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Economic Subjectivities and Crisis

The coincidence of the changing of circumstances of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice.#1# —Karl Marx

The contemporary landscape is reshaped and remade daily by fluctuations in the flow of money and goods. This process of transformation can take many forms. Where the specialist jargon of financial trading is diversified into the speech environments of everyday life, the transformation is *discursive*; where movements in interest rates induce banks to foreclose on their clients' mortgages, the transformation is *material*. It's not hard to find evidence for the influence of the abstract and systemic forces of financial exchange on the discursive and material elements of social life, even if it is supremely difficult to suspend or reverse. Yet the role of those forces in creating the subjects who are compelled to speak with abstract concepts or to experience the resulting material conditions is much harder to bring into view. The human subject is not the sum of her language and environment but an active entity who *works through* them, and thereby makes herself. (Though, it goes without saying, she does not do it in conditions of her own choosing.)

The system defines the subject, but the subject also defines the system. By moving through this tangled dialectic, this text is intended to make some headway in understanding how current shifts in the material relations of money, commodities, and social abstraction in general shape contemporary forms of interiority. There has been a surfeit of discussion of the ways in which subjects are formed through their social roles within the relations of production, but less has been said about the determinate shaping of people by abstraction. This preliminary inquiry into the relationship between capitalist abstraction and subjectivity has two main parts. In the first, we will rehearse some of the most significant theoretical accounts of capitalist abstraction; in the second, we will turn

away from the history of Marxism and toward the future of capitalism, tracing out a few of the abstract psychologies on which that future depends, and setting out some reflections on how they—and it—might be averted or overcome.

Sketches for a Financial Theory of the Self

Capitalism is a system of social practices that coordinates the relationship of people and goods through various forms of property. By operating through the legal categories of property, capital compels its subjects to limit their perspective to the disconnected and individuated particulars of “my” possessions, “my” job, “my” home, and so on. In these conditions, obliviousness regarding the total system of abstract exchange relations is not just an effect of the intellectual preferences of individuals: It is an imperative issued and enforced by capital itself. The powerful subjectivity-forming effect of capital is in part why the free choice that we are told constitutes individual subjectivity is hard to credit (and in this sense we could rather talk about capital as the only possible “subject”—as Marx himself did, in the first volume of *Das Kapital*.)#2#

Despite the significance of private property, however, the category most fundamental to our account of subjectivity is not ownership but value. It is value, and not property, that coordinates the relationships of exchange between individual actors; and it is value, and not property, that forces the goods, services and behaviors necessary to social reproduction to participate in a system of abstraction.

Under capitalist social relations, any object carries with it a certain abstraction and a relation to wider exchange relations. Marx noted this when he described how a commodity’s exchange-value relates each commodity to all other commodities.#3# Each commodity’s exchange-value is affected by the conditions of production throughout the system of exchange, such as changes in the prices of commodities consumed in production, or shifting labor conditions. Marx has this nexus of value in mind when he describes the labor time contained in commodities as “socially necessary.” He is not speaking of the decisions that individuals or groups arrive at concerning what they believe to be necessary, but the existence of a socially “average” or normative period of

time required for the production of any given commodity. Labor time is thus an abstract norm grounded in material relations of production and realized in the sphere of exchange. Individual subjects depend upon this abstraction of value in order to gain access to the material conditions that reproduce their lives. This situation becomes clearly visible during crises like the present one, where fluctuations in prices at one point in the system can have myriad knock-on effects.

What does this mean for the theory of the subject? Historically, attempts to apply the categories of the critique of political economy to psychology have focused on the relationship of subject and object. Usually they have done this under the auspices of the theory of alienation. The dialectics of subject and object in this theory is a dialectics of destitution, exploitation, and loss. Attempts to theorize the relationship between the abstraction of exchange and subjectivity have, by contrast, been pursued much more fitfully. Both approaches are relevant for our purposes, though we shall propose some ways in which the theory of capitalist abstraction might be made more adequate to the speed, ferocity, and relentlessness of subjective experience in a world where exchange relations are ubiquitous and inescapable.

