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## **The respectable working class and the Modern Conceptions**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This contribution is part of a debate between Michael Hardt/Toni Negri and David Harvey on the occasion of Marx's bicentenary (May 5, 2018). The discussion focuses on the question of what capitalism looks like today and how it can best be challenged. In this article, David Harvey responds to Hardt and Negri's previous debate-contributions.

Keywords: Marx, bicentenary, 200th anniversary, capitalism, alienation, real subsumption, daily life

I grew up in a respectable neighbourhood of working class homeowners in England. I viewed the house we lived in as a safe albeit rather claustrophobic and oppressive space to eat, sleep, socialise, read stories, do homework or listen to the radio, a place where family could dwell without outside interference. In the winter, we clustered around the smoky coal fire in the living room – the only source of heat. This produced the killer London smog of 1952. We kids played with others on the street together on summer nights. Only occasionally did we have to make way for a passing car. The milk was delivered by horse and cart. We never ate out (except for fish and chips brought in on Fridays) and Mondays was wash day when my mother (who never had a job, a sign of our respectability!) washed everything by hand in a tub with a mangle that was very hard to turn to squeeze out the water from the sheets. On Mondays the whole neighbourhood was festooned with sheets flapping in the wind (except when they froze) upon tough-to-manipulate clothes lines. By evening my mother, with hands red from washing, had ironed everything too. It was hard work.

One day in my teens there was a day of mild celebration. The debt on the house was paid off and we were full owners. I then realised that the house was also a vehicle for saving and that asset values could be passed on across generations (as happened to me after my parents died). Not far away there were estates of social housing. They looked OK to me but when I dated a girl from there my mother strongly disapproved – they were feckless people not to be trusted she said.

But they too seemed to have safe and secure housing in a decent living environment and listened to the same radio shows. The difference was at election time their neighbourhood plainly supported Labour but in mine a smattering of signs for both Conservatives and Labour could be seen. My father refused to discuss either politics or religion. They only foster discord and break up families he said. Working class homeownership, promoted from the 1890s onwards in Britain, has always been a subtle instrument of social control (socialists will confiscate your house, the conservatives said).

But in the 1980s this all changed. Margaret Thatcher sold off the social housing wholesale and everyone became passionately concerned with the exchange value of their housing. The local institutions that were set aside to promote homeownership among the working classes (the building societies in Britain or the Savings and Loan institutions in the United States) stopped being local working class institutions and became more bank-like (eventually being merged or incorporating themselves as full banks). In 1981 nearly a third of all houses in Britain were in the public sector but by 2016 that had fallen to less than 7 percent. In an ideal neoliberal world there should be no social housing at all. People began to buy places and fix them up themselves and then sell them off at a profit. The house became more and more an exchange value to be protected and manipulated to augment personal wealth. Riff-raff (like people of colour or immigrants) and the feckless should be kept out to protect neighbourhood values and positive externalities managed by getting everyone to paint their front doors and grow roses in their front yards. In the late 1980s many Saving and Loan societies got into deep financial trouble in the United States because of their risky speculative investments.

By the end of the century everything had gone a step further. Houses became an instrument of speculation (In spite of what had happened with the S&L crisis). They became an ATM machine from which people could extract wealth by refinancing their mortgages. But when housing prices declined suddenly many people found themselves “under water” with their mortgage exceeding the market value of the house. The “surface froth” that Alan Greenspan, chair of the US Federal Reserve, had cheerfully dismissed in the late 1990s, became the raging storm that swept through US housing markets in 2007-8, leaving financial institutions bankrupt and millions of people foreclosed upon as housing prices crashed. As the slow recovery took place, more and more houses and apartments were caught up in buy-to-let schemes converted into Airbnb, which quickly went from a nice idea of sharing on an occasional basis to a rabid and destructive capitalised system of converting and profiteering on temporary housing accommodation, provoking popular movements of revolt against tourism in cities like Barcelona and fervent cries for regulatory control elsewhere.

The effect was to promote the eviction of low income populations to make way for upscale investment opportunities, expensive condos, and conversions to new uses, such as Airbnb, in many neighbourhoods. It was no longer mere exchange value that drove housing market activity but a quest for capital accumulation through the manipulation of housing markets that became the aim and object of much activity. In the United States millions lost their houses to foreclosure in 2007-2010 while in the rental sector the pace of evictions from rental accommodations accelerated everywhere, with devastating social consequences for the less affluent ([Desmond 2016](#)).

What is interesting about this potted history is that it parallels almost exactly the passage from work through formal to real subsumption of labour under capital that Marx so brilliantly outlined. I am therefore delighted to support the move by Hardt and Negri to extend the use of

the formal/real distinction to other issues and questions. But I do so with a caveat. We have to be much more explicit about what it is that is being subsumed into what. In the case of housing, for example, the subsumption is into the circulation of interest-bearing capital and this entails a different set of social class relations to the story that Marx revealed in his analysis of the labour process subsumed within the circuit of industrial capital. But in both cases the move from formal to real entails an inversion of a power relation. In the case of labour, the control over the instruments of labour that lie with the labourer under conditions of formal subsumption pass into the power of fixed capital over the labourer under conditions of real subsumption. In the case of housing, real subsumption through the drive for accumulation exercises a power over the urban dweller to which residents are forced to submit. The bottom line of that power is debt peonage of the sort I initially described in the paper on “Universal Alienation”. Debt peonage is a form of subsumption, in which the lives and labours of individuals become inescapably tied into the circulation of interest bearing capital, the interest rate, and claims upon their future incomes and labour.

