CRISIS CULTURE:
THE THEORY & POLITICS OF HISTORICAL RUPTURE

by

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ABSTRACT

Everywhere, we are told, we are in crisis. And yet, the concept "crisis" obscures as much as it clarifies. *Crisis Culture: The Theory & Politics of Historical Rupture* examines how modern conceptions of crisis structure the ways we experience, narrate, and respond to moments of historical rupture and upheaval. It analyzes how logics of crisis and event limit and facilitate the emergence of new forms of social and political relations.

In its modern conceptions, "crisis" names an event in historical time, while simultaneously constituting historical temporality; crises reconfigure time by defining a new relation between past and future. Both academic and vernacular discourses frame crisis in normative terms: to name a situation a crisis is to posit and affirm (explicitly or implicitly) a definition of a "normal" or non-crisis situation. As such, the logic of crisis tends to reproduce existing hierarchies—specifically, those determining who has the power to name the situation and prescribe solutions.

Contemporary Marxist theories of crisis—including *Wertkritik* and *Neue Marx-Lectüre* resist normative understandings by locating crisis in the concrete, historical dynamics related to capitalist forms of value. In doing so, they account for the broader, transformative possibilities inherent to crises. Such theories tend, however, to understand crisis in overly objective terms. Analyzing and responding to this limitation, I develop a reconceptualization of historical rupture that—grounded in the political ontology of the Event (Alain Badiou), and what I call the Evental

Crisis—recovers the political, subjective force of "crisis." Specifically, I develop a theory of embodied subjectivity that grounds crisis in political intervention; within this framework a crisis marks a "new time," not in the objective movements of history *per se*, but rather in the process of deciding upon and working through the consequences of an event. Shifting the time of crisis from the (objective) moment of rupture to the (subjective) processes of decision-making, this conceptualization prioritizes political actors over abstract structures.

Lastly, *Crisis Culture* theorizes a material basis for the subject of the evental-crisis by contrasting Karl Marx's theory of crisis, Jacques Lacan's theory of the subject, and Alain Badiou's theory of the event. I conclude that the *thought* of politics depends on the *practice* of political subjects, today generated by anti-colonial, feminist, and anti-capitalist struggle.

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Introduction: Critique in the Time of Crisis

When the bubble burst in New York I grew very restless in Jersey and in the midst of this GENERAL DOWNBREAK I fell tremendously cheerful. The bourgeois filth of the last seven years has undoubtedly clung to me to some extent; now it will be washed away and I shall become a changed man. Physically, the crisis will do me as much good as a bathe in the sea; I can sense it already.

– Letter from Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, Nov. 1857

(Marx and Engels, *Marx & Engels Collected Works* 203)

This is a law for capitalist production, imposed by incessant revolutions in the methods of production themselves, by the depreciation of existing capital always bound up with them, by the general competitive struggle and the need to improve production and expand its scale merely as a means of self-preservation and under penalty of ruin.

— Karl Marx

(Marx, *Capital: Volume III* 244)

1. Crisis Generation: Concept and History

i. The dual nature of a concept

This dissertation analyzes the concept of crisis and the relevance of this concept to radical political thought. But it also questions the notion of conceptual inheritance: how can historically transformative concepts be inherited so as to preserve or revive their force? In the revolutionary era beginning in the 1840s, conservatives and radicals alike used crisis as a synonym for revolution. A crisis constituted a historical rupture and a moment of decision—a singular and irrecoverable moment cleaving past from future. In the letter quoted above, Engels anticipates such a change with excitement. He is certain crisis will initiate not only social change but also personal revolution through which he "shall become a changed man." Crisis was historical salvation. In hindsight, this concept is rife with contradictions, many of which sit just below the surface of Engels' joyful expression. Most obviously, it is clear the relation between crisis and revolution was not as immediate as Engels and many others had hoped. Social, economic and political crises have been widespread, but capital reproduces itself; there is little reason to believe that some emancipatory horizon looms. Moreover, even then, crisis was not an inherently radical concept. "The bourgeois filth that has clung to me," Engels writes, "will be washed away and I shall become a changed man… [just like a] bathe in the sea." Deliberately or not, Engels' description of crisis is a metaphor for Christian baptism. Even in the most revolutionary moment, radical transformation can only be thought in terms of the rituals of putatively bygone worlds. Today, the concept of crisis is more ubiquitous than ever, not only on the left, but across all spectrums and fields of discourse. Capital continues turning its widening gyre; what of crisis—this historically incisive and transformative concept—can be recovered?

The emergencies that punctuated the opening years of this century reached near global proportions in 2007-2008. In the wake of economic turmoil, the language of crisis was deployed in increasingly severe terms—an "emergency" became a "depression," then a "collapse," and then a "meltdown"—that everywhere initiated interpretations, diagnoses and putative solutions. The government ministers, banks and economists who first feigned control over the situation admitted a state of emergency, and used this admission to enact drastic measures. Many public institutions—schools, universities, hospitals—were decimated: programs were cut, employees were fired, unemployment skyrocketed, national economies were restructured by unforgiving heads of state.