The first writer in the revolutionary tradition to think seriously about the relationship between subject and object under capital was Marx. Marx asserts that capitalist relations of production separate the labor of workers from the products of that labor. This inability to relate to one's own activity except through the mediation of capital polarizes the subject, so that the subject becomes, as Marx states in the *Grundrisse*, "purely subjective labor, stripped of all objectivity."⁴ Turning this statement on its head, Theodor W. Adorno argues that reification turns the subject into object. Adorno contends that it is precisely the separation between subject and object and the fetishization of this separation that constitutes the modern subject. That, Adorno says, is the reality of reification.⁵

In the capitalist opposition of subject and object, the subject may appear as the least reified pole, but it is actually the most reified, while objects are imbued with subjectivity. This recalls the structure of commodity fetishism, where commodities have social relations, and humans treat each other like commodities. Rather than a correctable

perversity, this situation is logical in a system where production is organized for profit.

If the split between subject and object is social and historical, reiterated constantly in the universality of the exchange relation, then it cannot be overcome in thought alone, which is to say, subjectively. Capital produces the subject-object relation differently over time according to its needs, though philosophy, technology, and basic belief structures often register these changes as new discoveries about an immutable human nature. And yet the “revolutionary practice” of “self-changing” described by Marx in the epigraph to this essay can clearly be read as involving subjectivity, even if the ways in which it could be activated are far from clear or foreseeable. Nonetheless it points to the importance of considering what form a *collective* subject might take, even as this subject is formed through network technologies and the systemic nature of commodity subjectivation. If a collective subject used to be articulated through workplace structures, socialization in war and mass political organizations, in what terms can we think of an emergence of a collective subject outside these parameters, and how can we identify its capacities? Many, including those with an anticapitalist orientation, have argued such a thing is neither possible nor desirable. Our premise is that it is the connective miasma of value, and its collective domination of subjects, which constitutes capital, and as such it will require thinking precisely on that level of an ever-evolving and abstract collectivity if we are ever to have a different kind of society. Hence, if we are ever to have a different kind of society, we need to think in terms of this very kind of ever-evolving and abstract collectivity.

Perhaps influenced by similar questions, political and artistic currents often take sides with the subject, the object, or with some formula for transcending the split between them, according to the perceived urgencies of the period. For instance, in the history of the avant-garde and in much contemporary art, identification with objects has been an important aesthetic and political move for artists, from Pop art to the “wretched of the screen” today. Such an identification seems increasingly abstract, however, if it doesn’t take into account the material ways through which the present-day accumulation of capital invests the social with the logic of the commodity, which a formal or theoretical affinity with objects frequently elides. The rush to dismiss the subject-object

relation in favor of a “flat ontology” has been a driving force in much contemporary thought and practice.⁷ Yet perhaps this betrays the triumph of one pole of a broken dialectic: the willed unreflexivity of the subject-in-practice that has seen all forms of noncapitalist subjectivity stall and founder in the recent past, especially since the present crisis began. If we consider that the subject-object dialectic sketched out above is not an error, but a real reflection of the world of capital, perhaps a shift to the object in political thought can only go so far at present. We can only become nonpersonal nonsubjects once the absolute subject that is value ceases to be the metric of our subjectivity. How could this happen without a collective subject that breaks in some way from the ensemble of its determinations?

Subject Itinerary

A paradigmatic account of the aforementioned second approach to the theory of the subject, exploring the relationship between subjectivity and social abstraction, has been developed in the work of the economist and philosopher Alfred Sohn-Rethel. He asserts that the *origins* of abstract thinking are to be found in practices of exchange. In his view, the abstract concept of equivalence is constantly reinforced *through the action, not the idea of, exchange*.⁸ From this observation, Sohn-Rethel proposes that the modern, Kantian subject (and her ability to think conceptually) evolved as a product of such abstractions in practice.

Reading Sohn-Rethel against the grain, one could argue that the most interesting point is not so much how abstract conceptualization came to be as how abstract conceptualization continues to change. In the present, new forms of exchange abstraction circumscribe our thinking and other qualities we associate with subjects. For instance, the heightened intensity of social interaction, communication, and information exchange in social media emerges as a seeming emancipation whereby conversations become more inclusive and polyvalent. At the same time, it is an extension of capital’s tendency to collectivize production, as displayed in the earlier switch to industrial production, and profit from the increase in productivity. The shift is not in the material conditions of production but in its

social conditions—as, for instance, in heightened competitiveness or the monitoring of one another’s response times. Under present conditions, contemporary capitalist subjects have to keep moving and to continuously produce and reproduce new commodified exchanges.