Subsumption within the circulation of interest-bearing capital can by-pass valorisation through production (though new housing and condo construction and conversions mean that this is not wholly so). The circulation of interest-bearing capital is in this case focused not on fixed capital but on what Marx called “the consumption fund” (Harvey 1982, 229-238). When a private equity company like Blackstone buys up foreclosed houses in California (to become the biggest landlord in the state) and takes over financially failing affordable housing complexes and converts them (via evictions) to upscale market rents using huge loans from (often shaky) pension funds, then the whole housing system becomes highly capitalised and rates of return compete with rates of return in manufacturing. Hence also the perpetual danger of speculative bubbles. Housing values and qualities become vulnerable to volatile market processes. The so-called economic recovery (that has not spread to benefit wage labour) since the crisis of 2007-8 has in part rested on booms in housing prices in all of the world’s major metropolitan areas (from Melbourne to Moscow and Sao Paulo to San Francisco and Vancouver). This in spite of the lessons of the housing crash of 2007-8 and the S&L crash of 1987.

In London such processes have been accompanied by a rising tide of youth violence and a stunning and surprising increase in the murder rate. Here is how a London housing activist understands the potential connection.

“[...] most politicians’ response to our young people killing each other is to call for more policing. I accept it’s part of the picture. But obsessively seeing the problem through the prism of ‘law and order’, often as a proxy for talking about more uncomfortable subjects, offers no real hope of solving it [...] I’m not arguing that the housing crisis is directly or solely causing rising violence among young people. A complex range of factors is involved. But my thoughts keep going back to [...] an interview with a community activist from the South Side of Chicago. *‘They knew when they tore the buildings down that they’d displace people. Children have had to move schools, some to suburban areas in the far South Side, so it’s a double displacement. The black community’s social infrastructure has been destroyed. The demolitions have also disrupted the gang structure. Today the violence is random.’* [In Britain,] [t]he generation of working class youngsters at the centre of the current wave of street violence has only known Austerity Britain. The childcare services, youth clubs, leisure facilities, education, job and housing opportunities available to their parents have been decimated” (Robbins 2018).

We are now “reaping the whirlwind” of these cuts:

“Working class communities in general and women and young people in particular have been the main targets of revanchist policies against the Welfare State. As in the US, people with black and brown skin are disproportionately likely to suffer as cities become ever-more socially and ethnically divided [...] [T]he housing crisis has deepened and scores of council estates are now threatened with demolition [...] Neoliberal and profit-driven urban policies have produced cities in which many young people literally feel they have no place. They find it almost impossible to find a home they can afford in the communities where they were born, thwarting their ability to develop independent lives. Their social networks, sense of belonging and feeling of respect from the adult world have been stretched to breaking point. Nothing could be more perfectly calculated to create a situation in which young people don’t care, either about the lives of others, or their own” (Robbins 2018).

If this is not alienation, then what is?

Youth also live in a world where there is abundant evidence that political power does not give a tinker’s cuss about their lives either. In London, this was clearly demonstrated by the awful sequence of events that produced the Grenfell Towers fire of June 14th 2017. Austerity policies administered by the wealthiest local council in Britain, which subcontracted to a profit maximising private management company, led to hazardous materials being used to improve the appearance of a high rise tower that housed low income and marginalised tenants. The tower went up in a fiery inferno killing more than one hundred people. The cladding used (in the face of protests by the tenants that were ignored) mainly for cosmetic and cost saving reasons had been banned as unsafe in Europe and the United States. Subsequent investigations showed that it had been used in more than a hundred high rise towers housing low income populations across Britain. Furthermore, two years after the fire the local council had done almost nothing to find alternative accommodations for those displaced. The council did not care for social housing of any sort. Notes Colin Crouch (2017, 3), “Social housing tenants are the unwanted residue of a pre-neoliberal past”. Such tenants do not command respect. Their needs are irrelevant to a local authority where many houses stand empty, as investment vehicles for ultra-wealthy foreigners seeking to park and protect their asset wealth.

Universal alienation arises in many different ways. It links to the many different forms that real subsumption under the power of capital in general takes in our times. Here, too, there are caveats that Hardt and Negri hint at but which I think are worth making more explicit. The subsumption has profound effects upon that into which the labour or the housing is subsumed. It is not merely that the subsumed can be indigestible to that which gobbles it up. The insertion of housing and the consumption fund into the circuit of interest-bearing capital has a major impact upon what interest-bearing capital is all about. The significance of interest-bearing capital changes relative to the circulation of industrial, merchant and rentier capitals. This has implications for value and surplus-value production as well as for the class relations, struggles and the social inequalities that get generated. One can only speculate on what these implications might be, but there is no doubt in my mind that they are potentially profound<sup>iii</sup>. Here, too, I applaud Hardt and Negri’s willingness to go outside of the stultifying Marxist orthodoxy that refuses to acknowledge the significance of such shifts of emphasis within the dynamics of contemporary accumulation. We can debate and disagree on this or that but the spirit of our endeavours is similar.

Marx develops and uses the term “alienation” in respect to political economy the first time in the essay *The Jewish Question* that he wrote in autumn 1843 and that was published in February 1844: “Money is the estranged essence of man's work and man's existence, and this alien

essence dominates him, and he worships it” (Marx 1844b, 172). In his doctoral dissertation, Marx (1841, 64) spoke in the context of Epicurus’ philosophy of the “alienation of the essence”.

