

Read Capital: The First Sentence

Or Capital starts with Wealth, not with the Commodity

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The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as an "immense accumulation of commodities", its unit being a single commodity.

Translation by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, supervised by Friedrich Engels (Marx 1867/1965, 35)

The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an "immense collection of commodities"; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form. Translation by Ben Fowkes (Marx 1867/1990, 125)

Der Reichtum der Gesellschaften, in welchen kapitalistische Produktionsweise herrscht, erscheint als eine "ungeheure Warensammlung", die einzelne Ware als seine Elementarform. Marx 1867/1985, 49 [2]

Introduction

Few of the many commentaries on *Capital* even mention the first sentence of the book. [3] It is commonly asserted that the starting-point for Marx's discussion is the commodity. The first sentence is then seen as a curtain-raiser rather than as having significance on its own: it simply leads us in to the important issue, which is the analysis of the commodity. And yet, if we read the first sentence, we see that Marx does not start with the commodity, that before he ever mentions the commodity, he opens a whole world of questions that are of fundamental political and theoretical importance.

In what follows I shall examine the subject, object and predicate of the first sentence in order to explore this world of questions. My aim is not to discover the "true Marx" but to analyse the text and ask what it offers to the contemporary struggle against capitalism.

The subject

The subject of the first sentence is not the commodity. It is "the wealth" – "the wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails". This wealth "appears as an "immense collection of commodities", but first we shall focus just on the subject, the wealth.

It is easy to skip over the significance of the first sentence precisely because of what the sentence itself asserts. It is the very fact that wealth appears as a collection of commodities to us who live in capitalist society that makes us take this appearance for granted. We are used to seeing wealth in that way. When we think of wealth we usually think of material wealth, of the things that a person has, probably of money, the general equivalent of commodities. If we refer to someone as being wealthy, we generally mean that she or he has a lot of money, and can therefore dispose of an immense amount of commodities. In other words, the form in which wealth appears leads us to establish an identity between wealth and the immense collection of commodities, to treat them as being identical. And if this were so, then it would indeed be right to treat the first sentence as curtain-raiser, as a sentence that has significance only in leading us on to the central issue, the commodity.

However, wealth does not have to be thought of in this way. For English-speakers, this is perhaps easier to see if we go back to the original German term that Marx uses, *Reichtum*, which could just as easily have been translated as "richness": in capitalist society, richness appears as an immense collection of commodities. There is certainly no sharp difference in

English between the concepts of richness and wealth, but richness strikes us as having a broader meaning: a rich tapestry, an enriching conversation, a rich life or experience, a rich diversity of colours.

The first sentence, by talking of the “wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails” invites us to ask what would richness (or wealth) look like in a society in which the capitalist mode of production did not prevail? In the *Grundrisse*, written not very much earlier, Marx gives a direct answer to our question:

“In fact, however, when the limited bourgeois form is stripped away, what is wealth other than the universality of human needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces etc., created through universal exchange? The full development of human mastery over the forces of nature, those of so-called nature as well as of humanity’s own nature? The absolute working-out of his creative potentialities, with no presupposition other than the previous historic development, which makes this totality of development, i.e. the development of all human powers as such the end in itself, not as measured on a *predetermined* yardstick? Where he does not produce himself in one specificity, but produces his totality? Strives not to remain something he has become, but is in the absolute movement of becoming? In bourgeois economics – and in the epoch of production to which it corresponds – this complete working-out of the human content appears as a complete emptying-out, this universal objectification as total alienation, and the tearing-down of all limited, one-sided aims as sacrifice of the human end-in-itself to an entirely external end.” (1857/1973, 488) [4]

Once we read that account of wealth in the *Grundrisse* [5], the first sentence of *Capital* takes on much more vivid colours. Wealth is “the universality of human needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces etc., created through universal exchange [6]”. It is collective, it is social, the product of human interaction – the richness of what is often referred to as “the common” [7]. It is in movement: “the absolute working-out of [humanity’s] creative potentialities”, “the absolute movement of becoming”. It is diverse: “the development of all human powers as [an] end in itself”. Richness, the richness of a street filled with different traditions and ways of living, the richness of the turn of the seasons in the countryside, the richness of a voice raised in song, be it human or of a bird. The potentially unlimited richness of richnesses: that is what appears in our society as an immense collection of commodities [8]. This first sentence is no innocuous curtain-raiser. Marx is opening up a world of tension. He invites our indignation, our sense of dignity damaged.

This tension is manifest not just in the relation between subject and predicate (wealth and commodities) but already within the subject of the first sentence, “The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails”. We start from where we are: capitalist society, a society in which the capitalist mode of production prevails (or rules) [9]. This is the society in which we live, this is the society with which we have to deal. The subject of the sentence is a historically specific subject, but it is a subject that pushes beyond its own historical specificity. The qualification of the subject (“of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails”) is a limitation that suggests its own overcoming: the limitation of wealth posits a wealth that is not so limited. By limiting the subject in this way, we are already suggesting that there is something beyond the limits, a wealth that, at least potentially, is not the wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails. Wealth misfits: it is not contained within the limitation “of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails”, it overflows.

