

THE ‘MASSINESS’ OF CAPITAL

Humphrey McQueen

When I was a graduate, everyone said they were Marxist, but hardly anyone had read any Marx ... In a way, the stronger the cultural consensus about a figure, the less likely anyone will inquire. The great wheels of civilisation turn around terms that mean nothing, that have no core.

Marilynne Robinson, *Spectator*, 26 May 2012.

Because developing the tactics and strategy to promote the interests of the exploited, even for resistance, is chancier if we lack clarity on the intricacies of our enemy, the crisis in accumulation this time has cornered many of us into reposing the question ‘what is capital?’. One path proceeds through the couplings of constant/variable, fixed/fluid, individual/social and competitive/monopolising. Penetrating those complexities lays a foundation for distinguishing ‘fictitious’ from ‘finance’ and ‘financial’ (McQueen, 2009, 2011a). This paper builds on those investigations to consider how the expansion of capital depends on the engagement of objects/things with processes through historically specific relations.

The analysis begins from Marx’s acceptance that a dimension of thinghood inhabits capital, before introducing four instances which do not meet the everyday sense of *thing*: human capacities, personal services, ephemeral commodities and money. The next segment approaches capital at the intersection of value-forms and social relations. Metamorphosis is then offered as a corrective to the sub-dialectical reasoning of casting thing against process. Although the commentary rarely strays beyond exegesis, such theoretical practice can rise above coquetting with concepts if our eye is on making sense of the latest blockage in accumulation. The origins and prognosis of the catastrophe are outside the province of this paper, though elements are traversed elsewhere (McQueen, 2010).

Our focus on these tasks is sharpened by an engagement with David Harvey's lifetime of investigation into contemporary capitalism. Across forty years, he has guided Left activists through Marx's critique of political economy. As part of a broader critique of his *oeuvre*, this essay circles his claims that capital is not a thing but rather a process. Interrogating this dichotomy becomes politically valuable if it cautions against either/or thinking since critiquing the trajectories of capital calls for a method in which 'contradiction is both realised and resolved' (Marx, 1976: 198).

'Down with the Object!' (Marx & Engels, 1956: 32)

In a habitual if common enough misstep¹, Harvey writes that '[c]apital, Marx insists, should be defined as a process rather than as a thing' (Harvey, 1982: 20). One exception reports that 'in Marx's definition, capital is constituted as *both* the process of circulation of value (a flow) and the stock of assets ('things' like commodities, money, production apparatus) implicated in those flows'. Within a dozen pages, however, this summation is displaced by the regular claim that, for Marx, '[c]apital is directly conceptualised, therefore, as a *process* or as a *relation* rather than as a "thing"' (Harvey, 1996: 49-50, 62-63).

Harvey emphasises process and circulation rather than the social relations of production, which is a more usual definition of capital among Marxists, as he once put it:

1 Other examples include: 'Capital is a process and not a thing' (1990: 343); 'Capital is not a thing but a process' (2010a: 40); 'Capital is not a thing, but rather a process' (2010b: 12); 'Capital, Marx insists, is a process of circulation and not a thing' (2010c: [2]; cf. 1982: 205). Harvey is in good company among Marxists in excising 'thing-hood' from capital. Simon Clarke quotes a few words from the *Grundrisse* to disparage those who see capital '*as a thing, not as a relation*' (Clarke 1982: 78). This italicised snatch misrepresents the point that Marx is arguing against Adam Smith's ahistorical extraction of tools from social labour. In Smith's opinion, the human hand is capital. Marx counters: 'The catch is that if all capital is objectified labour which serves as means for new production, it is not the case that all objectified labour which serves as means for new production is capital'. Only after this statement do we find the sentence from which Clarke has drawn his assertion: '*Capital is conceived as a thing, not as a relation*' (Marx, 1973: 258). By omitting the context about Smith, and the first three words of Marx's sentence, Clarke portrays Marx as commenting on the actualities of capital rather than on his predecessor's mistake.

But capital is the social power of money used to make more money, most typically through a form of circulation in which money is used to buy commodities (labour power and means of production) which, when combined within a particular labour process, produce a fresh commodity to be sold at a profit (Harvey, 1985: 25).

To view capital as 'the social power of money ... through a form of circulation' is superior to focusing on 'a process of circulation' (Harvey, 2010c). Had Harvey stuck to this version there would be less need to unstitch his account. Strikingly though, he does not here name surplus-value as the source of profit – an oversight connected to his by-passing of the valorisation process in favour of the labour process as conjoint parts of the production process (McQueen, 2012b). Marx pursues the substance of capital through the twofold character of that process so that, far from saying that capital is 'a process of circulation', he shows why the latter:

is one phase in the reproduction process as a whole. But in the process of circulation, no value is produced, and thus no surplus-value. The same value simply undergoes changes of form. Nothing at all happens except the metamorphosis of commodities, which by its very nature has nothing to do with the creation or alteration of value (Marx, 1981: 392).

Value cannot be generated and hence capital cannot grow inside a 'process of circulation'. Accumulation requires both a labour process and a valorisation process (Marx, 1976: 283-306).

