therefore needed to turn the entire social structure inside out, becoming autonomous from its original end of feeding state war machines and turning into the very presupposition and result of general social reproduction. The world system that emerged from the sixteenth century⁵⁵ was for a long time predominantly a system of circulation, driven by world money, which gradually and troublesomely took over social reproduction. But that did not happen once and for all and everywhere at the same time and in the same way. This progressive domination of new money and new system of “circulation” over social production did not even have to lead necessarily to the capitalist mode of production, and in fact for centuries this growing control had several faces and modes of existence in the four corners of the world. But the European transformation had both incomparable social depth and territorial scope. After all, it was not the native peoples of the Americas who decided to make slaves among themselves to produce commodities for the new world market but rather Europeans establishing colonies there and producing with slaves predominantly brought from a third continent. The general tendency was to enlist a huge mass of human beings and mobilize it as a mere energetic material for new spaces of production, entirely disconnected from general social reproduction, and whose primary objective is the multiplication of money. Although these new “disembedded economic functional spaces”⁵⁶ are structured by the same valorization principle and “categorical imperative to

52 “In the period of the rising absolute monarchy with its transformation of all taxes into money taxes, money indeed appears as the moloch to whom real wealth is sacrificed”. Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 199.

53 This perspective is close to the approach recently presented by D. McNally, *Blood and Money: War, Slavery, and the State*, Chicago 2020.

54 It is not for nothing that Marx says: “The period which precedes the development of modern industrial society opens with general greed for money on the part of individuals as well as of states. [...] The hunt for gold in all countries leads to its discovery; to the formation of new states; initially to the spread of commodities, which produce new needs, and draw distant continents into the metabolism of circulation [...]. Thus, in this respect, as the general representative of wealth and as individualized exchange value, it was doubly a means for expanding the universality of wealth, and for drawing the dimensions of exchange over the whole world; for creating the true generality [*Allgemeinheit*] of exchange value in substance and in extension”. Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 225.

55 I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*, Berkeley 2011.

56 Kurz, *Substance*, p. 100.

work”,⁵⁷ there are at least two types. (i) In Europe, the paradigmatic spaces of this new production system were asylums, state workhouses, and manufactures, where thousands of uprooted individuals, isolated by the dissolution of feudalism’s personal obligation relations and the new state wars, were forced to labour. (ii) In the Atlantic, the paradigm was for centuries the sugar plantation (being “white gold” and the original cash crop), supplied mainly (but not only) by African slaves and on a scale never seen before.

Several factors contributed to the success and duration of the Atlantic plantation economy based on commodity-producing slavery. First, the kingdoms of West Africa possessed the much sought-after gold and were simultaneously outside the new system of circulation of monetary wealth based on precious metals, allowing the continuous channelling of bullion to Europe (first from Africa itself and then from the New World) to fuel state war machines and monetize social reproduction.⁵⁸

Second, the early Atlantic was a “political and legal vacuum”,⁵⁹ facilitating the implementation of an export-oriented commodity-producing slave plantation system in territories marked by profound geographical and social isolation (not by chance on islands and “frontier” zones),⁶⁰ and “disembedded” from the patterns of social behaviour in the metropolises. After 1630, the new plantation system was located mainly in an abstract and “empty” geographical space that became known as “beyond the line”,⁶¹ where European customs and conventions did not apply, enabling the “full development of institutions overseas which were not sanctioned at home”.⁶² According to Carl Schmitt, the “beyond the line” zone was a space of “freedom”, “analogous to the state of exception”, “where force could be used freely and ruthlessly” and everything that occurred “remained outside the legal, moral, and political values recognized on this side of the line”.⁶³ For Europeans, that freedom included the “freedom to enslave others”.⁶⁴

Third, “slaves” were the dominant form of wealth in Africa,⁶⁵ and their tragic encounter with the European hunger for abstract wealth ended up generating a barbaric slaving

57 R. Castel, *From Manual Workers to Wage Labourers. Transformation of the Social Question*, New Brunswick/London 2003, p. 107.