How to understand this overflowing, this overcoming of the limits placed on wealth? By constituting wealth as the subject and not the object of the sentence, Marx is suggesting that wealth itself is the source of movement beyond its own limits. He announces that the story he is about to tell is the story of human richness (humanity in the absolute movement of its becoming) driving against and beyond the bonds that hold it captive. In these very first words, Marx makes it clear that this book is not a theory of domination, but a theory of the pushing against domination, and indeed against all limits.

The wealth that is the subject of the first sentence is not an a-historical or trans-historical category, but it is a category that pushes beyond its own historical specification. It does not stand outside the predicate, it is not external to the collection of commodities, but it does stand in-against-and-beyond it. It is not just an otherness that is announced in the opening words [10], but an antagonism, an antagonism that pushes beyond itself. The richness to which we are introduced in these opening words is not the richness of an a-historical humanism, but a richness that stands in historically specific revolt against its own limitation.

Wealth, the richness of human creativity, stands then as subject, as restless, unsatisfied subject. As proud subject, the first words of the first chapter. Wealth dares, wealth roars. With indignation certainly, with power perhaps. This turns on its head much of left-wing thought, which takes poverty, not richness, as its starting point. The first sentence of *Capital* makes us think otherwise: it is not because we are poor that we fight, but because we are rich. It is not because we are poor that we struggle against capitalism, but because "the absolute working-out of [our] creative potentialities" is frustrated, because "the absolute movement of [our] becoming" is leashed. It is our richness that raises its head and roars that it will break its bonds.

The predicate

Wealth, richness, appears in capitalist societies as "an immense collection of commodities". The commodity, Marx tells us at the beginning of the second paragraph, "is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another" (translation by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, (Marx 1867/1965, 35)). [11] The commodity is an object outside us, a thing produced for sale.

Marx is taking us into the narrow confines of a dungeon. There is a dramatic transition in this first sentence from a world of richness (humanity "in the absolute movement of becoming") to a world composed of an immense collection of objects outside us. Marx is taking us by the hand and leading us in to the horrific world of political economy. Dramatically, we are reminded of the subtitle of the book: A Critique of Political Economy. It is the tension between the subject and the predicate of this first sentence that is the basis of the critique. Once we have walked through this dire passage from wealth to commodities, then Marx can say, as he does in the second sentence, "Our investigation therefore begins with the analysis of the commodity." [12] But that does not make the commodity the starting point of Marx's analysis. It is wealth – that richness that stands in-against-and-beyond the world of commodities - that is the starting point. It is only after we have gone down in to the narrow, dark world of political economy that the commodity becomes the point of departure. If we forget the world outside, the world of richness, then we forget ourselves, our critique, our opposition, the real starting point.

The passage in the first sentence is a narrowing, a reduction of the richness of the world to the world of political economy, of commodities. Marx is often accused of being guilty of this

narrowing, of having a purely economic view of the world, of leaving out of account the richness of life and the multiplicity of forms of oppression. It is clear from the first sentence that nothing could be further from the truth. His critique of political economy is not just a critique of the different theories of the economists, it is a critique of the economic as such, a critique of the world that reduces human richness to the economic. This is precisely the point made at the end of the passage from the *Grundrisse* previously cited: "In bourgeois economics – and in the epoch of production to which it corresponds – this complete working-out of the human content appears as a complete emptying-out, this universal objectification as total alienation, and the tearing-down of all limited, one-sided aims as sacrifice of the human end-in-itself to an entirely external end." It is not Marx but the world's reduction of everything to the economic that cuts out that which does not fit in to the logic of the commodity.

The movement from wealth to commodities is a movement in to a law-bound world, a world of tight social cohesion, a world that can be understood as a totality, a world of synthesis. There is no inherent reason why the production of wealth should follow any set of laws. The absolute working out of our creative potentialities can be followed in many different directions, for different motives, at different rhythms. This is not so with commodities: they are produced for exchange and the need to exchange them imposes the need to produce them with labour that is socially necessary, and this creates a whole world of functional necessities, of social determinations that operate as laws independent of any conscious control. Marx examines these laws in *Capital*, but from a vantage point that is against and beyond this law-bound totality.

The movement from wealth to commodities is also the movement to a quantifiable and quantified world. The little addendum to the predicate, "its unit being a single commodity" (or in Fowkes' translation: "the individual commodity appears as its elementary form") acquires significance. If one thinks of wealth as "the absolute working-out of [human] creative potentialities", then it makes no sense at all to think of it being subdivided into units or individual pieces of wealth. It is when this wealth is reduced to a collection of objects outside us that it becomes possible to speak of its subdivision into units: indeed not only possible, but the subdivision of this wealth into interchangeable units or individual commodities is an essential part of the passage from the subject of the sentence to its predicate. [13]

The Verb

Wealth *appears as* [14] an immense collection of commodities. What does "appears as" mean?