In 1843, in a reading of Hegel in the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law*, Marx argues that there is also political and ideological alienation: “It is indeed *estrangement* which matters in the so-called Christian state, but not *man*. The only man who counts, the *king*, is a being specifically different from other men, and is moreover a religious being, directly linked with heaven, with God. The relationships which prevail here are still relationships dependent on *faith*” (Marx 1843, 158). “Political emancipation is at the same time the *dissolution* of the old society on which the state alienated from the people, the sovereign power, is based.” (Ibid., 165).

In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx specifies that capitalism results in the alienation of labour, which means a fourfold form of alienation (Marx 1844a, 276-277): 1) the alienation of humans from nature, 2) from their activities and species-being, 3) from their bodies and mind that form the human essence, 4) from the “product of his [the worker’s] labour, from his life activity” (Ibid.) and as a consequence from other humans and society. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx presents economic alienation as the class relation between capital and labour:

“The emphasis comes to be placed not on the state of being objected, but on the state of being alienated, dispossessed, sold [Der Ton wird gelegt nicht auf das *Vergegenständlichkeitsein*, sondern das *Entfremdet-, Entäußert-, Veräußertsein*]; on the condition that the monstrous objective power which social labour itself erected opposite itself as one of its moments belongs not to the worker, but to the personified conditions of production, i.e. to capital” (Marx 1857/58, 831).

In *Capital Volume 1*, Marx argues that capital is an “alien power that dominates and exploits” workers and that in capitalism labour is “separated from its own means of objectification and realization” (Marx 1867, 716). In *Capital Volume 3*, Marx (1894) talks about alienation in chapters 5, 23, 27, 36, and 48. He argues in Chapter 23 that interest means the transfer of alienation from the realm of labour’s exploitation into the realm of interest-bearing capital. In Chapter 48, he writes that alienation not just exists in the relationship of capital and labour, but that also rent and interest are expressions of economic alienation.

Taken together, we see that alienation for Marx on the one hand is the particular form of domination and exploitation that shapes the capitalist mode of production, in which labour creates commodities without owning the means of production and without controlling the conditions and the results of production. On the other hand, Marx sees alienation also as the universal form of domination, in which humans are not in control of the structures that affect their everyday lives. All class relations are economic forms of alienation. But alienation extends beyond the economy so that also the state and ideology alienate humans from the conditions of collective political decision-making and cultural meaning-making.

In his essay *Universal Alienation* in the present special issue, David Harvey defines alienation as universal in three respects:

1) Alienation in the economy not just entails capital’s exploitation of labour, but also the realms of realisation, distribution and consumption, which means it extends to phenomena such as unemployment, consumerism, land seizure, deindustrialisation, debt peonage, financial scams, unaffordable housing, high food prices, etc.

2) Alienation entails processes beyond the economy, such as frustrations with politics, unaffordable public services, nationalist ideology, racism, police violence, militarism, warfare, alcoholism, suicide, depression, bureaucracy, pollution, gentrification, or climate change.

3) Alienation entails the geographic and social expansion of capital accumulation so that capital relations “dominate pretty much everywhere”. “Alienation is everywhere. It exists at work in production, at home in consumption, and it dominates much of politics and daily life”.

So, the universalisation of alienation means its extension beyond production, the economy and bounded spaces. Capital and capitalist society overcome and break down their own barriers in order to expand. In *Marx, Capital and the Madness of Economic Reason*, Harvey (2017, 47) argues that “a great deal of appropriation of value through predation occurs at the point of realization”, which results in “[a]lienation upon realization” (Ibid., 196).

In all forms of alienation, humans face asymmetric power relations and conditions that hinder their control over certain objects, structures or products (external nature, the means of production, the means of communication, the political system, the cultural system, etc.) so that aspects of their subjectivity are damaged (concerning human activities, well-being, consciousness, mind/psyche, body, worldviews, social relations). Alienation is neither purely objective nor purely subjective, but a negative relationship between social structures and humans in heteronomous societies.

In *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*, David Harvey (2014) devotes Chapter 17 to the topic of “The Revolt of Human Nature: Universal Alienation”. He argues that Marxists have often excluded alienation from consideration and have cancelled it off as “non-scientific concept” (Harvey 2014, 269). But the “scientific stance failed to capture the political imagination of viable alternatives” and “could not even confront the madness of the prevailing economic and political reason” (Ibid., 269). Universal alienation is therefore a concept that in light of the danger that we may face “a less-than-human humanity” (Ibid., 264) can provide prospects for alternatives. Alienation has always been a prominent concept in socialist/Marxist humanism (Fromm 1966; Alderson and Spencer 2017). Radical socialist humanism is the best way of opposing authoritarian capitalism’s and neoliberalism’s anti-humanism (Fuchs 2018).

Consequently, Harvey argues for both the use of the concept of universal alienation and for revolutionary humanism (Harvey 2014, 282-293 [Conclusion]). Humanism argues that “[w]e can through conscious thought and action change both the world we live in and ourselves for the better” and “that measures its achievements in terms of the liberation of human potentialities, capacities and powers” (Ibid.). Harvey notes that humanism has been perverted and turned into a particularism that disguises itself as universalism but advances “imperialist and colonial cultural domination” (Ibid., 285). He therefore argues for a “secular *revolutionary* humanism” that counters “alienation in its many forms and to radically change the world from its capitalist ways” (Ibid., 287). Hardt and Negri (2017, 72-76) argue that there are parallels between autonomist and humanist Marxism: Both take subjectivity, social struggles and social change serious and oppose dogmatic Marxism and Stalinism.