The concept of crisis was already common enough in diverse discourses; the economy, the environment, the university, democracy, art—all of these spheres were repeatedly described as being in crisis. In the wake of the 2007-08 crisis, however, something changed. Crisis no longer named a decisive moment, nor even an ongoing state of precarity and uncertainty; today, crisis is a Master-Signifier that conditions our shared experience of the world. While the nature of contemporary crisis is under dispute, the concept structures an overarching and widely embraced narrative about how we, as a society, relate to present and future. For example, in his 2009 "Speech on the Economy, President Obama declared that the United States was "in the midst of a crisis unlike any we have seen in our lifetime," one that will be overcome only through an historic and heroic intervention:

> With hope and virtue, let us brave once more the icy currents and endure what storms may come. Let it be said by our children's children that when we were tested we refused to let this journey end, that we did not turn our back nor did we falter; and with eyes fixed on the horizon and God's grace upon us, we

> carried forth that great gift of freedom and delivered it safely to future generations. (Obama).

In this speech—and I argue, in the dominant socio-economic discourse of our time—crisis is not an occurrence confined to the economy, but a logic, a way of organizing how it makes sense to represent (and hence to act in and upon) the shared world. This logic, moreover, structures the temporality in which shared meaning is possible: history as it will have taken place, the retroactive judgment in the future perfect (anthropomorphized as "our children's children"). It also prescribes the moral coordinates—in the Obama speech, "hope and virtue"—by which we, in the time of crisis, will have been judged. In short, "crisis" does not passively describe the historical situation. It reconstitutes shared worlds in an overarching logic—it conditions time and space, and the kinds of judgments that are possible therein. If the era of grand narratives had ended, "crisis" signals its rebirth. This time, however, the grand narratives persist in the inverse. The outcome of our crisis will be judged by history; but history is nothing other than the ongoing crisis.

What is signified by crisis? And what does this Master-Signifier *do*? More specifically, how does this Master-Signifier structure the social, material and symbolic world? A decade on, the 2007-08 financial crisis provides a few insights. Initially, the recent financial crisis reintroduced the idea that history—and its organizing system, capitalism—may be contingent and changeable. Following the collapse of alternatives, for nearly two decades it seemed clear that that the end of history had arrived. And then, Christopher Nealon writes, "came the economic crisis of 2008, and abruptly 'capitalism' was pronounceable…as the name, not of an inevitability, but of a contingent economic form" (Nealon 140; see also Noys, *"The Untranscendable Horizon of Our Time"* 73). Moreover, this crisis gave rise to some of the most

direct and widespread anti-capitalist movements and thought in recent decades: Occupy Wall Street, anti-austerity movements, and an elected socialist Greek government shared media space with reappraisals of broader political economic systems. As numerous thinkers on the left have argued, the development of this post-crisis wave of anti-capitalist action, organizing and thought provides grounds for political optimism.[1]

Such challenges to the status quo, however, met equal and opposite force; the crises catalyzing political movements also provided ideological justification for some of the most regressive policies in the post-war West. In the US, the optimistic "yes we can" (yes we can close Guantanamo, yes we can pull out of Afghanistan, yes we can provide healthcare to everyone) became the survivalist "we are in a time of crisis," followed by a profoundly reactionary backlash. Culturally, too, the predominant narrative—rehashed in countless dystopian blockbusters and remakes—is one in which everything *except* the existing forms of domination collapses. Perhaps this is symptomatic: at the psychological level, what is most depressing about the post-crisis era is that the widespread trauma inflicted by financial collapse has not produced any corresponding transformation or even catharsis. The crisis initially created a moment of exhilaration—a brief surge in the possibility of the new, a moment of public togetherness manifested in print, in the streets, in occupied parks. That moment allowed burgeoning collective subjects to represent to themselves the (normally unconscious) desire for something profoundly new. The thwarting of this desire doubles the experience of depression. As

[1] Notable among them are Isvtán Mészáros' collection of essays, *The Structural Crisis of Capital*, William I. Robinson's "The Crisis of Global Capitalism," Costas Douzinas' *Philosophy and Resistance in the Crisis*.

Eric Cazdyn writes: “It is brutal enough to lose one’s job or one’s home due to the crisis, but when very little changes in the process then we lose on both fronts. We lose our savings and our exhilaration, if not our joy, at watching the system give way” (Cazdyn 3).

ii. The last one hundred years

In its polarizing and dual nature, the most recent crisis is not without precedent. The 1929 Wall Street Crash initiated revolutionary optimism as well a period of unheard-of inflation and unemployment, that in turn enabled the rise of facism and history’s bloodiest war. In official histories, this near-global economic crisis was eventually controlled through the application of Keynesian economics: “despite the deficit, the state invested in public works, employing labour at a time when there was no work to be found…orders were stimulated and breathing space was given to industry, thus restarting the flywheel of the economy” (Bauman and Bordoni 2). The first global economic crisis was, in this sense, overcome through the intervention of the state, which—armed with post-Westphalian sovereignty—became the guarantor of social and economic stability. And thirty years of prosperity followed.