1. The appearance is not a false appearance: Marx does not say "wealth seems to be an immense collection of commodities, but this is a mistake, in reality it is something else" [15]. Such an interpretation would detach the appearance from its substratum, that is, from that which so appears, and treat the relation between the latter and the former as a matter of chance, whereas for Marx, the relation between appearance and substratum is of central importance. The appearance is a real appearance, an appearance which has a general validity, a certain stability. It is not an appearance that will go away once we point out that it is a mistake. It is an appearance that is generated by "those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails".

We can indicate the stability or reality of this appearance by saying that wealth in capitalist society exists *in the form of* an immense collection of commodities. "Form" in this context can be understood as "mode of existence" [16]: the mode of existence of wealth in capitalist societies is an immense collection of commodities.

2. The appearance, then, has a general validity. Marx is not saying "The wealth of these societies appears to Adam Smith or David Ricardo as an immense collection of commodities". He is also not saying that "wealth appears to the bourgeoisie as a mass of commodities, but the proletariat knows it is not so" [17] or that "wealth is presented by bourgeois ideology as a collection of commodities". Rather, wealth in these societies appears as or exists in the form of commodities. It appears as such to the members of this society, and it appears as such because it is so, the appearance is real, wealth really exists in the form of an immense collection of commodities. That is really the way that wealth is treated by people, that is the force that shapes what wealth is produced and how. We have already suggested that the force of this real appearance is the key to understanding the lack of importance generally attributed to this first sentence.

3. This presents us with a problem that is central to the reading of *Capital*. If wealth appears as such, *what it is that makes it possible for Marx to write this sentence?* The sentence could not have been written if Marx had not been able to transcend the appearance in some way. How can we explain this?

The most obvious explanation is an explanation in personal terms. Marx was a very clever man, we who now share his insight are very clever too, that is what allows us to break the appearances. There are two problems with this explanation. The first is that it runs counter to Marx's own method. For him, the appearance is a real appearance, one that has a real substratum, that has its basis in the current organisation of human activity. The limits of Smith's and Ricardo's thought, for example, are not the result of mistakes or lack of intelligence, but of the fact that their feet and heads were located in the social relations of capitalism. It is not just that they opted to take the side of the bourgeoisie, but that their ideas were made possible and also limited by the social relations of which they were part. The second problem with this sort of explanation is that it leads to a personal separation between those who understand that wealth is more than commodities and the masses who are entrapped in the world of appearances. In such a case, it is the responsibility of the enlightened few to enlighten (or bring consciousness to) the masses. The experiences of the last century indicate that such a conception can have disastrous consequences.

For Marx to write the sentence, and for us to share it, there must be more than cleverness, more than an explanation in personal terms. For Marx to transcend the appearance and take his stand beyond it (as he does in this first sentence), there must be a non-appearance, an overflowing, misfitting, a remainder that is not contained within the appearance. For Marx to go beyond the appearance in thought, there must be a breaking of the appearance in practice. It is the real non-appearance that gives us the vantage point from which we can say that "wealth appears as commodities". When we make that statement, we are inevitably saying at the same time "but this statement is not the whole truth because the only thing that allows us to make the statement is the fact that it is also true that wealth does not appear as commodities, that wealth exists in-against-and-beyond commodities". The sentence necessarily carries an unstated undercurrent, a non-appearance. The appearance excludes from sight that which does not appear, an invisible or latent substratum, and it is the real existence of this substratum, this "that which does not appear", that allows us to understand

and make ours that first sentence. We might say that half of the first sentence is written in invisible ink.

This is where we readers of *Capital* live and want to live: in the world that does not fall in to the appearance of wealth as commodities. If we think of the movement from wealth to commodities as the transition in to a dungeon of things, then we, the readers of *Capital* are on the side of wealth, digging our heels in to the ground and screaming that we do not want to be dragged in to the dungeon, that we do not want to fall in to the bewitched world of appearances that threatens to swallow us whole. Obvious: why else would we read *Capital*?

Once we ask the question of how it is possible to make this statement (and it is hard to see how it can be avoided), then the whole of *Capital* changes. From being a tale of how things fit together, it becomes a tale of misfitting. And then we realise that our pleasure in reading it comes from the fact that we too are misfits: we live in-against-and-beyond this system we are trying to understand.

4. The writing of the first sentence is possible only because the relation between wealth and commodities is not one of identity. Wealth does not fit in to the commodity without a remainder: it is this remainder that makes the writing (and the reading) of the sentence possible.