### 3. Formal and Real Subsumption

In their article *The Powers of the Exploited and the Social Ontology of Praxis* that is part of the present special issue, Michael Hardt and Toni Negri argue that neoliberalism has advanced the formal and real subsumption of society under capital, which means that ever more spaces that were autonomous from capital have come under its influence and control and have been turned into spheres of capital accumulation, commodity production and the exploitation of labour. The

commons that are available to all and produced as gift by nature or society have thereby become commodified. The subsumption of society under capital affects “muscles, languages, affects, codes”, “images”, “social intelligence, social relations”, “the cognitive, social, and cooperative components of living labour”, etc.

In the *Economic Manuscripts of 1861-63*, Marx introduces the concepts of the formal and real subsumption of labour under capital:

“Historically, in fact, at the start of its formation, we see capital take under its control (subsume under itself) not only the labour process in general but the specific actual labour processes as it finds them available in the existing technology, and in the form in which they have developed on the basis of non-capitalist relations of production. It finds in existence the actual production process – the particular mode of production – and at the beginning it only subsumes it *formally*, without making any changes in its specific technological character. Only in the course of its development does capital not only formally subsume the labour process but transform it, give the very mode of production a new shape and thus first create the mode of production peculiar to it. [...] This *formal* subsumption of the labour process, the assumption of control over it by capital, consists in the worker's subjection as worker to the supervision and therefore to the command of capital or the capitalist. Capital becomes command over labour” (MECW 30, 92-93, emphasis in original).

Formal subsumption means that wage-labour relations are imposed on particular forms of labour without transforming the mode of production. Real subsumption in contrast means a qualitative change of the mode of production so that more radical organisational and technological changes take place. Marx speaks of formal and real subsumption as “*two separate forms of capitalist production*” (MECW 34, 95, emphasis in original). Formal and real subsumption for Marx correspond to forms of capitalist production that are based on absolute and relative surplus-value production: “I call the form which rests on absolute surplus value the *formal subsumption of labour under capital*. [...] The real subsumption of labour under capital is developed in all the forms which produce relative, as opposed to absolute, surplus value” (Ibid., 95, 105, emphasis in original).

In real subsumption, science and technology transform the production process qualitatively:

“With the real subsumption of labour under capital, all the CHANGES we have discussed take place in the technological process, the labour process, and at the same time there are changes in the relation of the worker to his own production and to capital – and finally, the development of the productive power of labour takes place, in that the productive forces of social labour are developed, and only at that point does the application of natural forces on a large scale, of science and of machinery, to direct production become possible” (Ibid., 106).

The *Results of the Immediate Process of Production* is a text of 130 printed pages that Marx wrote sometime between June 1863 and December 1866 (Ernest Mandel, in Marx 1867, 944). It is printed as appendix in the Penguin-edition of *Capital Volume 1* (Marx 1867, 948-1084), but is not contained in the German Marx-Engels-Werke (MEW). In the *Results*, Marx again takes up the question of the formal and real subsumption of labour under capital and points out the importance of machinery as method of relative surplus-value production in the real subsumption of labour under capital:

“The general features of the *formal subsumption* remain, viz. the *direct subordination of the labour process to capital*, irrespective of the state of its technological development. But on this

foundation there now arises a technologically and otherwise *specific mode of production – capitalist production* – which transforms the nature of *the labour process and its actual conditions*. Only when that happens do we witness the *real subsumption of labour under capital*. [...] The real subsumption of labour under capital is developed in all the forms evolved by relative, as opposed to absolute surplus-value. With the real subsumption of labour under capital a complete (and constantly repeated) revolution takes place in the mode of production, in the productivity of the workers and in the relations between workers and capitalists” (Marx 1867, 1034-1035).

Hardt and Negri have further developed Marx’s notions of formal and real subsumption by extending them from the realm of labour to society as totality and all of society’s moments. In *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*, Negri (1991, 121) speaks of “the real subsumption of world society under capital” and says that in the passage from formal to real subsumption, capital becomes “a real subject” (Ibid., 123). In *Labor of Dionysus*, Hardt and Negri (1994) characterise real subsumption as the postmodern phase of capitalist development:

“Postmodern capitalism should be understood first, or as a first approximation, in terms of what Marx called the phase of the real subsumption of society under capital. In the previous phase (that of the formal subsumption), capital operated a hegemony over social production, but there still remained numerous production processes that originated outside of capital as leftovers from the precapitalist era. Capital subsumes these foreign processes formally, bringing them under the reign of capitalist relations. In the phase of the real subsumption, capital no longer has an outside in the sense that these foreign processes of production have disappeared. All productive processes arise within capital itself and thus the production and reproduction of the entire social world take place within capital. The specifically capitalist rules of productive relations and capitalist exploitation that were developed in the factory have now seeped outside the factory walls to permeate and define all social relations – this is the sense in which we insist that contemporary society should now be recognized as a factory-society” (Hardt and Negri 1994, 15).

In *Commonwealth*, Hardt and Negri argue that formal subsumption means the creation of “circuits of capitalist production” and the passage from formal to real subsumption results in the production of “severe divisions and hierarchies within the capitalist globe” (Hardt and Negri 2009, 230). Real subsumption creates “new, properly capitalist forms”, whereas formal subsumption merely instrumentalises non-capitalist practices and relations (Ibid., 142). In their latest book *Assembly*, Hardt and Negri write that “*the richness of the category of formal subsumption is indeed that it reveals the economic and cultural differences of labor, land, society, and community that have been subsumed within capitalist production but maintain their connection to the territory and the past*” (Hardt and Negri 2017, 182; emphasis in original).