Stress on capital as a process, whether of circulation or production, pales beside Marx's elaboration of its circuits in volume two where he specifies how money, production and commodities take part in each other's expansion. For instance, capital steps forth as money, usually credit, to buy several things, namely, raw materials, semi-finished goods and ancillaries, but crucially, labour-power. The first pair of those production-commodities remain things during their remaking to emerge as material constituents in the new things to be exchanged. Too often, Marxists never get to relax the simplifying assumption in the formula of Money-Commodities-More Money (M-C-M+) from volume one to penetrate volume two for its trio of circuits (*e.g.* M-C ... P ... C+-M+) with all the massiness of exploitation and labour discipline that makes expansion possible (McQueen, 2011b). In elaborating those circuits,

Marx sees that capital ‘is a movement, a circulatory process through different stages, which itself in turn includes three different forms of the circulatory process. Hence it can only be grasped as a movement, and not as a static thing’ (Marx, 1978: 185)². The phrase ‘static thing’ reminds us that it is things that are in motion so that capital can expand. Their movement does not require their de-materialisation. In writing that ‘[c]apital is not a thing but exists only in motion’ (Harvey, 2010a: 40), Harvey sidelines the things that are moving through the production process where they shift from one use-value to another as bearers of additional exchange-value.

Before specifying further inadequacies in any splitting of thing from process, it needs to be said that Harvey is right to challenge the bookkeepers’ identification of capital with ‘a stock of productive assets’ to depreciate (Harvey, 1996: 49). He is also right to acknowledge process and circulation since capital cannot be a thing in the sense of being an inert lump, whether of gold or steel, worked up as coins or girders. Notwithstanding these truths, the defects flow from severing processes from things, the more so if process is chained to circulation. The phrase ‘process of circulation’ remains empty until we know what is in circulation: money, commodities or – dare one say it – things?

Harvey extends his mantra to ‘fixed capital’, which is that segment (mostly plant and machinery) of the means of production, almost none of which circulates in commodities. Nonetheless, Harvey writes that ‘[f]ixed capital is not a thing but a process of circulation of capitals through the use of material objects, such as machines’ (Harvey, 1982: 205). To picture fixed capital in circulation is a category error. At least the oxymoron accepts that capital expands through ‘material objects’. The bracketed insertions below bring the sentence more into line with Marx’s treatment:

Fixed capital is not [just] a [single] thing but [one element in] a process of circulation of [money and fluid] capitals [for their expansion] through [the application of labour and] the use of other material objects, such as machines.

2 The Moscow edition reads ‘thing at rest’ (Marx, 1957: 105); the German ‘*ruhendes Ding*’ is closer to ‘dormant thing’, suggesting that capital is alive but asleep (Marx, 1966b: 109).

This rewrite remains inadequate since it omits the class relations that allow exploitation and produce surplus-value.

No amount of wordplay will decide the nature of capital. To reach an answer, we must venture into its behaviour. Only by considering its reproduction can we clarify the conjunctions and disjunctions between things, processes and relations across the more than 200 years since value became self-valorising and capital entered upon its own mode of production³. Thereafter, capital could be itself only when in the business of expanding. This essential is highlighted whenever the circuits for growth are thrown into reverse so that values previously materialised as means for further expansion start to shrink:

Machinery which is not used is not capital. Labour which is not exploited is equivalent to lost production. Raw material which lies unused is no capital. Buildings (also newly built machinery) which are either unused or remain unfinished, commodities which rot in warehouses – all this is destruction of capital' (Marx, 1968: 495; cf. 1976: 425)⁴.

In these cases, commodities 'not only lose their use-value, but do not alter the *magnitude of their value*' (Marx, 1956: 295). They cease to be capital. Capital is lost because the non-use of the things in which it is embedded has depleted their use-values and thereby shrunk their possible contribution to the next round of growth in exchange-values. Marx's portrayal of these negations suggests that he was not keen to strip capital of palpable forms.

Marx notes that, although J.S. Mill recognises that capital is a 'production relation', he 'confuses capital with the material elements of which it is constituted' (Marx, 1971: 236). In making such criticisms,

3 Marx calls capital 'self-valorising value', a formula helpful only to those who already know what he means. He puts it better as 'value which maintains itself' and still better as 'value which produces surplus-value' (Marx, 1978: 185; 1971: 131, and 475). Even that third rendition requires knowing what he means by value. Talk of capital as self-expanding value sounds like Mr. Toad's puffing himself up. Marx ridicules writers who regard capital 'as a mere number that increases itself, just as Malthus saw people in his geometrical progression' (Marx, 1981: 520). To portray capital as self-expanding implies that its drivers are immanent instead of the outcome of conflicting practices, not all of them internal.

4 Because this essay draws on the less frequently consulted *Theories of Surplus-Value* readers are reminded of Oakley (1985).

Marx never forgets ‘how important is the analysis of *use-value for the determination of economic phenomena*’ (Marx, 1968: 489) and so does not suppose that a ‘production relation’ can be severed from its physical forms. Rather, capital must not be reduced to those constituents even though it usually ‘consists of commodities or, in so far as it consists of money, it must be reconverted into commodities of one kind or another, in order to be able to function as capital’ (Marx, 1968: 533). Almost all of those commodities are also things, from bibles and brandy to rifled cannon. Elsewhere, Marx illustrates why even a gift of nature has to be made flesh by pointing out that wind can contribute to production only if capitalists possess things, namely, windmills to harness that ancillary (Marx, 1981: 784). It seems quixotic to suppose that capital can be comprehended by tilting at things.