The verb “appears as” does not indicate an identity. Marx is not using the term “appears as” loosely (as we often do) to mean “The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails *is* an “immense collection of commodities”. Nevertheless, the verb does express a process of identifying. In this society wealth comes to be identified as a collection of commodities. There is a process of identifying, but the process is not complete, for it is confronted by a moving in the opposite direction, a resistance. In other words the relation between appearance and non-appearance is an antagonistic one. There is a live antagonism between the dragging of wealth into the commodity form and the forces that push against and beyond the process of commodification. On the one hand the movement of “appearing as”, of forming, identifying; on the other the movement of anti-identifying, of overflowing, of misfitting. The appearance, the commodity, presents itself as non-antagonistic, but this conceals the antagonism that underlies it. The wealth of these societies appears as an immense collection of commodities: this appearance is an active appearing, an active forming or identifying that conceals that antagonistic force that makes this statement possible, the force that derives from the fact that it is also true that wealth does not appear as a collection of commodities, that it overflows that appearance.

That which appears a *fait accompli* (the existence of wealth in the commodity form) is a live antagonism. If we think of the transition from the subject to the predicate of the sentence as the dragging of richness into the dungeon of the commodity, then the overflowing tells us that the dungeon door has not clanged shut, that the dragging is still continuing.

The commodity form, far from being accomplished fact, is a constant attack on its substratum (wealth), a constant struggle to force it into, and contain it within, the commodity form, and this attack is confronted by a constant pushing in the opposite direction, as human wealth-creating resists this confinement and pushes towards other forms of socialisation. [18] To make sense of the sentence we must understand both “wealth” and “commodity” as verbs rather than nouns. The commodity is in reality a movement of commodifying and wealth is a movement of wealth-creating or enriching, a moving against and beyond the commodity form, a communising. More precisely, the transition from the beginning to the end of this

first sentence is a transition from an active enriching ("working out of ... creative potentialities") to a noun that conceals not only the enriching that it confines but also its own dynamic as a movement of commodifying. The appearance referred to in "appears as" is constantly at issue.

"Appears as" opens, then, a space of hope. We live in a world in which we are confronted with wealth as commodities, or as money, the general equivalent of commodities. The first sentence of *Capital*, by telling us that this is an appearance, tells us that it is true but also that it is untrue, that there is more to wealth than this, that there is a wealth that pushes beyond this form. If the existence of wealth as commodities indicates a world of alien determination, a world in which it is the value of commodities that determines the way in which the richness of human capacities is developed, then the simple "appears as" draws our attention to the present reality of a pushing towards self-determination [19] (the precondition for the writing of this first sentence).

Crisis is posed as an issue in these opening words. The "appears as" tells us that the horrifying existence of wealth in the form of commodities is not (or not necessarily) permanent. There is a non-permanence, an instability, in the form of existence of wealth. The death knell which tolls for capitalism and which is only mentioned explicitly some 700 pages later [20] can already be heard in this first sentence. From the point of view of capital, "appears as" is a menacing phrase. "What is this 'appears as'?", the capitalists cry, "wealth *is* money and commodities, and that is all there is to it". There is a threat in the "appears as", something beyond their ken, beyond their control.

That which is beyond their control is that which is latent, the richness that does not "appear as", that does not fall into, or is not fully contained within, the commodity form. That is the menace. Clearly there is not a fully elaborated theory of crisis in this first sentence, but it does point us in a certain direction. It points us towards a tendency to crisis that is derived from the *that which does not appear*, that gives us the standpoint from which we can pronounce the words "appears as". Wealth, the richness of human creativity, is the crisis of its own containment – that wealth that overflows from its containment, refuses to be contained, pushes beyond to another manner of social cooperation, towards a free association of creators. [21]

The crisis that "appears as" announces is a crisis of the transformation of wealth in to commodities. Wealth now appears as an immense collection of commodities, but it will not always do so. It will not always do so, because the statement already carries its own untruth. It is already true that in the movement of commodification/ totalisation/ synthesis/ closure of wealth there is a moving in the opposite direction, a detotalising [22], desynthesising, decommodifying, enriching, a communising that constitutes the crisis of the commodity form. It is this latter movement that makes its appearance later in *Capital* as the "social forces of production".

5. "Appears as" places us in the middle of all this, in the middle of the battlefield. There is no place to hide.

We read the first sentence three times. The first time we read it, we are likely (as we have seen) to just pass over it, to treat it as a sentence of little consequence. We read that "the wealth of these societies appears as an immense collection of commodities", think to ourselves "well, of course it does" and move on to look at the commodity. In other words, we fall in to the appearances that we think we are criticising. Worse than that, by not attributing

importance to the first sentence, we are actually participating in the constitution of the appearance of wealth as commodity.

When we read the sentence a second time, we scream with indignation. We understand the horror of what Marx is saying: that the unlimited richness of human becoming is forced into the form of an immense collection of commodities.