In *Assembly*, Hardt and Negri (2017, xix) argue that we have experienced the rise of what they term “the capitalist extraction of value [...] from the common”. We can say that subsumption has two aspects: It is on the one hand the starting point and enablement of the application of the logic of capital and commodities to a space, system, realm, practice, structure or resource. On the other hand, there can be potential resistance to subsumption – struggles for decommmodification and the appropriation of the commons – so that capital needs to reproduce subsumption by means of e.g. law, ideology, corruption, the dull compulsion of the market, or physical violence (including warfare). Contemporary capitalism’s class structure is for Hardt and Negri (2017, 166-171) based on the extraction of the common, which includes the extraction of natural resources;

data mining/data extraction; the extraction of the social from the urban spaces on real estate markets; and finance as extractive industry.

Hardt and Negri (Ibid., 166) discern among two main forms of the common: the natural and the social commons. These two types are further subdivided into five forms (Ibid.):

- 1) The earth and its ecosystems;
- 2) The “immaterial” common of ideas, codes, images and cultural products;
- 3) Tangible goods produced by co-operative work;
- 4) Metropolitan and rural spaces that are realms of communication, cultural interaction and co-operation;
- 5) Social institutions and services that organise housing, welfare, health, and education (Ibid.).

In his contribution *Universal Alienation and the Real Subsumption of Daily Life Under Capital: A Response to Hardt and Negri* in the present special issue, David Harvey welcomes Michael Hardt and Toni Negri’s interpretation of Marx’s concepts of formal and real subsumption and points out parallels to his notion of universal alienation. He stresses that it is important to be “explicit about what it is that is being subsumed into what” and about the “many different forms that real subsumption under the power of capital in general takes in our times”.

#### 4. Primitive Accumulation

Marx (1867) dedicated a long chapter of *Capital Volume I* to primitive accumulation – Chapter 24 in the German edition. In the English edition, Chapter 24’s seven sub-sections were turned into seven separate chapters (chapters 26-32). Together with the concluding chapter on the modern theory of colonisation, they form part eight that is titled “So-Called Primitive Accumulation”.

For Marx, primitive accumulation is the phase that “precedes capitalist accumulation” (1867, 873), “the pre-history of capital” (Ibid., 875), and capitalism’s “point of departure” (Ibid., 873), where “conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force, play the greatest part” (Ibid., 874). During this phase, resources are transformed into capital and humans into proletarians. Primitive accumulation is “the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production” (Ibid., 875). Marx shows that small landowners have been robbed of their land and how communal land was turned into private property. As a consequence, feudalism turned into capitalism. The history of expropriation “is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire” (Ibid., 875).

In the report (to the Central Council of the International) *Value, Price and Profit*, Marx (1865, 129) argues that primitive accumulation should in fact be called primitive expropriation because it means the separation of the producers from the means of production. “*Separation* between the Man of Labour and the Instruments of Labour once established, such a state of things will maintain itself and reproduce itself upon a constantly increasing scale, until a new and fundamental revolution in the mode of production should again overturn it, and restore the original union in a new historical form” (Ibid.).

Rosa Luxemburg interpreted primitive accumulation not just as the early, violent stage of capitalism, but as an ongoing process. Marx hinted at such an understanding by saying that primitive accumulation has to “maintain itself and reproduce itself” (Marx 1865, 129). “The accumulation of capital, seen as an historical process, employs force as a permanent weapon, not only at its genesis, but further on down to the present day” (Luxemburg 1913, 351). Luxemburg

argues that capital creates milieus of primitive accumulation that “provide a fertile soil for capitalism” (*Ibid.*, 397).

David Harvey (2003) has interpreted Luxemburg’s concept of ongoing primitive accumulation as accumulation by dispossession, the central feature of neoliberal capitalism. “A general re-evaluation of the continuous role and persistence of the predatory practices of ‘primitive’ or ‘original’ accumulation within the long historical geography of capital accumulation is, therefore, very much in order, as several commentators have recently observed. Since it seems peculiar to call an ongoing process ‘primitive’ or ‘original’ I shall, in what follows, substitute these terms by the concept of ‘accumulation by dispossession’” (Harvey 2003, 144). Methods of accumulation by dispossession include e.g. privatisation, commodification, financialisation, the management and manipulation of crises, and state redistribution (Harvey 2005a, 160-165). Through accumulation by dispossession, “predatory activity has become internalized within capitalism (through, for example, privatization, deindustrialization or the erosion of pension and welfare rights orchestrated largely through the credit system and the deployment of state powers)” (Harvey 2006, xvii). “Capitalism would long ago have ceased to exist had it not engaged in fresh rounds of primitive accumulation, chiefly through the violence of imperialism” (Harvey 2010, 306).

Hardt and Negri in their article *The Powers of the Exploited and the Social Ontology of Praxis* argue that the subsumption of society under capital is the “new primitive accumulation of the socially produced commons by capital”. They write that this process resembles what David Harvey describes as accumulation by dispossession, which he conceives as ongoing primitive accumulation. Subsumption does not necessarily operate only “by brute force” (as in warfare), although physical violence can also be involved. Other methods used can include the law, illegal practices tolerated by the state, corruption, the neoliberal ideology of entrepreneurship, ideologies that create and reproduce capitalist hegemony, financial markets, and other forms of violence.