Capital is much more than the use-values in which it is usually embodied since its expansion swivels on surplus-value and exchange-values to yield any profit. Despite the distinctions that Marx draws between value-forms, he recognises that use-values remain the ‘material substratum of exchange-value, are the bearers of exchange-value’ (Marx, 1976: 293; *cf.* 1981: 375). Although use-values are the ‘material shell’ of exchange-values, the latter ‘do not contain an atom of use-value’ because exchange-value ‘can have no more natural content than has, for example, the rate of exchange’ and, like ‘weight’, is a quality which no chemist or physicist can extract (Marx, 1976: 167n., 128, 176, 148-9). Processes alter the significance of things without liquidating their presence since ‘[v]alue exists only in use-values, in things, if we leave aside its purely symbolic representation in tokens’ (Marx, 1976: 310). When writing about the average rate of profit as ‘ossified’, Marx inspects capital simultaneously as relationship and thing:

In this quite alienated form ... capital more and more acquires a material form, is transformed more and more from a relationship into a thing, but a thing which embodies, which has absorbed, the social relationship, a thing which has acquired a fictitious life and independent existence in relation to itself, a natural-supernatural entity (Marx, 1971: 483).

In volume three, Marx reminds us of how capital is – and is not – married to things:

But capital is not a thing, it is a definite social relation of production pertaining to a definite historical social formation, which simply takes the form of a thing and gives this thing a specific social character.... It is the means of production monopolised by a particular section of society ... and ... personified in capital through this antithesis (Marx, 1981: 953).

The distinction that Marx draws here counterpoises 'thing' to 'process' yet ties them together within relations of production, neither dissolving their physical forms, nor disconnecting them from the processes to which they contribute.

Hard Cases

Human capacities, human services, ephemera and money are expressions of capital which are beyond our everyday usage of *thing* but nonetheless retain a physical dimension. Sketches of these four cases confirm the place that Marx reserves for objects throughout the circuits of capital.

Living tools

The character of one of the things employed in processes for the expansion of value amazes when the exchange of labour-power for wages alienates human capacities into a form of capital: 'What is in fact brought to market is not labour, but the labourer. What he sells to the capitalist is not his labour but the temporary use of himself as a working power' (Marx, 1971: 113). This sale of labour-power installs thingification: 'Man himself, viewed merely as the physical existence of labour-power, is a natural object, a thing, although a living, conscious thing, and labour is the physical manifestation [*dingliche Ausserung*] of that power' (Marx, 1976: 310) Throughout the production process, the wage-slave is the embodiment of labour-time while the capitalist personifies capital, whom Marx dramatises as Mr. Glass Capital or Mr. Moneybags. Members of neither class lose their human-ness when they encounter the other as things. Such duality is as typical of each value-form and every capital-form as it is of Marx's method.

Personal services

Related to the reification of human capacities is whether personal services can expand capital. Adam Smith rightly allots them according to whether or not they enlarge resources for accumulation, in short: do they

produce surplus value? That was not the situation with the services supplied to Smith at home by his valet. However, when he booked into an inn which provided him with servants, his relationship with those flunkies moved from personal service paid for out of his revenue to one of wage-slavery producing surplus-value for the inn-keeper (Marx, 1956: 154, 160-1, 168). Marx knew of other commodities that are animate:

Are there not at every moment of time in the market, alongside wheat and meat, etc., also prostitutes, lawyers, sermons, concerts, theatres, soldiers, politicians, etc.? These lads or wenches do not get the corn and other necessaries or pleasures for nothing. In return they give or pester us with their services, which as such services have a use-value and because of their production costs also an exchange-value. Reckoned as consumable articles, there is at every moment of time, alongside the consumable articles existing in the form of goods, a quantity of consumable articles in the form of services (Marx, 1956: 164, cf. 392).

Although these services/commodities have next-to-no shelf-life, they are not ethereal but are supplied and received through bodily organs expressive of their thinghood.

Ephemera

The grounds for dispelling doubts about whether personal services can contribute to expansion need not apply to ephemeral commodities. Domestic service might be drawn out over a lifetime whereas amusements are more often fleeting and hence do not exist ‘in a more or less durable, and therefore again saleable, use-value’ Marx, therefore, appreciates that exchange-value ‘depends on the degree to which the use-value is durable, that is, on how slowly consumption deprives it of the possibility of being a *commodity* or bearer of exchange-value’ (Marx, 1956: 294). Wants that arise from our fancy enlarge the question mark over whether exchange-value can ride on a use-value that is barely durable. Through a contrast of extremes, Marx proposes that it could: ‘Diamonds and song are both congealed labour and can – like all commodities – be converted into money and as money into capital’ (Marx, 1968: 137; cf. 1970: 28).

However, for as long as song bore the liability of needing to be ‘consumed while it is being performed’ (Marx, 1956: 168), an impresario could profit only from ticket sales for its recital. That circumstance led Marx to suppose that ‘capitalist production is hostile to certain branches

of spiritual production, for example, art and poetry' (Marx, 1956: 277). Nonetheless, he saw that the printing of books had already removed some of this impediment to accumulation:

A writer is a productive labourer not in so far as he produces ideas, but in so far as he enriches the publisher who publishes his works, or if he is a wage-labourer for a capitalist.... For example Milton, who wrote *Paradise Lost* for five pounds, was an *unproductive labourer*. On the other hand, the writer who turns out stuff for his publisher in factory style, is a *productive labourer* (Marx, 1956: 153-4; 389).