This determining power of the abstract over the concrete is ever more central to the expansions and involutions of capitalism. One example of the hypertrophy of exchange relations is financialization, which exacerbates and makes explicit the current state of affairs. Across multiple contemporary cultural phenomena, financialization expresses a situation in which the logic of exchange-value has an increasingly palpable form in the material world through novel and ever-expanding *abstractions in practice*. Take for example, the ways in which contemporary finance reappropriates and reconfigures the exchange-value of given commodities, such as real estate or natural resources, or redistributes “risks” through practices such as carbon offsetting, or builds fiber-optic networks to shave off nanoseconds in high-frequency trading. As subjects are pushed to new levels of abstraction in practice, novel capacities and modes of activity will emerge, even as conditions of subjugation deepen.

As socially produced subjects in capital, we experience our “selves” as contained, discrete entities, and this habit is reinforced through social practices that have come into being: They have already evolved through centuries of capitalism. At present, we largely overlook the ways in which our relations with other people define us, both in practice and in mind. This is the common or collective condition of isolation within capitalist social relations that has traditionally been termed alienation. But the model of the alienated subject does not lead to an understanding of collective conditions, or point toward the collective actions we need to take in order to make our way out of the present situation. Could the porosity between subjects at the level of daily practice, as emphasized in social media, someday open onto a new constellation? This would mean trying to develop an understanding of an emergent collectivity in practice, one that is structured differently from existing communities of identity reinforcement such as those defined by consumption, nationality, religion, or profession.

We know that during the present crisis anger, frustration and desperation have ignited protests and ensured their persistence. There is a nonpersonal, collective affect and cohesion in those moments, but how can it extend to a consideration of how to live otherwise? At the same time, in other circumstances, people's own direct experiences of pain or injustice can inhibit any specific direction of action or politics. The conditions of the crisis are fast and fierce, albeit very different across global space, so that the fight to prevent social and material conditions from dramatically worsening is often the main focus of protest movements. As affect boils over and propels revolt, this defiance of the present order of things is the basis of some hope. When subjects who resist capital continue to express their formation by it, for example by voicing their demands and objections in the form of capitalist categories such as wages or government spending, we see the intractable difficulties of imagining social reproduction or subject formation differently. We recognize here that affect is capable of driving revolt, but also acquiescence. This is close to what Lauren Berlant calls "cruel optimism": In her analysis, the socially effective idea that you can triumph over your conditions itself constitutes an affective attachment to those conditions.#9#

Not Subjects but Women

Various strains of feminist theory focus on subjectivity when speaking of structural or systemic effects, which are understood as always concretely embedded in a particular set of relations. The radical materialist feminisms that seek to abolish gender rather than affirm women go further still. In the feminist journal *LIES* the pseudonymous author M. Sandovsky writes: "The problem for women is not just uncovering what is political in the personal and personal in the political; it is finding a way to live inside of a contradiction wherein we experience simultaneously the concrete and the abstract nature of gender relations."#10# Many feminist perspectives explore the problems arising at the intersection of the individual or subjective and the social. The female subject seems an exemplary figure for this discussion because she is caught between the systemic and particular in ways that do not necessarily act upon the male subject (as bearer of abstract symbolic value). This is the ideological construction with real effects that feminist theory

challenges, in that it regards gender as imposing identities upon both men and women (with detrimental effects for both). Insofar as “women” are structurally consigned to the private sphere, regardless of their participation in production, they become the primary bearers of social signifiers of affect. The structural and the affective, therefore, have no determinate relationship in this analysis. The lack of correlation between them can be politically problematic, certainly when it comes to identifying interests based on positioning within oppressive social relations, yet the relationship is also far from contingent, let alone optional.