Marx has brought us right in to the notion of science as critique. Before saying anything about the commodity, he has constituted it as the object of critique. By telling us that wealth appears as commodities, he invites us to criticise that appearance, to try to understand where it comes from, what its relation is with the forces that generate it. Marx says in effect: "The wealth of these societies appears as an immense collection of commodities; therefore our investigation must begin with the critique of this appearance, that is, with the critique of the commodity." In the same breath, he establishes wealth as the standpoint of critique: that wealth which does and does not appear as a collection of commodities, that wealth which pushes beyond its present form of existence. Critique is then the self-discovery of that which is hidden by the appearance.

When we read the sentence a third time, we scream again: not just with indignation against the world, but with horror directed against ourselves. How could we read the sentence the first time without screaming? How could we take for granted the horror of the transformation of human riches into an immense collection of commodities? How could we be so insensitive to the suffering that this sentence relates? We cannot help but ask ourselves if this is the insensitivity that made Auschwitz possible [23], that allows Guantanamo to continue, and all the hunger, and all the destruction of the world. And we know that the answer is yes.

Critique becomes self-critique. But this is not just a personal self-critique, for we know that this reading-without-screaming has been the common understanding of the first sentence of *Capital*. The phrase "appears as", precisely because it refers not to a false appearance, but to a real appearance, is a challenge not just to capitalist society but to ourselves personally. Since the appearance has a general validity in this society, we too live inside it, however clever or revolutionary we like to consider ourselves. It is our living inside the appearance that is expressed in our first reading of the sentence. Critique, then, is turned not only against the existence of wealth in the commodity form, but also against our own way of thinking (and indeed our own mode of existence). To say that the standpoint of our critique is the wealth that pushes beyond the commodity form does not free us from the appearances generated by that form. To think scientifically we must turn against ourselves. When we say "wealth in these societies appears as commodities", we recognise that we live inside these appearances and at the same time place ourselves against and beyond the appearances, as critics of the appearances. We recognise that our presence in this society constitutes us as self-antagonistic, as schizophrenic in the popular sense of self-divided. Any notion of revolutionary purity or theoretical correctness is for this reason absurd.

But it is not just us. You too, Mr. Marx. It must be so. Marx too lived in this world of appearances in which the existence of human richness as a collection of commodities is simply taken for granted. At the same time as he points out the horror of what is happening, there are moments in which he seems to take it for granted, moments in which he seems to focus on the world of forms (commodity – money- capital) and forget the standing-against-and-beyond which, from the very first words of the book, gives his analysis its critical edge. It is impossible to read *Capital* without being confronted by the question of "which Marx, which

reading?" The opening words (the "appears as") announce a tension which inevitably runs through Marx as through all of us. Of course there are two Marxes, as there are two of all of us, but the tension is not a break between the young and the old Marx (as Althusser claimed) but a tension that derives from the antagonism between appearance and its substratum. If Marx had unpacked his first sentence, he might have written "The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an "immense collection of commodities", and since this appearance is not a simple mistake but is generated by the nature of these societies, it follows that, as long as capitalism continues to exist, it is impossible to escape completely from these appearances. When we criticise these appearances, therefore, as we do by simply signalling them as appearances, we signal too a tension within ourselves between our existence within these appearances and our critique of the appearances as appearances. Do not expect to find, therefore, a true Marx or one correct reading when you read this book: take the text rather as a stimulus that can become part of your own contradictory existence." He might have written that, but he did not.

Resonances

The argument here is a simple one: Marx's *Capital* begins with wealth, not with the commodity, and the theoretical and political implications of this distinction are enormous.

1. The argument runs counter to the main stream of commentaries on *Capital*. Relatively few commentaries make any mention at all of the first sentence and, of those that do, none reaches the conclusion proposed here. It is not my purpose to criticise other commentators, but a brief comment on three of the most influential and distinguished commentaries will help to highlight the distinctive features of the argument presented here.

David Harvey's *Companion to Marx's Capital* does quote the first sentence on the first page of his first chapter (2010, 15) and draws attention to the importance of the term "appears as", which "signals that something else is going on beneath the surface appearance" (2010, 15). He interprets the first sentence to mean that "Marx is exclusively concerned with the capitalist mode of production" (2010, 15), which is rather different from the interpretation suggested here, namely that the significance of the first sentence derives from the fact that Marx is not limiting his gaze to capitalism but pushing beyond it. Consistent with this, Harvey pays no attention at all to the question of wealth and moves immediately to the end of the first sentence, the commodity. He summarises his view of the beginning of *Capital* ten pages later: "The story so far is roughly this: Marx declares that his aim is to uncover the rules of operation of a capitalist mode of production. He starts with the concept of the commodity ..." (2010, 25).

