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Abstracts

Nicole Pepperell (RMIT, Melbourne)
Beyond Telos and Totality: Immanent Critique as Selective Inheritance

Recent reinterpretations of Marx's work have tended to emphasise the ways in which Marx puts forward a *critical* appropriation of concepts like teleology and totality. In many of these recent interpretations, Marx's work is understood to involve a deflationary, historically specific, and non-metaphysical analysis of the ways in which capitalist societies can be said, first, to be characterised by a particular trajectory of historical transformation and, second, to generate certain practical phenomena that can be well-described by a concept like 'totality'. In spite of the deflationary and anti-metaphysical emphasis of these readings, some critics have expressed concern that even a qualified, bounded use of categories like 'telos' or 'totality' might attribute too much power to capitalism as a social form - and thus undermine attempts to theorise possibilities for transformative agency.

In this paper, I explore one particular option for how to think the role of concepts of telos and totality in Marx's mature works, while retaining the potential for transformative agency close to the surface of our analysis. With specific reference to the first volume of Marx's *Capital*, I show how Marx zooms in and out of different layers of social experience in the course of his analysis, moving between aspects of collective life that are intuitively meaningful to social actors, and other aspects that can better be described as unintended consequences of aggregate behaviour. By focussing on this layered dimension of social experience, it becomes possible to bring more clearly into focus how Marx could both argue that aspects of capitalist societies possess 'totalising' qualities, without this argument in any sense undermining the ability to think about concrete potentials for emancipatory change.

Geoffrey Kay
Derivatives: 'Metaphysical Subtleties and Theological Niceties'

The title is taken from the start of the section on 'commodity fetishism' in the first chapter of *Capital*:

A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.

Derivatives by contrast to commodities do not even seem obvious; from the start they appear strange. It does not necessarily follow that because they are more complex than common or garden commodities (financial) derivatives are metaphysically subtler and theologically nicer. But since they are, so to speak, commodities turned inside out, sliced and rearranged, it seems a safe assumption to make. If as Walter Benjamin claimed 'the religious structure of capitalism [is] - not merely ... a formation conditioned by

religion, but .. an essentially religious phenomenon [itself]' derivatives are the Eucharist of capital, its consecrated elements.

One of the issues to which the astronomic growth of derivatives in the last thirty years and its sequel have given a certain urgency is the economic distinction between the *real* economy and *nominal* factors. Is the provenance of this distinction really William of Ockham? If so what is a matter of medieval dispute doing setting the terms of what Ben Bernanke calls 'a central question in macroeconomics ... why nominal [i.e. monetary] shocks should have real effects?' Is it possible that an essentially medieval notion of the real not only entered economic thought (through British moralism) but has even found its way into Marxism as well? The aim of this paper is to raise rather than resolve such issues, to show that there are questions concerning derivatives which fall into the domain of Marxists *qua* philosophers.

**Nick Dyer-Witheford (University of Western Ontario)
Twenty-First Century Species-Being**

No concept of Marx's is more tantalizing than that of 'species-being' (*Gattungswesen*). Cryptically and fragmentarily announced in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844, but largely abandoned in Marx's later work, the idea has passed in and then, apparently decisively, out, of fashion amongst his interpreters. But the first decade of the twenty-first century has seen a revival of interest in *Gattungswesen*. What did Marx mean by species-being? Why might the idea have a renewed relevance today? What contemporary politics could inform, and be informed by, this reconsideration of species-being?

GRADUATE PANEL:

**Jeremy Cohan (NYU)
What Marx Really Thought about Class: it's not (only)
the bourgeois pigs that are the problem**

This paper details how and why Marx uses the concept of social class. First, I describe and catalog the different classes that appear in Marx's work—proletariat, bourgeoisie, landowners, intellectuals, finance capitalists, peasants, lumpenproletariat, and more. With the aid of a little-known passage from Marx's *Theories of Surplus Value*, I differentiate between the essential class relationship of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and several other subdivisions (e.g. 'transition classes' like landowners). The relationship between the bourgeoisie and proletariat is 'essential' for Marx both because it is vital for understanding the particular character of capitalism and because it points to how class society as such might be overcome. I claim (after G.A. Cohen, though with some amendment) that class society for Marx is a situation of 'collective unfreedom' for *all* classes. I counterpose this reading of Marx to more common uses of class that focus on evoking sympathy for the oppressed class and condemning all-powerful oppressors. Marx was convinced that 'class' described the unfreedom not only of the oppressed class, but of *all those involved in the class relationship*. I demonstrate this through a sustained engagement with examples spanning from *The Holy Family* to *Capital* where Marx characterizes the bourgeoisie as unfree. Marx's attention to the proletariat is not due to the