58 Joseph C. Miller has always emphasized this aspect, but its relevance to the process of constitution of capital in Europe remains to be explored. See J. C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730–1830*, London 1988, p. 685; J. C. Miller, *O Atlântico Escravista Açúcar, Escravos e Engenhos in: Afro-Ásia 19/20 (1997)*, pp. 9–36, at 13–14.

59 J. C. Miller, *The Problem of Slavery as History: A Global Approach*, New Haven/London 2012, p. 66.

60 “Indeed, perhaps all slave plantations of the type developed by Europeans needed to be either on geographic islands or islands in a sea of insiders, as on the North and South American mainlands”. D. Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas*, New York 2000, p. 161.

61 R. Blackburn, *The American Crucible: Slavery, Emancipation And Human Rights*, London 2011, p. 62.

62 S. Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilization in Comparative Perspective*, New York 1987, p. 13.

63 C. Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, Cambridge 2006, p. 94.

64 Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery*, p. 23.

65 See, for example, S. Drescher, *Abolition. A History of Slavery and Antislavery*, Cambridge 2009, p. 56; J. I. Guyer, *Wealth In People And Self-Realization In Equatorial Africa*, in: *Man* 28 (1993) 2, pp. 243–265; Miller, *Way of Death*, pp. 673–677; J. Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1680*, Cambridge 1992, p. 89.

dynamic for several centuries.⁶⁶ Slaves, in their condition of liminality and “absolute other”, truly belonging neither to the societies that sold them nor to those that would acquire them, were ideal for regimentation and forced mobilization to spaces “disembodied” from “official” social reproduction and specifically oriented, since the beginning, towards the export of commodities and the multiplication of money.

It was this insatiable hunger for money from Europeans that really determined the so-called labour problem (or labour shortage) of the New World and not any land/labour ratio. The labour problem was a problem only “from the European perspective”;⁶⁷ after all, Native Americans had no labour problem before Europeans arrived (first of all because they had no labour). But even the continual reference to this violent historical process as a labour problem also is an anachronism: the labour problem is the representation in current terms of what was in fact an important part of the actual process of constituting the real abstraction of labour and that today allows for the reification of itself (as well as the synonyms human resources and human capital). From the perspective of historical agents, the reification was not yet exactly that: individuals isolated and dragged along in this process did not appear under the name of an abstract activity (labour) but as a fragment of their own body. It is quite significant that the Portuguese and Spaniards of that time referred to what is now called the labour problem of the New World as *falta de braços/braços* (literally arms shortage) or *falta de mão-de-obra/mano de obra* (literally hand-for-work shortage).⁶⁸ It is also known that British and American plantations from the second half of the eighteenth century renewed the old term *hand*, developing a fractionation system (full hand, half hand, quarter hand, etc.), according to the “labour capacity” of each slave, for the calculation and optimization of the land/hands ratio.⁶⁹ This abstract system of homogenization and quantification, in which the unit of measure hand is divided, is thus something more abstract than the simple hand that appeared in Cato and Varro.

However, little attention has been paid to what is perhaps one of the most bizarre abstractions born out of the transatlantic slave trade. Centuries before the fractionation of slaves into hands, the Portuguese and the Spanish developed an abstract system for quantifying and measuring the expected labour capacity of each slave, whose novelty and historical significance still seem far from having been properly recognized by historiography:⁷⁰

66 Miller, *Way of Death*, p. 673.

67 D. Eltis, *Free and coerced migrations: the Atlantic in global perspective*, in: *European Review* 12 (2004) 3, pp. 313–328, at 319.

68 *Mão-de-obra/mano de obra* are still alternative terms for labour power today and have exact correspondence also in French and Italian (*main d'oeuvre, manodopera*).

69 R. Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492–1800*, London/New York 1998, p. 467; W. Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom*, Cambridge 2013, pp. 153–154.