Michael Heinrich's impressively clear *Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's Capital* (2004/2012) [24] quotes the first sentence at the beginning of his chapter on "Value, Labour, Money" (2004/2012, 39) and then immediately moves on to the commodity, drawing attention to the fact that it is only in capitalism that the commodity is the typical form of wealth. In another book (2008, 50-54) the same author devotes a whole section of several pages to the first paragraph of *Capital*. After pointing out (much as we have done) that it is easy to skip over the first sentence as being of little significance (2008, 50), he draws attention to the importance of the phrase "appears as", distinguishing it both from "is" and "seems" (2008, 51). He points out that there is an implicit critique here of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* and its failure to perceive that wealth assumes different shapes in different types of society (2008, 52). With this, he passes on to a discussion of the commodity, in effect

reducing the importance of the first paragraph to an introduction to the central theme: "Basically the first paragraph says only that Marx begins his presentation with the commodity and that he thinks he has good reasons for doing so" (2008, 53; my translation). There is nothing here of the tension between wealth and commodity that has been our main theme, nor is the question raised of what could allow Marx to make this statement. Heinrich spells out the implications of his understanding of the commodity and of value theory: "with value theory, Marx seeks to uncover a specific social structure that individuals *must* conform to, *regardless of what they think*." (2004/2012, 46; italics in the original).

Harry Cleaver's important *Reading Capital Politically* (1979) comes closer to the interpretation offered here in that he understands the logic of the commodity form not as inescapable structure but as struggle: "There are certainly regularities, or "laws", of commodity exchange just as there is a logic to the commodity-form itself, but that logic and those laws are only those which capital succeeds in imposing. What Marx shows us in *Capital* are the "rules of the game" laid down by capital." (1979, 66) However, in spite of understanding the commodity form as struggle, Cleaver maintains the traditional view that *Capital* starts with the commodity. He quotes the first and the second sentence (1979, 71), and then continues "He [Marx] begins with the commodity because it is the elementary form of wealth in capitalist society. When we read the rest of *Capital* we discover why it is that all wealth takes the commodity-form in bourgeois society". Thus, although Cleaver emphasises the importance of seeing the categories of value, money, capital and so on as categories of struggle, the struggle against these forms remain external to the analysis of *Capital*. The suggestion here, on the contrary, is that anti-capitalist struggle is already announced in the opening words of *Capital*: "the wealth". Struggle is not a product of militancy coming from outside domination, but is inscribed rather in the relation of domination itself and is inherent in our everyday experience. The categories themselves tell their tale of revolt. [25]

To add a discussion of further authors would not help us to advance in our argument. Other commentators on *Capital* do not adopt the perspective advanced here. To the best of my knowledge, nobody asks the question of what allowed Marx to break through the appearances that he was analysing, and nobody presents the relation between wealth and commodity as one of active struggle. The almost universal position is that Marx starts with the commodity [J1] [26], and the general view seems to be that advanced by Harvey, namely that "his aim is to uncover the rules of operation of a capitalist mode of production". Since these rules operate independently of human volition, it seems to follow that these are the rules that, as Heinrich puts it, "individuals *must* conform to, *regardless of what they think*."

2. The aim is not to find the *correct* interpretation of Marx, or to discover what he *really* meant. Whether Marx was or was not aware of all the implications of what he wrote is of secondary interest. More important is that we are talking about a text that has been immensely influential in shaping anti-capitalist struggle. As the forms of struggle change we must constantly question its continued relevance, and the answer to this question is inseparable from its interpretation. There is no possibility of an a-historic or indeed a-political reading of *Capital*.

There has been a symbiotic relation between the traditional reading of *Capital* (which assumes that Marx starts from the commodity and that the book is concerned with explaining "the rules of operation" of the system) and a concept of revolutionary change which locates revolution in the future and associates revolution with the taking of state power and the replacement of one system with another. This view of revolution has been

greatly discredited by the experiences of the twentieth century and the urgencies of the present. In few countries is there a Party that has even the most remote prospect of leading the "future revolution".

The central issue is closure. If we start from the commodity we already place ourselves *within* the system that we are criticising. What follows can then be seen as a powerful analysis of the prison within which we are held. This prison is constituted by a tightly textured chain of social forms. Starting from the commodity form (the commodity as a form of social relations), Marx leads us on to ever more developed forms of the totality of social relations, deriving one from the other: the value form from the commodity form, the money form from the value form, the capital form from the money form, and so on. [27] Marx is at pains to emphasise the interconnection between the forms (especially in his critiques of Proudhon), such that it makes little sense to dream of a society based on commodity exchange but no money, or on money, but without capital. The different forms fit together tightly to form a totality. If we stop there, then we have an analysis that suggests that the only way to break this totality is to do it as a whole, that attempts to break particular aspects are doomed to failure because of the integrating power of the whole.

The understanding of *Capital* as the rigorous analysis of a closed system can lead us in two directions. The first is to the Party which will lead the future revolution: the only way to break the totality as a whole is through the building of a strong, united revolutionary party. Alternatively, and I think that this has been the dominant tendency in recent years, the reading of *Capital* becomes detached from any consideration of revolution: since revolution must be total, but there is no party with any prospect of carrying it out, reading *Capital* is seen as important simply for understanding how the system works. The rigorous reading of *Capital* can easily be combined with an a-political pessimism far removed from the actual movement of anti-capitalist struggle. Reading *Capital* and anti-capitalist struggle just drift apart.