Marx's stricture against the bourgeois philistine shed its aptness as agents of capital found ways to commodify more of the arts, turning ineffectual angels into productive labourers – productive, that is, of surplus value. Technologies have allowed the incorporation of ever more performances into durable goods: screen acting helps television networks to package audiences for sale to marketers (Smythe, 1977); erotic services and divine guidance are bought through phone-sex and televangelism; Pavarotti's singing became a vendible commodity as CDs and DVDs (Klumpenhouwer, 2002). iTunes warded off the threat from Napster to the realisation of surplus-value so that 'spiritual production' is now available at the super-market checkout. Such inventions confirm that the expressions of capital are neither eternal, natural nor universal, but are historical.

The money-commodity

Marx adjusts his handling of the interweaving of process, thing and relationship to that most multi-faceted manifestation of capital – money. The key to his analysis is that money is itself a commodity, albeit one with unique properties. Within capitalism, money serves as a measure of value, a medium of circulation, a store of value and world money. In meeting these needs, money appears in a variety of physical guises, from precious metals to plastic tokens. Gold is among the most durable of commodities yet, even in its alloyed form as sovereigns, it was worn away by being exchanged. One of Marx's rollicking paradoxes illumines why the intimacy between gold and money persists after gold ceases to be the monetary standard:

But the gold coin gave rise first to metallic and then to paper substitutes only because it continued to function as a coin despite

the loss of metal it incurred. It circulated not because it was worn, but it was worn to a symbol because it continued to circulate. Only in so far as in the process of circulation gold currency becomes a mere token of its own value can mere tokens of value be substituted for it (Marx, 1970: 114).

These symbols retain their link back to gold because they too stand as universal equivalents of socially necessary labour-times, those measures of variable capital embodied in every commodity, including precious metals.

Once capital is the product of its own reproduction, money becomes the most mysterious of the system's operations, epitomising fetishism yet increasingly detached from the primary object of worship: gold. The capitalist system floats on credit, an intangible promise, one which underwrites fictitious capital. With the sprawl of credit, money seems to be independent of coins as well as of the commodities that it represents during an exchange of values:

The social existence that it [money] has thus appears as something beyond, as a thing, object or commodity outside and alongside the real elements of social wealth. Credit, being similarly a social form of wealth, displaces money and usurps its position. It is confidence in the social character of production that makes the money form of products appear as something merely evanescent and ideal, as a mere notion (Marx, 1981: 707-8).

This dream world, crowded by capital, commodities and money as phantoms, is shattered:

... as soon as credit is shaken ... all the real wealth is supposed to be actually and suddenly transformed into money, into gold and silver – a crazy demand, which, however, grows necessarily out of the system itself (Marx, 1981: 708).

The opening phase of a crisis precipitates a rush back to that 'barbarous relic' (Cochrane, 1980-81). Of late, this 'crazy demand' has been at work in the flight to gold in China and in chatter at the World Bank about reverting to a quasi-gold standard.

Worse is in store for conjurors of credit once gold proves not to be hard enough. Only within capitalism, does gold shed its lustre while commodities are losing value. As the depression deepens, its hoarders

flee towards ready money, as Marx had witnessed in 1858 during perhaps the first global crisis:

This particular phase of world market crises is known as monetary crisis. The *summum bonum*, the sole form of wealth for which people clamour at such times, is money, hard cash, and compared with it all other commodities – just because they are use-values – appear to be useless, mere baubles and toys ... mere ornament and gluttony (Marx, 1970: 146).

Similarly, in our era of excess capacity, the funds released by US and European central banks are being recycled into government bonds rather than outlaid on public works. This grand larceny cannot rescue the financial system since '[c]redit depends on the confidence that the exploitation of wage labour ... will continue in the traditional manner' (Marx, 1977: 170). That underpinning requires state apparatuses to enforce class power at workplaces and beyond.

Social Relations

Our quest to refine the interpretation of capital, which began from a juxtaposing of process against thing, now moves towards integrating those characteristics into a range of relationships. All manifestations of capital, like any account of it, remain abstract until located in the structured dynamics of value-forms, those 'social expressions' of the 'world of commodities' (Marx, 1976: 160). While capital-forms were still growing out of value-forms in the 1800s, they fertilised each other and the relations between them, each set gaining momentum from their cross-links without surrendering all of their distinctiveness. To uncover how value-forms operate together involves specifying the kind of 'social' in each since not all these relations are between human beings. Although labour is common to all forms of capital and of value, each has its specific social dimension: *use-values* gain a social element if their utility is sought by someone other than their makers or current owners; *value* is a relation through the socially necessary labour-time required to achieve the average rate of profit; *exchange-value* 'is a relation between persons hidden by a material veil' since it is expressed between several kinds of commodities (Marx, 1970: 34).