70 Vol. 3 of the *Cambridge World History of Slavery*, for example, only mentions it in passing twice. D. Eltis/K. Bradley/S. L. Engerman/P. Cartledge (eds.), *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, Vol. 3: AD 1420–AD 1804, Cambridge 2011.

the *peça da Índia*/*pieza de India* (piece of India).⁷¹ As far as it is possible to know from the documentation already studied, the term appears as early as the sixteenth century in the contact between the Portuguese and the territories of present-day Angola, where from early on a special equivalence was established between a certain amount of fabric (with a dimension for dressing an adult and presumably produced in Asia), functioning as “money”, and a standard slave taken by Portuguese traffickers. This equivalence was associated with the parallel need for European states to charge monetary taxes on human commodities of unequal quality and eventually led to the establishment of a true system of slave equivalence, which lasted at least until the mid- eighteenth century. The *peça*, as a unit of measure, corresponded generally to a black adult man with a certain age standard (depending on the sources and variable over time: between 15 and 35 years old), minimum height, physical condition, and health, from which the fractions were then established: a slave between 8 and 15 years old or 36 and 45 years old corresponded to two-thirds piece; and a slave between 4 and 8 years old was equal to one-half piece. It is important to realize here that, on the one hand, the genesis of the *peça* measure is totally inseparable from the abstracting functions and equivalence of money. On the other hand, although the object of the transaction is individuals, the *peça*, as Curtin argues, is a “measure of potential labour, not of individuals”.⁷² What the *peça da Índia* illustrates paradoxically is that the purchase of slaves is not really the purchase of labour power, although the *peça* serves as a measure of labour power for establishing the price of slaves. Labour power, the “peculiar commodity”,⁷³ is one of the essential categories of the capitalist social form and Marx believed that this was one of his most important “discoveries”. Today we immediately associate it with his name but, in fact, it was originally advanced during his time by the theory of thermodynamics with the aim of studying the conservation of energy in all material bodies.⁷⁴ This origin is not accidental. Several potential misunderstandings need to be clarified.

First of all, bear in mind that, like labour, and even more notoriously, the abstraction labour power is a specifically modern category. If Marx occasionally refers to the labour power of human beings in pre-modern societies, this is only an anachronism resulting from his transhistorical understanding of the category labour and that again jumps over the problem that he himself identifies in *Grundrisse*. Although it is often said, and in an

71 P. D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade. A Census*, Madison 1969, pp. 22–23; H. Moura Filho, *A precisão do padrão “peça da Índia” como indicador qualitativo de idade. Encontro Escravidão e Liberdade no Brasil Meridional*, Porto Alegre 2017; Miller, *Way of Death*, pp. 68–70, 299; A. Carreira, *As Companhias Pombalinas de Grão-Pará e Maranhão e Pernambuco e Paraíba*, Lisboa 1983, p. 28. D. B. Domingues da Silva, *The Atlantic Slave Trade from West Central Africa 1780–1867*, Cambridge 2018, pp. 45, 112–114; A. d. A. Mendes, *The Foundations of the System: A Reassessment of the Slave Trade to the Spanish Americas in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, in: D. Eltis/D. Richardson (eds.), *Extending the Frontiers: Essays on the New Transatlantic Slave Trade Database*, New Haven/London 2008, p. 91; G. A. Lopes/M. M. Menz, *Vestindo o escravismo: o comércio de têxteis e o Contrato de Angola (século XVIII)*, in: *Revista Brasileira de História* 39 (2019), pp. 109–134.

72 Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, p. 22.

73 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, p. 274.