The objection to the traditional view that Marx starts from the commodity is not only political. It is textual. It simply is not true that Marx starts from the commodity: he starts from wealth. It is not a question of forcing him to say what we would like him to say. There it is in black-and-white. Marx starts from wealth.

Marx does not begin by placing us within the system we are criticising. On the contrary, he starts from a wealth (richness) that does not fit without remainder into the commodity form. Before he ever takes us in to the tightly fitting weave of capitalist social forms, he introduces us to, and takes his stand upon, a category that does not fit. [J2] This does not weaken the strength of the derivation of the different social forms, but it does make us understand those forms as processes, as form-processes, processes of forming. [28] The capitalist totality is then a process of totalising, a constant struggle to subject the sheer unrest of life [29] to the logic of capital, to bind all human activity into a tight social cohesion. What appears to be a densely woven prison of capital-logic is better understood as a powerful and coherent dynamic of attack, but an attack that carries within itself its own crisis, an attack that we can understand only because it is not totally effective. All the social forms are processes of forming a recalcitrant content, and these contents simply *do not fit* in to their respective forms: wealth does not fit in to the commodity form, use value does not fit in to the value form, concrete labour does not fit in to abstract labour, the capacity to work does not fit in to the commodity labour power, the forces of production do not fit in to the capital form, and so on [30]. These forms are so many procrustean beds, but procrustean beds that are

inherently faulty, that are incapable of totally shaping their contents. [31] In each case the content overflows its form, exists not only in but also against and beyond its form.

Capital, from its opening words, is a tale that pitches the forces of misfitting against the forces of an oppressive social cohesion. It starts from the dignity of rebellion, not from the horrors of domination. Wealth, human creativity, our absolute movement of becoming: that is its theme. Marx leads us into a world of misfitting, in which our creativity is enclosed but never quite enclosed within the laws of capitalist development, in which the social forms that would enchain us carry their own crisis within themselves. The book opens an exploration of the possibilities and difficulties of thinking and making a revolution through the multiple revolts of that which does not fit in to the capitalist forms, the multiple perforations of those forms. The Party is over, future revolution is dead, breaking capital here and now through a million ruptures is desperately urgent, and already happening. That is why it is so important to read *Capital*. Starting with the first sentence.

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Notes

- [1] John Holloway is a professor in the Posgrado de Sociología of the Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades "Alfonso Vélaz Pliego", Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla.
- [2] Note also the first sentence of the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, first published in 1859, eight years before the first edition of *Capital*: "The wealth of bourgeois society, at first sight, presents itself as an immense accumulation of commodities, its unit being a single commodity" (1859/1971, 27). And in the original: "Auf den ersten Blick erscheint der bürgerliche Reichtum als eine ungeheure Warensammlung, die einzelne Ware als sein *elementarisches Dasein*." (1859/1961, 15).
- [3] For a discussion of some of the commentaries that do mention it, see below.
- [4] The original German reads: "In fact aber, wenn die bornierte bürgerliche Form abgestreift wird, was ist der Reichtum anders, als die im universellen Austausch erzeugte Universalität der Bedürfnisse, Fähigkeiten, Genüsse, Produktivkräfte etc. der Individuen? Die volle Entwicklung der menschlichen Herrschaft über die Naturkräfte, die der sog. Natur sowohl wie seiner eignen Natur? Das absolute Herausarbeiten seiner schöpferischen Anlagen, ohne andre Voraussetzung als die vorhergegangene historische Entwicklung, die diese Totalität der Entwicklung, d.h. der Entwicklung aller menschlichen Kräfte als solcher, nicht gemessen an einem vorhergegebenen Maßstab, zum Selbstzweck macht? Wo er sich nicht reproduziert in einer Bestimmtheit, sondern seine Totalität produziert? Nicht irgend etwas Gewordnes zu bleiben sucht, sondern in der absoluten Bewegung des Werdens ist? In der bürgerlichen Ökonomie – und der Produktionsepoche, der sie entspricht – erscheint diese völlige Herausarbeitung des menschlichen Innern als völlige Entleerung; diese universelle Vergegenständlichung als totale Entfremdung und die Niederreißung aller bestimmten einseitigen Zwecke als Aufopferung des Selbstzwecks unter einen ganz äußeren Zweck." (1857/1953, 387/8)
- [5] My understanding of the *Grundrisse* is that, as Marx's rough draft, it helps to throw light on the interpretation of *Capital*. Its publication played an important part in opening the traditional reading of *Capital* to question, but I certainly do not see a contrast between a more revolutionary *Grundrisse* and a less revolutionary *Capital*.