mere fact of its oppression, but because of its political potential to end class itself. The abolition of classes, rather than fulfilling the interests of an oppressed group, or even bringing 'power to the people,' is at the core of Marx's treatment of class. Claiming that Marx's unique and complex way of seeing class is too often bowdlerized and forgotten, the paper ends by calling for the renewal of a Marxian analysis and politics that imagines the end of class itself.

David Marjoribanks (Kent)

Marxism and Morality: out of the 'Moral Wilderness'?

Marxism is often thought to have a 'moral deficit'. Alasdair MacIntyre, for example, in *After Virtue*, has argued that Marxism has suffered from 'grave and harm engendering moral impoverishment'. In this paper I examine what this could mean, and what responses are available to Marxists. Marxism's moral impoverishment is generally held to consist, firstly, in its paradoxical approach to morality. Marxism has always maintained an ambiguous relationship with morality, dismissing it as a pernicious ideological abstraction, whilst at the same time clearly advocating socialism not merely as a scientific prediction, but as a moral idea. Secondly, it has been argued that Marxism's ambiguous philosophical approach to morality has dangerous political consequences for Marxism. Steven Lukes, for example, argues that Marxism's problematic treatment of morality led to Marxism becoming ethically disabled as a theory, such that it found itself unable to condemn the crimes of Stalinism. In his early Marxist phase, contributing to the debate about Marxist humanism, MacIntyre pointed to a way out of the moral 'wilderness', where Marxists are caught between Kantianism and Utilitarianism. In between the Scylla and Charybdis of abstract, ahistorical, groundless moral principle and amoral, purely 'scientific', utilitarian Stalinism, MacIntyre sought to find a materialist ethics for Marxism, historically conditioned and socially grounded. However, he has long since abandoned this hope. In this paper I will contrast the prospects for such an ethics with those for an alternative, but similarly materialist, 'post-modern' ethics. I suggest we can see Hegel and Marx as contributing to a line of thought developed by thinkers such as Nietzsche and Foucault. Such an approach might have the advantage that Hegelian Marxism provided – its historicity – without the idealist and teleological 'baggage'; it might provide a way of overcoming the political, as well as philosophical 'moral deficit'.

Caleb Basnett (York University, Toronto)

Re-inventing the Subject: Marx and Ethics

Marxism's preoccupation with its relation to science has often involved neglecting the possibility of a Marxist ethics. Ethics, along with the ethical 'subject,' have often been seen as ideological categories hostile to Marxist science. In my paper I will argue against this position, claiming that Marx's *Capital*, while often seen as a kind of matrix for Marxist science free of ideological contamination, in fact contains numerous descriptions of different kinds of subjects from which an ethical project complementary to revolutionary politics can be constructed.

I examine three interrelated yet distinct forms of subject found in Volume 1 of Marx's *Capital*: 1) the subject of

circulation, the legal 'person' of bourgeois society; 2) the pre-bourgeois subject transformed into this 'person' through historical forces; and 3) the subject of production, the laborer. While the latter two forms of subject arise through Marx's empirical studies of history to undermine the essentially Hegelian subject of bourgeois society, both are described in terms of bodies and wills, concepts which, while retaining their Hegelian stamp, for Marx transcend their origins and become something altogether new. This empirical short-circuiting of idealist concepts involves the fracture of the bourgeois subject. Subjects for Marx are everywhere: indexed to the concatenating material processes that make up the world, they harbor the possibility of its change.

Insofar as these material processes everywhere involve subjects, ethical subjects who practice the cultivation of their potential, such as those described by thinkers as diverse as Aristotle or Kant, need not serve the established order. Instead I argue these subjects might through ethical practice rid themselves of that which would mutilate their potential, radically alter the functioning of the material processes which they compose, and in so doing, re-invent themselves as subjects. In Marx, ethics can be revolutionary.