Hardt and Negri prefer to define primitive accumulation as a phase in capitalist development and to use the term (formal and real) subsumption for what Luxemburg and Harvey characterise as ongoing primitive accumulation. In *Assembly*, they discern among “three broad phases of capital: the phase of so-called primitive accumulation, by which we mean here simply the period in which capital was accumulated primarily through the expropriation and enclosures of the commons in Europe and elsewhere through the various forms of theft that accompanied European conquest and colonization; the phase that stretches from the birth of manufacture through the dominance of large-scale industry over the global economy; and, finally, the contemporary, post-Fordist phase characterized by the realization of the world market and the forms of extraction typical of finance” (Hardt and Negri 2017, 184-185).

As part of the present special issue, Hardt and Negri argue in their essay *The Multiplicities within Capitalist Rule and the Articulation of Struggles* that they prefer to use the concepts of formal/real subsumption over the use of (ongoing primitive) accumulation and universal alienation. They say that the concepts of formal and real subsumption allow to best capture the inner and outer dynamics of capitalism: Formal subsumption subsumes something from the outside into capital, whereas real subsumption qualitatively transforms capital’s inner dynamics. Hardt and Negri write that the concept of subsumption allows the argument that racism and patriarchy are older than capital and relatively autonomous, but have become subsumed under capitalism, creating racial capitalism and patriarchal capitalism so that capitalism, racism and patriarchy have become “intimately intertwined”. Patriarchy and racism are relatively autonomous

and therefore only formally subsumed. At the same time, they have transformed capitalist production and so have also become really subsumed under capital. Capitalism as form of exploitation and other forms of domination are identical and different at the same time, they form a dynamic dialectic, a totality with open and overgrasping moments that are mutually producing each other.

The notion of ongoing primitive accumulation – that goes back to Rosa Luxemburg and has, among others, been used by Harvey and Marxist feminists such as the “Bielefeld School of Feminism” (Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, Maria Mies, Claudia von Werlhof) –, can be employed in a manner comparable to Hardt and Negri’s use of the notions of the formal and real subsumption of society under capital (see [Fuchs 2016, Chapter 26](#) for a detailed interpretation of the concept of primitive accumulation based on Marx, Luxemburg, Marxist feminism and Harvey). Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen and Werlhof (1988) argue from a feminist perspective that capitalism requires milieus of primitive accumulation for its reproduction. Capital cannot exist without making use of unpaid resources stemming from nature, nonwage/unremunerated labour (such as housework), and the periphery. “Women, colonies and nature” are “the main targets of this process of ongoing primitive accumulation” (Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen and Werlhof 1988, 6). They form inner colonies of capitalism. This process corresponds to what Hardt/Negri term formal subsumption of society under capital. In neoliberal capitalism, the inner colonies transform the very nature of capitalist production so that housewifed labour that is “a source of unchecked, unlimited exploitation” emerges (Mies 1986, 16). This process corresponds to what Hardt/Negri term the real subsumption of society under labour: The precarious reality of the houseworker, the unemployed, and the Global South is taken as model for qualitatively transforming capitalism into neoliberal capitalism. Primitive accumulation thereby not just forms inner colonies of capitalism, but also qualitatively transforms wage-labour and capitalism’s core relations. Primitive accumulation and formal/real subsumption are both suited means for the Marxian explanation of the role of domination in capitalism and the relationship of class and domination.

The notion of primitive accumulation in Luxemburg’s meaning of the term helps to grasp capitalism’s “‘inside-outside’ dialectic” (Harvey 2003, 141). Not everything is subsumed under capital accumulation. For hope, resistance and potentials for alternatives to thrive, outside spaces that transcend the logic of capital are important. The potential for the creation of such spaces of hope (Harvey 2000) and resources of hope (Williams 1989) always remain and constitute material foundations of the principle of hope. “Hope is thus ultimately a practical, a militant emotion, it unfurls banners. If confidence emerges from hope as well, then the expectant emotion which has become absolutely positive is present or as good as present, the opposite pole to despair” (Bloch 1986, 112).

Within capitalist society, we find experienced spaces, conceptualised spaces and lived spaces (Harvey 2005b, 105-106) in which hope and struggles for alternatives to capitalism can develop. But capitalism is a totality, which means that everything that exists in contemporary society is related to capital. Capital accumulation implies an imperialistic character: It tries to subsume social relations into its inner dynamic in processes of original primitive accumulation (that can also be termed processes of formal subsumption) in order to create inner colonies of accumulation that are cheap or gratis resources instrumentalised in capital accumulation. Capitalism through crises and destruction also wrecks parts of its inner dynamics, which requires to create new spheres of accumulation and instrumentalisation. At the same time, existing inner

milieus also need to be economically, politically and ideologically reproduced in order to hinder resistance and alternatives. Original primitive accumulation is thereby constantly repeated and reproduced as an ongoing process. At certain moments, capitalism's inner colonies can become models for the qualitative transformation of capitalist production, distribution, circulation and consumption into a new capitalist regime of accumulation. In such cases, spheres of ongoing primitive accumulation and formal subsumption can become models for a new regime of accumulation (corresponding to the real subsumption of society under capital). Social struggles resist original and ongoing primitive accumulation, formal and real subsumption, by trying to create spaces that stand outside the logic and influence of capital.