[6] "Interchange" might have been a better translation of the original "Austausch". It is clear that Marx is not thinking here of commodity exchange. Richard Gunn, in a very helpful comment on an earlier draft of this paper, points out that the German original gives a more central place to "universal exchange" (a literal translation would be: "what is wealth other than the created-through-universal-exchange universality of human needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces etc.") and suggests that "universal exchange" should be understood as mutual recognition and that, accordingly, "wealth IS mutual recognition".

[7] It is indeed a common wealth. This tallies with the title of the third book of Hardt and Negri's trilogy (2009), but their development of the idea takes them in a different direction: they do not focus on the opposition posed in the first sentence of *Capital*, that between common wealth and the commodity form.

[8] In similar vein, see Vaneigem 2012, 14: "The best remedy against this lack of living which is the malady of survival, is to discover one's own richness, that of joy, of creation, of love, of desire intoxicated with breaking free from the oppression of the commodity." (my translation).

[9] The original "herrscht" might have been translated as "rules" instead of "prevails". The term "prevails" opens up the possibility of a peaceful coexistence with other forms of production, whereas the term "herrscht" suggests that any other form of production can exist only in antagonism to the capitalist mode. The latter version seems to me more exact.

[10] Massimo De Angelis (2007) speaks of the importance of other values in contrast to the value of commodities, but he attributes to these values an externality vis-à-vis capitalist value. My understanding is rather that the relation is inherently antagonistic. The commodity does not simply exist alongside other forms of wealth: rather, it is a constant aggression, a constant drive to absorb all other forms of wealth.

[11] The Fowkes translation (1867/1990, 125) is slightly less striking: "The commodity is, first of all, an external object, a thing which through its qualities, satisfies human needs of whatever kind." The German original: "Die Ware ist zunächst ein äusserer Gegenstand, ein Ding, das durch seine Eigenschaften menschliche Bedürfnisse irgendeiner Art befriedigt." (1867/1985, 49)

[12] (Fowkes translation, Marx 1867/1990, 125) Moore and Aveling translation: "Our investigation must therefore begin with the analysis of a commodity" (1867/1965, 35). "Unsere Untersuchung beginnt daher mit der Ware." (1867/1985, 49).

[13] My thanks to Richard Gunn for pointing this out to me.

[14] "erscheint als" in the original; "presents itself as" in the Moore-Aveling translation.

[15] For a discussion of the distinction between "erscheint" and "scheint" in this context, see Heinrich (2008, 51).

[16] For the understanding of form as a mode of existence, see Gunn, 1992, 14.

[17] This is the central theme of Lukács' still wonderful but problematic *History and Class Consciousness* (1923/1988).

[18] Intellectual property is a particularly obvious battlefield at the moment. More generally, the commodifying of richness (or enclosing of the commons, as it is often referred to) is an appallingly bloody battle at the centre of human experience today.

[19] My thanks to my friend Sergio Tischler for this formulation.

[20] See Marx (1867/1965, 763/ (1867/1985) 929: "The knell of capitalist private property sounds."

[21] This is what Marx also calls the "forces of production", a term which is converted by the later tradition of Marxism into an expression of deadness but which is better understood as the drive of humanity "in the absolute movement of becoming".

[22] On detotalisation, see Tischler (2014).

[23] This is simply a repetition of Adorno's point: "Auschwitz confirmed the philosopheme of pure identity as death." (1990, 362)

[24] Heinrich's book has been praised (on its back cover) by my friend Werner Bonefeld as "the best and most comprehensive introduction to Marx's *Capital* there is". I have no reason to take issue with this description, for the account of *Capital* is extremely clear, but I do not share the interpretation that Heinrich offers.

[25] For a fuller discussion, see my comment on Cleaver's rejection of concrete labour as a category of struggle in Holloway (2010, 189-190).

[26] The outstanding exception, the only one that I have found, is a chapter by Leon Rozitchner on cooperation and the productive body in Marx and Freud, in which he stresses that Marx starts *Capital* not with the commodity, but with wealth, and explicitly links the concept of wealth with the passage from the *Grundrisse* quoted here (2003, 88, 98). He does not, however, develop the antagonistic relation between wealth and the commodity which has been emphasised here. My warmest thanks to Bruno Bosteels for drawing Rozitchner's work to my attention.

[27] The most sophisticated development of this approach is probably the so-called "new reading" (neue Lektüre) of Marx, associated with such authors as Reichelt, Backhaus, Postone and Heinrich. For an account and discussion of the "new reading" see Bonefeld (2014).

[28] On forms as form-processes, see Sohn-Rethel (1978), Holloway 1979/1991, 2002, 2010.

[29] On the "sheer unrest of life" see Hegel (1807/1977) 27.

[30] And, one might add, "our dreams do not fit in to your ballot boxes".

[31] I note that Michael Perelmann (2011) uses the metaphor of the procrustean bed to describe the economic institutions and practices that force people to accept the discipline of the market. Crucial, however, is that Marx introduces us to the procrustean bed (the commodity form) through its own crisis (the wealth that does not fit).