Historically, a focus on the particularity of the subject in literature and the visual arts has often led to a denial of the systemic, social, and economic determinations that are looped through subjectivity. Capital polarizes the subject toward the particular and obscures its systemic dimension. But if the structural effects of capital’s subject-forming powers induce us to conflate all forms of subjectivity with the capitalist subject, then—especially in the realm of culture—we run the risk of merely confirming capital’s own innate drive to consume its others. The UK poet Keston Sutherland argues against “ant subjectivist” forms of art in these terms, looking to poetry in particular. Referring to Jacques Rancière’s work, Sutherland explains that “the Althusserian ban on subjectivism is precisely a ban on proletarian self-expression. The same interdiction resonates in a freshly subtilized form in the contemporary ban on ‘subjectivity’ in poetry.”#11# Here, the political argument is that subjectivity is necessary for political resistance, and that the subject of capitalist social relations cannot be blotted out if we’re trying to see where resistance and revolt can come from. Revolutionary practice and the arts alike need to move on from the reactionary forms that subjective approaches normally take, whether this means opening onto radically collective interiorities or undiscovered forms of abstraction in practice. Again, recall that the split between subject and object is a result of the dominance of the exchange abstraction, which, for Sohn-Rethel, is generated by the original split between mental and manual labor. This split is foundational for a class society. An affirmation of either side of this relation will not transform its terms; only breaking the relation can do that. Therefore, if we look outside the sphere of exchange to see forms of collective subjectivity emerging, we can only see this as a horizon attendant on a long process of social change in which the sphere of exchange will no longer

underpin and pervade all other social relationships.

Involuntary Data Bodies

According to the new rules of the biopolitical game, what is promoted in contemporary culture today is a picture of the self in which we are formed by the social, but only insofar as we are defined by parameters and metrics that evaluate our risk, predict our suitability, and assess our behavior. In other words, the way the social forms us is only considered to the extent that it can be helpful to accumulation. Otherwise, it is preferable for the maintenance of the present order that the ways in which our “selves” are not purely selves, but radically multiple and socially dimensional, are not acknowledged. In the digital era, capital’s data-mining algorithms reflect subjects back to themselves in the same way that *LIFE* magazine spreads and psychotherapy did in days gone by. In the contemporary moment of digital administration-*cum*-world production, subjects are increasingly reproduced via metrics.

The social constructionist versions of the subject popular in the twentieth century have faded from view. In their place, a host of explanations for behavior are ever more readily available through neurological and other technoscientific frameworks. Most of the new understandings of social processes of subject formation are premised upon factors that can be measured, for example education and income bracket. Meanwhile, indeterminate influences—such as structures of desire or social antagonism—are increasingly passed over or “disappeared.” At the same time, contemporary computing technologies of prediction increasingly shape the material world. Deployed through the financialization and administration of the social environment by private and public bodies, these technologies are driven by the needs of capital to ensure and increase value extraction. They may not themselves be effective, yet they remake the world in the process of their operation. As such they crystallize one pole of the dialectic of subject and object. Propelled by the abstractions of exchange, understanding is replaced by knowledge in the service of capital, whose simple aim is to make all things calculable for the purposes of accumulation. Here, singularity becomes identity, always to be used as a marker that

attaches the biopolitical subject to her (economic) conditions.

Against such economic and biological reductivism, affect and habit could be understood as social processes that express themselves *within* the structures and functions of the body. This raises murky questions. How can we describe the social *within* the body without subordinating one term of the relation (social/body)? And how can we counter the tendency of neuroscientific explanation to naturalize and depoliticize? The *involuntary* is what acts out determination without knowing it, on a somatic level. Like affect, the involuntary spans the physical and the psychical; it is not open to immediate self-knowledge. Involuntary actions, reactions, and sensations are fed into the social reproduction of capital, yet the experience of the involuntary has no preformed relation to knowledge; there is no image for what is happening. The supposed irrationality of somatic and affective responses often obeys other nondiscursive rationalities, inscribing oppressions, subjugation, and even abstractions on a corporeal level. In this way, capital's formations are inscribed in social habit. Yet the gestures that result can fall anywhere on the political spectrum, in the service of the radical or the reactionary. In this way, capital's formations are inscribed in social habit. The involuntary is an element of social and physical experience that has recently been described by philosopher Catherine Malabou in terms of "plasticity." This term refers at once to that which forms and that which is formed. It is thus not just awareness but the neurological structures beneath it that are dialectically formed by experience. Plasticity can dissolve belief, social habit, and notions of possibility, including those inculcated by capitalist social relations. The concept of plasticity opens up the arena of biophysical discourse to a debate on the definition of the self through social and historical practice.