Sorting through these value-forms is bedevilled by the switches that Marx makes in his terminology (Young, 1976). He confesses that he had

been ‘wrong’ to open *Capital* in the ‘customary manner’ by calling the commodity ‘both a use-value and an exchange-value’, a version he corrects⁵ by interpolating ‘value’ between use-value and exchange-value: ‘A commodity is a use-value ... and a value’. It appears as the twofold thing it really is as soon as its value possesses its own particular form of manifestation ... [in] exchange-value’ (Marx, 1976: 152). This twofold nature of a commodity is founded on its utility and exchange:

Commodities come into the world in the form of use-values, or material goods, such as iron, linen, corn, etc. This is their plain, homely, natural form. However, they are only commodities because they have a dual nature, because they are at the same time objects of utility and bearers of value. Therefore they only appear as commodities, or have the form of commodities, in so far as they possess a double form, i.e. natural form and value form (Marx, 1976: 138).

The social dimension of exchange-values exists while being compared with other goods or services: ‘the commodity never has this form [exchange-value] when looked at in isolation, but only when it is a value-relation or an exchange relation with a second commodity of a different kind’ (Marx, 1976: 152). That comparison can explode to encompass the galaxy of commodities because one of the money-forms serves as a universal equivalent for comparing their socially-necessary labour-times:

Commodities, which exist as use-values, must first of all assume a form in which they *appear* to one another nominally as exchange-values, as definite quantities of materialised *universal* labour-time. The first necessary move in this process is, as we have seen, that the commodities set apart a specific commodity, say, *gold*, which becomes the direct reification of universal labour-time or the universal equivalent (Marx, 1970: 64-5).

Some of the relations between money and labour-time have been sketched above but it is well to

5 Not everyone is convinced that Marx could extricate himself from his initial ‘wrong’ formulation by claiming that ‘our manner of speaking does no harm; it serves, rather, as an abbreviation’ (Marx, 1976: 152). Disputes over value-forms are associated with I.I. Rubin in 1928, the Japanese school around Uno Kozo from the 1950s and the defence of intrinsic-value by Andrew Kliman against neo-Ricardian allegations of its redundancy.

remember that commodities possess an objective character as values only in so far as they are all expressions of an identical social substance, human labour, that their objective character as values is therefore purely social. From this it follows self-evidently that it can only appear in the social relation between commodity and commodity (Marx, 1976: 138-9).

In recognising that accumulation pivots on such comparisons, Marx need not expel or decompose the materiality of capital as an accumulation of values but rather must relocate its 'natural form' within social labour:

... the exchange-value of *things* is a mere expression, a specific social form, of the productive activity of men, something entirely different from things and their use as things.... Thus commodities, things in general, have value only because they *represent* human labour, not insofar as they are things in themselves, but insofar as they are incarnations of social labour (Marx, 1971: 181).

Thus, a commodity is a peculiar kind of thing. A stick lying on the forest floor becomes one only after it has been collected for barter or sale. That incorporation of value does not destroy its stick-ness. The obverse remains true as Marx indicates when he analyses Ricardo's labour theory of value to accuse one of its critics of accepting the fetishistic appearance of things as if that aspect could exhaust their social reality and thereby boil their value down to a physical property open to chemical experiment:

Thus he, the wisecrack, transforms value into something absolute, 'a property of things', instead of seeing in it only something relative, the relation of things to social labour ... in which things are defined not as independent entities, but as mere expressions of social production (Marx, 1971: 130).

That social relations are one element in the definition of capital is a spur to refining both *social* and *relation*.

Although relations are of the essence, not all are valid. Indeed, the granting of significance to relations is risible when economists connect 'capital, land and labour', which, as Marx observes, have as little relation to each other as 'lawyer's fees, beetroots and music' (Marx, 1981: 953). He sunders the trinity of 'profit, rent and wages' because those sources of income are not fungible:

First, we have the use-value *land*, which has no value, and the exchange value *rent*: here, then, a social relation, conceived as a thing, is placed in a relationship of proportion with nature; i.e. two incommensurable magnitudes are supposed to have a proportionate ratio (Marx, 1981: 956).

Marx is again able to redeem value and things from abstraction by clarifying relationships.

Are Monads Relational?

David Harvey's alertness to relations entices him into the quasi-dialectical Idealism of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716), a thinker who gets little attention from Marxists (McQueen, 2012c). The geographer in Harvey remains fascinated by Leibniz's view that space is not a thing, but rather is some kind of relation. Before Harvey was any sort of Marxist, he had 'identified a tripartite division in the way space could be understood' (Harvey, 2006: 121) which he summarised in his first Marxist work, *Social Justice and the City*, by concluding that:

... [t]here is another sense in which space can be viewed as relative and I choose to call this relational space – space regarded in the manner of Leibniz, as being contained in objects in the sense that an object can be said to exist only insofar as it contains and represents within itself relationships to other objects (Harvey, 1973: 13).

This description of the properties of an object owes little to Leibniz for whom the belief in space between or within objects was an insult to the plenitude of God's Perfection, a conviction which led him to challenge Newtonian gravitation as action at a distance. Leibniz came to believe that the world is made up of monads, a term he takes from '*Monas ... a Greek word which signifies unity, or that which is one ... having no parts*' (Leibniz, 1934: 21). Harvey's reading of Leibniz transfers certain characteristics of monads as simple substances to those composite ones. This blurring allows Harvey to suppose that each monad 'internalises everything there is' which is contrary to Leibniz's faith that God internalises the universe inside each of them at its creation. They are self-contained, indivisible and impenetrable which makes it impossible for

them to internalise anything: 'Monads have no windows.... Thus neither substance nor accident can enter a monad from without' (Leibniz, 1934: 7). Harvey substitutes an activity – 'internalising' – for Leibniz's more passive 'mirroring', a capacity which confines the relations that a monad can have with the outside to perceptions; its internal relations are similarly limited to consciousness, which is inevitable given that the monad is immaterial, mind, soul.