The capitalist welfare state and the public university are good examples: They are funded out of general taxation and do not follow the logic of capital accumulation. But they create resources that capital requires and subsumes: skilled workers, skilled managers, reproduced labour-power, scientific knowledge and technological innovations that take on the form of fixed capital, etc. The welfare state and the public university are therefore within capitalism always formally subsumed, at the same time inside and outside of capital. The rise of neoliberal capitalism has brought a qualitative shift: Many public institutions have become directly spheres shaped by the logic of capital. Education, health care and other public services have become commodities, public institutions define profit goals, public service employees have constant pressure to increase efficiency and face the threat of being laid off due to cuts and austerity, etc. The model of precarious life and labour that has shaped the lives of houseworkers, the poor, the unemployed and the Global South for a long time, has become capitalism's regime of accumulation that shapes and qualitatively transforms social relations, including the welfare state and the public university.

Although the theoretical perspectives of Harvey and Hardt/Negri are highly compatible, one can identify certain differences and nuances, for example in respect to the relationship of capital, racism, and patriarchy. Hardt and Negri in the present special issue argue that capitalism, patriarchy, and racism have "equal weight" and are "on equal terms". They form a multiplicity of contradictions with relative autonomy. David Harvey (2014, 8) argues for the existence of a unity within the diversity of such contradictions and therefore says that the contradictions of capital form the "economic engine of capitalism".

"Racialisation and gender discriminations have been around for a very long time and there is no question that the history of capitalism is an intensely racialised and gendered history. [...] Contemporary capitalism plainly feeds of gender discriminations and violence as well as upon the frequent dehumanisation of people of colour. The intersections and interactions between racialisation and capital accumulation are both highly visible and powerfully present. But an examination of these tells me nothing particular about how the economic engine of capital works, even as it identifies one source from where it plainly draws its energy. [...] wars, nationalism, geopolitical struggles, disasters of various kinds all enter into the dynamics of capitalism, along with heavy doses of racism and gender, sexual, religious and ethnic hatreds and discriminations" (Ibid., 7-8).

As an implicit critique of postmodernism - that David Harvey (1990) sees as the ideology corresponding to the flexible regime of capitalist accumulation - Harvey (2014, 10) argues that it is "surely myopic, if not dangerous and ridiculous, to dismiss as 'capitalo-centric' interpretations and theories of how the economic engine of capital accumulation works in relation to the present conjuncture. Without such studies we will likely misread and misinterpret the events that are

occurring around us. Erroneous interpretations will almost certainly lead to erroneous politics whose likely outcome will be to deepen rather than to alleviate crises of accumulation and the social misery that derives from them”.

The economic and the non-economic are at the same time identical and different: They are all realms of social production, which is the economic moment of the social that binds together all human existence. All social spaces and systems have their relative autonomy from the economy and not just overgrasp into, but also shape the economy. In capitalism, the economic moment takes on the form of the logic of capital accumulation and general commodity production, circulation, distribution and consumption. In capitalism, society’s moments are as a consequence at the same time shaped by and shaping the logic of capital and to specific, variable degrees more or less autonomous from it. Capital’s imperialist logic aims to subsume as many social relations as possible directly and indirectly under the logic of capital. Progressive social struggles have concrete goals but can only be emancipatory if they are struggles against capital.

#### 5. Conclusion: Anti-Value Struggles and Self-Valorisation

The contributions by and the discussion between David Harvey and Michael Hardt/Toni Negri in the present special issue show that 200 years after Karl Marx’s birth, his theory and politics remain of key importance for critiquing capitalism and envisioning and informing struggles for alternatives. Hardt, Harvey and Negri have consistently shown that Marxian categories, such as capitalism, labour, class, class struggles, etc. remain vital for interpreting and changing contemporary society. In the Marx@200 special issue, they show that this is also true for the categories of alienation and formal/real subsumption.

We can summarise some key results of the present reflection-paper:

□ Alienation as Marx’s most universal critical category: For Marx, alienation is both the specific form of the object-subject dialectic that constitutes capitalism as well as the general process of domination, by which humans are continuously put out of control of the structures that constitute their lives. Alienation is a particular Marxian category as well as the most universal critical category he uses for characterising domination.

□ Three aspects of universal alienation: David Harvey shows that alienation is universal in three respects: 1) Alienation extends beyond production into the realms of realisation distribution and consumption; 2) it extends beyond the economy into politics, culture, social relations, and subjectivity; 3) it has in neoliberal capitalism been generalised as the commodification of (almost) everything and accumulation by dispossession, which has resulted in far-right phenomena such as Donald Trump (for a detailed analysis of the rise of Trump’s political economy and ideology and the associated transformation of capitalism, see [Fuchs 2018](#)).

□ The relationship of capital and its outside: Capitalism has always lived from economically instrumentalising non-capitalist milieus, practices, structures, and social systems. The subsumption of non-capitalist social relations into capitalism again and again also transforms the capitalist modes of production, reproduction, circulation, distribution and consumption. These two processes can be explained both with the help of Marx’s notion of primitive accumulation and his notions of formal and real subsumption.

□ Original/ongoing primitive accumulation, formal/real subsumption: Whereas Hardt/Negri interpret primitive accumulation as the original phase of capitalism, Harvey sees it as an ongoing process of accumulation by dispossession. The distinction between original and

ongoing primitive accumulation corresponds to the notions of formal and real subsumption of society under capital.