Since the involuntary seems every day to become more subservient to the machinery of biopower, looking at the role played by the involuntary in past episodes of critical or insurgent culture may prove instructive. For Brecht, the involuntary was important as it sedimented history and conflict—in other words, contingency—into casual and subconscious gesture. The involuntary was thus a variant of realism: The actor of the epic theater was enjoined to perform in such a way as to reveal her involuntary gestures as an

index of history. In other words, the actor was asked to act as if the emotions and gestures of the character were not just pedagogically distant from her (the estrangement effect) but were precisely readable to spectators/other actors, as if they, too, could be different under other social conditions. The personal self was portrayed in a way intended to reveal its true nature as *both* contingent and collective. Hence psychology and interiority were jettisoned as the ground of naturalism in acting. Nature is only relevant, for Brecht, insofar as it is historical—that is, open to conscious change. The involuntary is thus where capital reproduces itself, but it could also be the other way around. The Brechtian gesture registers struggle, however obliquely. Gesture as history, in turn, is discussed by philosopher Giorgio Agamben in his writing on “pure gesture.” He describes gesture as the involuntary communication of the corporeal, bounded conditions of being in a form where “nothing is being produced or acted but rather something is being endured and supported.”#13# Theories of the social and historical character of affect, here articulated as the involuntary, can thus help mediate between the contemporary discussion of affect, which often leaves out these dimensions, and the critical aesthetics and political theory that still found their arguments on a one-sided rationalist view of critique.

As Conclusion

The abstraction of exchange value is part of the moving contradiction. This statement is both abstract and concrete; it is a piece of theoretical jargon and a literal truth. Capital needs to keep on moving not only through its sequence of “forms” (of which the baleful circuit of Marx’s M-C-M is only the most famous); it needs also to keep moving down roads, through tunnels, across radio spectrums. It needs to keep moving in the bodies of industrial and service workers, in the minds of academics and cultural workers, and in the social institutions that contain them. The structurally unemployed are included in this motion too, forcibly inculcated with the modern values of dynamic, flexible, task-ready compliance.

An adequate critique of capitalist social relations will have to learn to move as quickly as capital does from the abstract to the particular, and from the schematic illustration of

exchange to the rich and painful subjective experience of it. Wherever the critique of political economy is unwilling to take into account the speed of these movements, it will be nothing more than an impressive statue that slowly disappears from view as social relations continue to change. Our wish in this text has been to challenge the idea of the inertia of the relationship of subject and object, and to look instead at the social character of the involuntary as a palimpsest of collective energies which are, however, experienced as solely individual, marked by that which may only become legible in social conditions not (yet) our own.

1. Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” from *Marx/Engels: Selected Works*, vol 1., trans. W. Lough, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1969, p. 13.
2. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes, London, Penguin, 1976, p. 255.
3. Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, part 3, trans. Jack Cohen and S.W. Ryazanskaya, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1969, pp. 143–144.
4. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, London, Penguin, 1993, p. 296.
5. Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models*, trans. Henry W. Pickford, New York, Columbia University Press, 1999.
6. Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen*, New York/Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2012.
7. Manuel de Landa uses this term in opposition to a hierarchical ontology, to describe relations between “unique, singular individuals, differing in spatio-temporal scale but not in ontological status.” Manuel De Landa, *Intensive Science & Virtual Philosophy*, Atlantic Highlands, NJ, Athlone Press, 2002, p. 47.
8. Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Manual and Mental Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, London/Basingstoke, Macmillan Press, 1978, pp. 25–29.

9. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2011.
10. M. Sandovsky, "Letters To L: Paranoia and Visions," in *Lies: A Journal of Materialist Feminism* 1, 2012, p. 60.
11. Keston Sutherland, *Theses on Anti-Subjectivist Dogma*, 2013, <http://afieryflyingroule.tumblr.com/post/49378474736/keston-sutherland-theses-on-antisubjectivist-dogma>.
12. Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do With Our Brain*, trans. Sebastian Rand, New York, Fordham University Press, 2009.
13. Giorgio Agamben, "Notes on Gesture," in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p. 57