74 A. Rabinbach, *The Human Motor. Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity*, Berkeley 1992, pp. 69–83.

apparently banal way, that human beings naturally have labour power, only in modern society did this abstraction arise, which is thus anything but a banality. Just as labour is not simply human activity in general, labour power is also not merely the vital energy that exists naturally in the human body; it is and it is not. In a Hegelian fashion, it can be said that the expenditure of human energy is *presupposed* in pre-modern societies, but only in modern society is this abstraction *socially posited*.⁷⁵ But it is also not seen as an abstraction common to all human activities, but only in those that produce commodities.⁷⁶ Second, it must be clear that labour power is not identical to abstract labour: labour power is a potential; abstract labour its actuality. It is only abstract labour (that is to say, the expenditure of labour power itself in the production of commodities) that is the “social substance” of value.

Third, just as abstract labour can only happen through concrete labour (after all, there is no combustion of human energy in the abstract), labour power can also only exist in a concrete body: the individual human body. The lack of clarity in these distinctions or the inability to deal with them has been a continuous source of misunderstandings regarding the fundamental similarities and differences between the slave and the wage labourer.

Both slave and wage labourer are socially reduced to mere *carriers* of human energy and forced, directly or indirectly, to the pure “expenditure of human brain, nerves, muscles” in the production of commodities. But the purchase of the commodity slave is not the purchase of the commodity labour power,⁷⁷ although his labour power is the purpose of the purchase (just as the purchase of a battery is motivated by the energy it contains). It is precisely for this reason that Marx calls the slave a “living labour-machine”.⁷⁸ If in both cases human beings are *reduced* to mere *carriers* of energy, only the wage labourer is socially recognized as a *possessor* or *owner* of that energy, and that is exactly what allows the *generalization* of the abstraction labour, commodities and capital. That is why, although not using the term, Marx puts “self-ownership” as one of the decisive and fundamental presuppositions of capitalist society, with consequences of great historical significance.⁷⁹ According to Marx, “[t]he capitalist epoch is [...] characterized by the fact that labour-power, in the eyes of the worker himself, takes on the form of a commodity which is his property; his labour consequently takes on the form of wage-labour. On the other hand, it is only from this moment that the commodity form of the products of labour becomes universal”.⁸⁰ We must draw attention to two aspects here: first, Marx places self-ownership as a precondition for the capitalist mode of production and at the centre

75 M. Robles-Baez, On the Abstraction of Labour as a Social Determination, in: A. Freeman/A. Kliman/J. Wells (eds.), *The New Value Controversy and the Foundations of Economics*, Cheltenham 2004, pp. 151–165, at 152–153.

76 Kurz, *Substance*, pp. 193–194.

77 Tomich, *Through the Prism of Slavery*, p. 7; T. Brass, *Towards a Comparative Political Economy of Unfree Labour: Case Studies and Debates*, London 1999, p. 12.

78 Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 465.

79 One of the first to realize its importance was C. B. Macpherson through his investigations of seventeenth-century liberalism and the “possessive individualism” that was at its origin. C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*, Oxford 1962.

80 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, pp. 274n, see also 271.

of a great epochal change; and second, that self-ownership is not only an objective category, but also implies changes in the form of subjectivity, namely a self-objectification of human beings themselves (that is why Marx says “in the eyes of the worker himself”⁸¹). This last aspect is also highlighted by Marx regarding the difference between the wage labourer and the slave:

*In the slave relation, he [the slave] belongs to the individual, particular owner, and is his labouring machine. As a totality of force-expenditure, as labour capacity, he is a thing [Sache] belonging to another, and hence does not relate as subject to his particular expenditure of force, nor to the act of living labour. [...] In the slave relation the worker is nothing but a living labour-machine [...]. The totality of the free worker's labour capacity appears to him as his property, as one of his moments, over which he, as subject, exercises domination, and which he maintains by expending it.*⁸²

This means that whenever Marx places “propertylessness” as a precondition for the wage labourer,⁸³ this is not exactly true, since capital is only possible to the extent that the wage labourer is “free proprietor of his own labour-capacity”.⁸⁴ In fact, truly propertyless is only the slave,⁸⁵ and that is exactly why capitalism could never be born out of a slave society. Now, like most of the categories reflected here, self-ownership is a specifically modern category,⁸⁶ born during the process of constitution of capitalism, after which it started to function as an “a priori concept”⁸⁷ and a presupposition of capital.