When Harvey theorises space, he invokes Descartes, Einstein and Leibniz to conjure connections with Marx's three forms of value:

Everything that pertains to use value lies in the province of [Cartesian] absolute space and time.... Everything that pertains to exchange value lies in [Einstein's] relative space-time because exchange entails movements.... Value is, however, a relational concept. Its referent is, therefore, [Leibniz's] relational space-time (Harvey, 2006: 141).

These associations are strained since not everything about each value-form fits with the proffered variants of spatio-temporality: use-value is more than extension when it is the bearer of exchange-value; the movements entailed in exchange-value depend on a prior comparison of values, leaving value no more 'relational' than exchange-value.

Harvey extends his representation of the monad as being open to outside relations to argue that understanding 'a category like "money"' is impossible 'without examining the way it internalises all sorts of other meanings such as commodity, labor, gender, status, memory, capital, and the state' (Harvey, 2006: 271). Leaving aside that that this concern is epistemological, not with an ontology of social relations, it remains the case that if money were a Leibnizian monad, those other 'meanings' would have been supplied by God and could not be the outcome of the 'massiness' of human action over the past 250 years, as an historical materialist must maintain. Harvey also advances an account of money which simultaneously runs counter to monads as 'unified', 'simple substances' and abandons Marx's structured dynamics:

Money ...h as multiple uses and it is quite possible for each use to define a different spatio-temporality. Yet money is, in the end, just money so the term operates as a kind of umbrella to indicate a wide range of 'compossible' or 'congruent' uses of a consistent and coherent entity endowed with certain qualities. The fact that some of these uses may be contradictory *vis-à-vis*

other uses in no way detracts from the overarching coherence of the money concept (Harvey, 1996: 260).

Flattening money into ‘just money’ jettisons the insights that Marx attained about how its four functions can be performed only in each other’s company. Moreover, once money is reduced to a uniform entity, the forms of capital and value are also levelled to ‘just capital’ and ‘just values’. From the perspective of Flatland, Harvey can go on to argue that, because ‘[v]alue is, in short, a social relation ... it is impossible to measure except by way of its effects’ (Harvey, 2006: 142). If so, there is no role for money as the universal equivalent, the measure of value as a manifestation of labour-time⁶.

Leibniz’s concepts of relational space-time and the monad support Harvey’s de-materialising of capital. Although acknowledging Leibniz’s Idealism, Harvey convinces himself that he can ‘drop the theological’ for ‘a secularised version’ (Harvey, 1996: 252-4). Such hopes are not easily fulfilled as many have found with Kant or Hegel. After cracking the monad’s deist shell, its kernel remains god-structured, with Leibniz’s ‘Author of nature’ as pure action matching Harvey’s capital as process. His creation of the monad’s capacity for internalising relations allows him to welcome Leibniz’s treatment of space and time as dialectical whereas Leibniz accepts internal modifications but denies any effect from other monads, leaving little space for dialectics, either as method or in actuality. The monad’s lack of parts means that it is free of contradiction, qualitative changes and leaps; for dialectical materialists, that triad works for and against each other, both within and between all forms of value, money and capital.

6 Compare this stance with his pre-Marxist training ‘that human behaviour cannot be measured’ (Harvey, 1969: vi). A reluctance to count is not shared by Leibniz, for whom ‘[r]elative things have their quantity as well as absolutes; for instance, ratios or proportions in mathematics have their quantity, and are measured by logarithms, and yet they are relations. Thus although time and space consist in relations, they have their quantity none the less’ (Leibniz, 1934: 225). Michael A. Lebowitz ends his appreciative review of *The Limits to Capital* by pointing out that ‘the absence of mathematical proofs is a serious flaw’ (Lebowitz, 1984: 41).

Dialectical Reasoning

In penetrating the conundrum of capital as a clutch of relationships, processes, value-forms and things, we have been steeping ourselves in dialectical reasoning – albeit like Moliere's bourgeois gentleman, M. Jourdain, who had spoken prose all his life without announcing it. How often is the appearance of the word 'dialectical' in a text academic abracadabra, a sign that the topic is too complicated for the author to unravel? Harvey's Introduction to his recent *A Companion to Marx's 'Capital'* notes the difficulty of reasoning dialectically, a burden he lightens by contracting dialectics to motion: 'Dialectics has to, in short, be able to understand and represent process, change and transformation' (Harvey, 2010b: 11). This stress on the dialectic as movement confirms the one-dimensional mentality evident in the casting of thing against process. Materialist dialecticians go beyond 'process, change and transformation' to ponder the manner in which they operate: is the movement 'cyclical' or 'spiral' (Marx, 1976: 727, 780; 1968: 524); since most change is quantitative, not qualitative, need motion always be dialectical, or can it be mechanical within a dialectical totality? In addition, quantitative-to-qualitative transformations involve *rates* of change, not just its presence, as is the case for turnover-times (Marx, 1978: 233-424).