□ The reproduction of capitalism: For capitalism to continue to exist, it needs to again and again subsume social relations under capital. Subsumed social relations can subsequently also qualitatively transform capitalism itself. There are certain initial processes that start off specific forms of alienation and accumulation within capitalist society. Formal subsumption and original primitive accumulation (by dispossession) are categories characterising this point of subsumption. But capitalism needs to be reproduced, otherwise it enters a crisis phase and its potential demise. As a consequence, capitalist practices aim at the ongoing reproduction of alienation, primitive accumulation and the subsumption of society under capital. Marx identified both original and ongoing aspects of alienation, subsumption and primitive accumulation. Capitalism reproduces itself through the dialectic of ongoing and primitive accumulation and the dialectic of formal and real subsumption.

The approaches of Toni Negri/Michael Hardt and David Harvey share the political perspective of a commons-based, participatory-democratic society as alternative to capitalism – democratic commonism. As the means to this end, they propagate radical reformism, the dialectic of reform and revolution, or what Rosa Luxemburg in the conclusion to the Marx@200 special issue (the first English translation of her article titled “Karl Marx”) terms “revolutionary Realpolitik”. The political question is how political praxis can turn the contradictions of capital and value into alternatives to capitalism. These alternatives are not sufficiently characterised as “post-capitalism” because one thereby only names a later stage of society but not its desirable quality as democratic commons-based society.

David Harvey (2017, Chapter 4) distinguishes between anti-value arising from debt and devaluation in crises from “the active anti-value of political resistance to commodification and privatisation” that defines “an active field of anti-capitalist struggle” (Harvey 2017, 76). He argues that such struggles include consumer boycotts and “struggles over realization” (Ibid., 200) for example over telephone bills, credit card fees, etc. (Ibid., 199) and anti-debt struggles as struggles over distribution.

The category of anti-value can both mean *Nicht-Wert* (not-value) and *Gegenwert* (opposition to value). These are two moments of a dialectic of struggle: The opposition to value constitutes struggles that aim at a society based on not-value, i.e. goods and social relations that are defined by their meaningfulness for human use and not by the logic of exchange and capital accumulation.

Marx uses the notion of “not-value” (*Nicht-Wert* in German) in a passage in the *Grundrisse* (Marx 1857/58, 295-297), where he discusses the dialectic of capital as not-labour and labour as not-value and not-capital. Not-value is “purely objective use value” (Ibid., 296). Under capitalism’s dull compulsions, labour is “absolute poverty” (Ibid.). But at the same time, work is the “the general possibility of wealth as subject and as activity” (Ibid.) and therefore the source of commodities, capital and value. Not-value is also the determinate negation of capital, commodities and value. Not-value is the revolutionary sublation of capital and capitalism, the moment of political praxis.

David Harvey’s stress on anti-value as moment of political praxis has clear parallels to autonomist Marxism’s notion of self-valorisation. Marxists do not agree on the theoretical question of whether the alternative to value is another form of value or the abolition of value,

which relates to the question of whether value is a capitalist or a more general phenomenon. But notwithstanding pure terminology, there are parallels between Harvey's notion of anti-value and Hardt/Negri's concept of self-valorisation. Capital "consists solely in its own motion as self-valorizing value" (Marx 1867, 425). Toni Negri opposes capital's self-referential character by the working class' potential for self-referential autonomy, in which work does not produce capital and commodities, but an end-in-and-for-itself, i.e. products that satisfy humanity's need and thereby do not serve class distinctions.

Negri (1991, 148) contrasts the concept of capital's self-valorisation to worker self-valorisation. Self-valorisation means the "independence of the worker-subject" (Ibid., 135), "non-work" (Ibid., 149). Negri (Ibid., 148) writes that proletarian self-valorisation starts with the refusal of work in capitalism and comes to full effect in communism (Ibid.). Michael Ryan says in the introduction to the English translation of Negri's (1991) *Marx Beyond Marx* that Negri defines self-valorisation as "working for oneself as a class, asserting one's own needs as primary to capital's need for value" (Negri 1991, xxx). Harry Cleaver (1992, 129) defines self-valorisation as "a process of valorisation which is autonomous from capitalist valorisation - a self-defining, self-determining process which goes beyond the mere resistance to capitalist valorisation to a positive project of self-constitution" that constitutes a "working class for-itself". "Auto-valorisation and sabotage are the double figure of one and the same object - or, better, they are the two faces of Janus, the gateway to the constitution of the subject" (Negri 1992, 82). In *Assembly*, Hardt and Negri re-affirm self-valorisation as struggle against digital capital(ism): "Exploit yourself, capital tells productive subjectivities, and they respond, we want to valorize ourselves, governing the common that we produce" (Hardt and Negri 2017, 123).

David Harvey (2017, 77) points out the parallels between his concept of anti-value and the autonomist notion of self-valorisation: "The working class (however defined) is the embodiment of anti-value. It is on the basis of this conception of alienated labour that Tronti, Negri and the Italian autonomistas build their theory of labour resistance and class struggle at the point of production. The act of refusal to work is anti-value personified. This class struggle occurs in the hidden abode of production". Harvey stresses in the present special issue (in respect to Hardt and Negri) that "[w]e can debate and disagree on this or that but the spirit of our endeavours is similar". It is only out of the opposition to "nihilistic forms of protest and fascistic accommodations", as Harvey stresses in the present special issue, that "anti-capitalist movements" can arise that create, as Hardt and Negri say at the end of their first contribution to the present publication, a new foundation of production. Only then will real subsumption be reversed so that capital becomes subsumed under society in a process of political sublation of capital that abolishes exploited labour and necessity and establishes the realm of human freedom.

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