It is not by chance that the first formulations of this principle, which place the individual as a private owner of his body, date from this period (Grotius, Hobbes, Overton, Locke, etc.), starting from a metaphysical split in the self-owner, an internal division between a part that is proprietary (subject) and a part that is property (body) vis-à-vis another self-owner. In the new sphere of circulation, this was quickly associated with the modern metaphysics of contractual freedom between subjects and a whole ideology based upon the equality and consensus of commodities exchange. It was not, therefore,

81 Other points where Marx emphasizes this particular aspect of subjectivity in self-ownership and the sale of labour are K. Marx, Chapter Six. Results of the Direct Production Process, in: Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Vol. 34: Marx, 1861–64, London 2010, p. 359; Marx, From the Preparatory Materials, pp. 504–505.

82 Marx, Grundrisse, pp. 464–465.

83 Ibid., pp. 489, 507, 515, 607, 674, 736, 769.

84 Marx, Capital, Vol. 1, p. 271.

85 Even Orlando Patterson, who, as is known, denied the slave's foundation in the property relation, says: “the slave was a slave not because he was the *object* of property, but because he could not be the *subject* of property”. Patterson, Slavery and Social Death, p. 28.

86 The few and valuable existing investigations on the theme assume an intellectual history perspective and only in passing refer to real socio-historical processes, but generally all point to the same conclusions of the historian Janet Coleman, who says that “can find no concept of self-ownership or a notion of having a property in one's own person, either in classical Greek, Roman or in medieval discussions”. J. Coleman, Pre-Modern Property and Self-Ownership Before and After Locke Or, When did Common Decency Become a Private rather than a Public Virtue?, in: European Journal of Political Theory 4 (2005) 2, pp. 125–145, at 134. See also B. Tierney, Dominion of Self and Natural Rights Before Locke and After, in: V. Mäkinen/P. Korkman (eds.), Transformations in Medieval and Early-Modern Rights Discourse, Dordrecht 2006, pp. 173–203.

87 Coleman, Pre-Modern Property, p. 125.

difficult to derive an ideological equivalence between self-ownership and supposed freedom, autonomy, and self-determination of the subject. In the late eighteenth century, Denis Diderot, writing about Africans and slavery, was already claiming that “freedom is property of oneself”.⁸⁸

Supposedly self-ownership applies to all subjects, to all physical persons, but, in reality, already in the historical process of constitution it proved to be a male, “white”, and Western principle. First, at the same time that capitalism constituted itself worldwide, women were excluded from self-ownership⁸⁹ and made inferior subjects and responsible for activities incompatible with the production of value but still necessary as presuppositions of social reproduction, without which capitalism could not have developed at all. Second, this helps to understand the different course and articulation for centuries between Europe, on the one hand, and Africa and the New World, on the other. In sixteenth-century Europe, an a priori principle began to be established that European men were self-owners and that this was their condition of freedom. This a priori made it possible that even when they were forced to migrate to the New World (as indentured servants, convicts, etc.) in no case did they arrive there as slaves. And, conversely, it was this fetishist presupposition, born from the sphere of circulation and which associates freedom with self-ownership, which led to the inferiorization of non-Europeans in general⁹⁰ and allowed for centuries the reduction of Africans to mere bodies, “a brute biological force that lacks self-governing will and is thus in need of socialising violence to make it useful to civil society”.⁹¹ It is no coincidence that nineteenth-century feminism and abolitionism have both based their claims on the demand for a “true” universality of self-ownership and their recognition as full legal persons.⁹²

What self-ownership also shows is that the common analogy between slave and wage labourer, based on the fact that both are reduced to mere carriers of energy, is not entirely adequate. If “[t]he totality of the free worker’s labour capacity appears to him as his property, [...] over which he, as subject, exercises domination”,⁹³ then the right analogy is with the modern version of the *slave-master relation as a whole*. This is insightfully suggested by Baudrillard: “The individual who ‘controls’ his labour is [...] simply the slave who has become *his own master*, since the master-slave couple is interiorized in the same individual without ceasing to function as an alienated structure”.⁹⁴ In the historical

88 “La liberté est la propriété de soi”. D. Diderot/J. R. d’Alembert, *Encyclopédie méthodique, ou par ordre de matières*, Vol. 31, Paris 1788, p. 419.