Furthermore, Marx never lauds the dynamics within capitalism to the extent of supposing that its expansion could be free from blockages, *i.e.* the crises that arise out of the spatial and temporal gaps between production and consumption that are peculiar to the capitalist mode. On the contrary, he brings the reciprocities between the active and the inert to the fore in tracking the tides of money as the measure of labour-time:

So that money as coin may flow continuously, coin must continuously congeal into money. The continual movement of coin implies its perpetual stagnation in larger or smaller amounts in reserve funds of coin which arise everywhere within the framework of circulation and which are at the same time a condition of circulation (Marx, 1970: 126).

Businesses maintain latent capital as money to minimise interruptions in their production processes. Some capital as money is always suspended, awaiting the moment to be cast again into the circuits for accumulation. Similarly, Marx traces the intimacies between motion and inertia into the

critical component for expansion – ‘labour’ – as it ‘constantly undergoes a transformation, from the form of unrest [*Unruhe*] into that of being [*Sein*], from the form of motion [*Bewegung*] into that of objectivity [*Gegenstandlichkeit*]’, recognising ‘that this inactivity is the prerequisite of its movement’ (Marx, 1976: 296; 1970: 126n). During the production process, variable-capital is alternatively in states of ‘unrest’ and ‘being’, seesawing from value-adding activity to a ‘static thing’. Although values are added only during ‘unrest’, the at-rest stage is part of the social metabolism making expansion possible.

Metamorphosis

Searching for a metaphor to accommodate multiple forms and their interplays, Marx favoured Ovid’s ‘metamorphosis’ to picture how capital expands while transforming one kind of thing into another. Wonder of wonders, capital:

... which, in one of its aspects, can be called *value in process* – and since value only exists independently in money, it can accordingly be called *money in process*, as it goes through a series of processes in which it preserves itself, departs from itself, and returns to itself increased in volume (Marx, 1971: 137).

Throughout this metempsychosis, capital cannot be identified with any *single* thing since it must be embodied in several different kinds of things, and synchronously so if it is to be exchanged via money. Even at its most mundane as a raw material, commodity-capital becomes two kinds of thing at each instant during the production process where it is not what it had been on entering but is still not the object it will be on the market after alloys are moulded into car-parts or seeds germinate to yield a sorghum crop:

... in the labour process ... materials of labour, instruments of labour and labour ... begin to ferment, act on one another, combine with one another, undergo a chemical process and form the commodity like a crystal as a result of this process (Marx, 1971: 490).

As production-commodities acquire new uses they reappear in different commodities with a larger aggregation of exchange-values. For example, labourers make cement, admixtures and sand into concrete slabs, a new

use-value and the bearers of both more exchange-value and office towers.

The duality in the commodity as thing and as social relation, and as both use- and exchange-values, is revealed in the need that value has to be some kind of thing without caring which: 'however important it may be to value that it should have some use-value to exist in, it is still a matter of complete indifference what particular object serves this purpose' (Marx, 1976: 310-11). Steel might be turned into a chair or a bridge. The expansion of capital requires that the exchange-value of the steel in each new commodity be realised at the average rate of profit, or better. Furniture is as handy at that as is a freeway.

This shape-changing is at its most spectacular for the universal equivalent of commodities – money: 'All commodities can be converted into money and as money into capital, because in the form of *money* their use-value and their particular natural form become extinct' (Marx, 1968: 137). Money can nowadays flutter free as a keystroke while fluctuations in exchange-rates remain tethered to the 'world of commodities'. Value transcends the attributes specific to thingness without vaporising 'natural forms' while it awaits the call to metamorphose yet again through the three circuits of capital – *ad infinitum* prays every capitalist.

Contra-concluding

One objection to keeping 'thing' in our definition of capital will come from those whose fondness for *Capital* is confined to a couple of pages under the rubric 'The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret'. The fetishisation of this sub-heading allows cultural theorists and Post-ists to squib Marx's critique of political economy with the 'fatiguing climb of its steep paths' (e.g. Milner, 2011: 1-2). In the 1960s, their ilk distilled estrangement from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* to soar above the massiness of alienation as the sale of labour-power (cf. Walton and Gamble, 1972). Desirous of floating free from the 'world of commodities', shame-faced materialists find 'nothing more damnable, more profane, more massy than an object', which sullies their speculative philosophising (Marx and Engels, 1956: 32).

By contrast, the validity of keeping things in sight when accounting for any disruption in the accumulation of capital proves ineluctable when its physical forms are commanded to vanish. The survival of capital depends

of its expansion which is impossible without an increase in the means of production, without new machines, more raw materials, more semi-finished goods, more ancillaries – more of every kind of thing save one. That exception is living labour if and when it is displaced by dead labour, the machine-thing. Such transmogrification is central to crisis theory because the compositions of social capital effect the tendential law of the rate of profit to fall. Every crisis in the capitalist mode manifests itself in an over-production of things as the bearers of surplus value that cannot be realised as profit for further expansion.

Were capital no more than an agglomeration of things, however, there would never have been a capitalist mode of production. Within capitalism, there are no things without processes, no processes without things, and neither outside relationships. Investigating all three – and more – is required to comprehend capital as the ‘self-expansion of values’. The job facing materialist dialecticians is to integrate our understanding of every form of value and of capital in order to locate the fulcra upon which those with naught to sell except labour-power can tip class power in their favour.