89 See C. Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, Cambridge 1988.

90 This approach makes it possible to substantiate in a different way and reinforce Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery*, pp. 55–56, 276–280; D. Eltis, *Europeans and the Rise and Fall of African Slavery in the Americas: An Interpretation*, in: *The American Historical Review* 98 (1993) 5, pp. 1399–1423, at 1414–1415.

91 H. White, *How is capitalism racial?* Fanon, critical theory and the fetish of antiblackness, in: *Social Dynamics. A Journal of African Studies* 46 (2020) 20, pp. 22–35, at 24.

92 See A. D. Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation*, New York 2007.

93 Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 465.

94 Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, p. 104.

process of constitution of capitalism, the wage labourer and the slave were symmetrical ideological figures. The wage labourer is the *modern monetary subject*, the divided male self-owner, who as an owner is a master and as a body is a slave, and who sells “freely” his labour power in the sphere of circulation. The black slave, oppositely, as a propertyless individual and in principle extremely conditioned in his access to money and circulation, is the *anti-subject par excellence*, reduced to a mere living labour machine.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the capitalist mode of production already “stands on its own feet” in different regions of Western Europe, and with it the world social reproduction was starting to turn inside out. From that moment on, we cannot speak more of a real sphere of circulation because now it has taken over production and revolutionized it according to the new logic of capital as a presupposition and result of all social (re)production. It is also for this reason that whenever Marx refers to “capital circulation” in the context of fully formed capitalism, the notion of circulation always seems to fall short of the concept of the process that is really at stake because now it is “a spiral, an expanding curve, not a simple circle” but “a self-expanding circle”,⁹⁵ with “a moving magnitude, being expanded by production itself. Accordingly, it already appears as a moment of production itself”.⁹⁶ “Its immediate being is therefore pure semblance. *It is the phenomenon of a process taking place behind it.*”⁹⁷ Behind the circulation is the expanded reproduction of “total social capital”, based in the introduction of more and more machinery in the production process and increasingly driven by capital’s essential contradiction: “Capital itself is the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth”.⁹⁸ What we are used to calling circulation, as a synonym for the market, refers us only to the mere necessary appearance of the “metamorphoses of capital” at the level of the whole social reproduction. Highlighting the historical tendency of this social whole, based on the nexus abstract wealth/abstract labour, Marx clearly shows the insufficiencies of the perspectives that still today conceptualize capitalism as a mere market economy, showing themselves ideologically attached to the long-disappeared historical period where circulation had its independence.

But it was precisely from this now pseudo-independent sphere that the modern concept of freedom was born. Through it, self-ownership was assumed as the very basis of personal rights and autonomy and revealed itself a fundamental part of the struggles for recognition in both the metropolises and the colonies. Male and white self-owners started to exchange more or less “freely” their body energy for money, as wage labourers of the industrial world, and women, slaves, and non-whites in general fought fiercely for the right to be able to do so on equal terms. But self-ownership is a presupposition for entering into the “free” market of universal competition as a subject, not a guarantee for

95 Marx, *Grundrisse*, pp. 266, 746.

96 *Ibid.*, p. 407.

97 *Ibid.*, p. 255.

98 *Ibid.*, p. 706.

survival once inside it. If the self-owner proves to be insolvent, he/she is left in a new “condition of liminality” that the “moving contradiction” of capital in the twenty-first century will continue to intensify: superfluity.