Humphrey McQueen is an independent researcher and writer.

loge27@alphalink.com.au

References

Clarke, S. (1982), *Marx, Marginalism and Modern Sociology, From Adam Smith to Max Weber*, London: Macmillan.

Cochrane, P. (1980-81), Gold: The Durability of a Barbarous Relic, *Science & Society*, 44(4): 385-400.

Harvey, D. (1969), *Explanation in Geography*, London: Edward Arnold.

Harvey, D. (1973), *Social Justice and the City*, London: Edward Arnold.

Harvey, D. (1982), *The Limits to Capital*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Harvey, D. (1985), Money, Time, Space and the City, *Consciousness and the Urban Experience, studies in the history and theory of capitalist urbanisation*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Harvey, D. (1990), *The Condition of Post-Modernity*, Cambridge: Blackwell.

Harvey, D. (1996), *Justice, Nature, and the geography of difference*, Cambridge: Blackwell.

Harvey, D. (2006), *Spaces of global capitalism*, London: Verso.

Harvey, D. (2010a), *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism*, London: Profile.

- Harvey, D. (2010b), *A Companion to Marx's 'Capital'*, London: Verso.
- Harvey, D. (2010c), The Enigma of Capital and the Crisis This Time, *Reading Marx's Capital with David Harvey*, davidharvey.org/2010/08/the-enigma-of-capital-and-the-crisis-this-time.
- Klumpenhauer, H. (2002), Commodity-form, Disavowal, and Practices of Music Theory, R. B. Qureshi, ed, *Music and Marx, Ideas, Practice, Politics*, London: Routledge: 23-41.
- Lebowitz, M. A. (1986), Capital Reinterpreted, *Monthly Review*, 38(2), June 1986.
- Leibniz, G. W. (1934), *Philosophical Writings*, London: J.M. Dent.
- McQueen, H. (2003), What happened in Globalisation", *Journal of Australian Political Economy*, 51: 103-31.
- McQueen, H. (2009), Re-financing capital, *Surplus Value*, surplusvalue.org.au.
- McQueen, H. (2010), Chinese Crackers, *Surplus Value*, surplusvalue.org.au.
- McQueen, H. (2011a), Fictitious capital, *Surplus Value*, surplusvalue.org.au.
- McQueen, H. (2011b), Who's afraid of volume two?, *Surplus Value*, surplusvalue.org.au.
- McQueen, H. (2012a), Assemblage of the Initial Capital, *Surplus Value*, surplusvalue.org.au.
- McQueen, H. (2012b), Harvey and valorisation, *Surplus Value*, surplusvalue.org.au.
- McQueen, H. (2012c), Harvey's 'Leibnizian Conceit', *Surplus Value*, surplusvalue.org.au.
- Marx, K. (1956), *Theories of Surplus-Value*, Volume I, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House.
- Marx, K. (1958), *Capital I*, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House.
- Marx, K. (1966b), *Das Kapital*, zwiete band, Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt.
- Marx, K. (1968), *Theories of Surplus-Value*, Volume II, Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1970), *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1971), *Theories of Surplus-Value*, Volume III, Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1973), *Grundrisse*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Marx, K. (1976), *Capital I*, London: Penguin.
- Marx, K. (1977), *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Volume 8, London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Marx, K. (1978), *Capital II*, London: Penguin.
- Marx, K. (1981), *Capital III*, London: Penguin.
- Marx, K. and F. Engels (1956), *The Holy Family*, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House.
- Milner, A. (2011), Changing the Climate, *Arena Journal*, 35-36: 1-7.
- Oakley, A. (1985), *Marx's Critique of Political Economy, Intellectual Sources and Evolution*, Volume 2, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Smythe, D.W. (1977), Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism, *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 1(3): 1-27.

Young, G. (1976), A Note on Marx's Terminology, *Science & Society*, 40(1): 72-78.

Walton, P. and A. Gamble (1972), *From Alienation to Surplus Value*, London: Sheed and Ward.

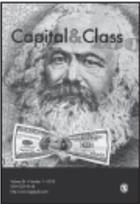
New to SAGE in 2010!

Capital & Class

Managing Editor: **Owen Worth**
University of Limerick, Republic of Ireland

Reviews Editor: **Adam David Morton**
Nottingham University, UK

Published in association with Conference of Socialist Economists



Since 1977 *Capital & Class* has been the main independent source for a Marxist critique of global capitalism. Pioneering key debates on value theory, domestic labour, and the state, it reaches out into the labour, trade union, anti-racist, feminist, environmentalist and other radical movements. It analyses the important political, economic and social developments of our time and applies a materialist framework unconstrained by divisions into economics, politics, sociology or history.

Subscribe today and become a member of the CSE!

Individual subscribers to *Capital & Class* become members of the Conference of Socialist Economists with the right to vote at the AGM, elect members to the executive committee and editorial board, and influence policy. Members are encouraged to set up CSE local groups and participate in and initiate discussions and debates about both theoretical understanding and practical action.

Free online sample copy available!
<http://cnc.sagepub.com>

Quarterly: March, June, September, December
ISSN: 0306-4220

Membership Services +44 (0)20 7324 8500 Email membership@sagepub.co.uk

 **SAGE**
www.sagepublications.com