In the 1970s the cycle turned once more. Increasingly interdependent global economies gave way to massive inflation, unemployment and a generalized sense of instability. This time, however, the state proved largely incapable of reestablishing order—that is, of delivering on the promise of stability that had lent the state legitimacy. With increasing fervor, it was declared that people must finally abandon the notion that salvation would descend—in the forms of state intervention, social assistance, etc.—from above. After playing an increasingly central role as guarantor of social and political wellbeing, the state quickly became, in the minds of

governments and corporations, an obstacle to progress. In its stead, the likes of Friedman, Reagan, and Thatcher invested faith in what was presented as the objective and universal legislator: the invisible hand. Suddenly, as Bauman and Bordoni write, the same basic ailments—inflation, unemployment, economic stagnation—were prescribed the opposite remedies: "'deregulation', 'privatization', 'subsidization' were to accomplish what regularization, nationalization and communal state-guided undertakings so abominably and frustratingly failed to deliver" (Bauman and Bordoni 10). Effectively, the risk and responsibility associated with such instability was redistributed and, over time, transferred from the public to the private sphere.

While the most recent crisis is one moment in a longer cycle, it also reveals a limit point; it constitutes a crisis in the ways in which capital reproduces itself, as well as a crisis in the subjective capacity to imagine anything beyond the final subsumption under capital.[2] For three centuries, capitalism derived its legitimacy from the promises of economic bounty, social freedom, and political representation. Liberal ideology assured us that free market capitalism would bring about greater equality, the eradication of poverty, a democratically governed community, and overall greater wealth. Where the free market led, we were assured, liberal society would follow. In this sense, the crisis of 2007-2008 was not only economic but also

[2] In this regard, there is an important distinction to be made between "capital" and "capitalism": capital is an economic abstraction; capitalism is a socio-historical formation in which capital plays both a foundational and determinate role—in which, as David Harvey writes, "processes of capital circulation and accumulation are hegemonic and dominant in providing and shaping the material, social and intellectual bases for social life" (Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* 7).

social. It constitutes what Jürgen Habermas calls a legitimation crisis. The fallout of market collapse—thousands evicted, rising unemployment, a scarcity of basic resources, etc.—is also the failure of liberalism to deliver on its promise. More significantly, this failure calls into question the legitimacy of liberal processes and institutions in general: the European Union is crumbling, the American media is dismissed by its own government, and the notion of free speech has been coopted to legitimate the hate speech of the far right.

At a material level, this legitimation crisis has been contained by intensified policing, facilitated by the use of military machinery against citizens, the ongoing criminalization and incarceration of racial minorities, an increase in classed and racialized vigilantism (exemplified by the murder of Trayvon Martin), and so on. Where institutions and principles fail, violence preserves both economic production and social reproduction. At an ideological level, the contemporary era is defined by the final subsumption of state and society under principles defined by market economy. As Imre Szeman writes: "it is now the market that supplies the state with its principles and mandate, rather than the state guiding, shaping, and supervising the market on behalf of those subjects who (at least in theory) collectively legitimate the state's actions and practices" (Szeman 483).

This postliberal ideology operates on multiple levels and in diverse forms. Perhaps most immediate in the West, it transfers risk and responsibility from the capitalist-democratic state to the private producer-consumer. This political-economic transfer is enabled by the emergence of narratives that normativize individual risk in the guise of individual freedom. The figurehead of these narratives is the young entrepreneur who manages economic risk by incorporating, internalizing and affirming it as fully as possible. The entrepreneur is, as the title of Arlene

Dickinson's book advocates, "all in," identifying so fully with her venture that "the boundary between work and personal time has essentially been erased" (Dickenson). Socializing becomes networking; leisure time becomes rehabilitation aimed at working harder; isolation becomes self-reliance. Risk and overwork become virtues and, while failure (and learning to "fail better") are part of the process, long term success is supposedly assured to anyone willing to work hard enough. Just as modern capital promised workers the "freedom" to sell their labor, postmodern entrepreneurial capitalism promises, as Szeman writes, "the freedom to become a new kind of petite bourgeoisie, but without the constraints of bourgeois morality or the crippling desire to become anything other than ourselves" (Szeman 483). However compelling this narrative is, it represses rather than addresses the very real individual and collective risks endemic to global capitalism. Crisis is an inevitable and essential dimension of capitalism; whether the entrepreneur poses a new form of value creation, no degree of entrepreneurial innovation can circumvent the crisis dynamic. To the contrary, the overarching effect of this form is to atomize production, thus dismantling our capacity to collectively address the shared effects of crisis.

At the global, institutional level, this post-liberal ideology reproduces the forms of social liberalism, but increasingly empties them of any social content or responsibility. For example, responding to the crisis in Haiti, in 2012 Jim Yong Kim (at the time, President of the World Bank) argued the need for more state intervention, arguing that he

> made it very clear to [the Haitian government] that the evidence from the rest of Latin America is that their path to growth has to include many, many more people. It has to open access to the market, to education and to health services to a much broader sector of society. That is not because equality is good and inequality is bad; it is because that is the path to growth.

For Kim, state intervention is necessary and must reduce inequality and ensure that more people are included by the situation. But equality and inclusion have no value in and of themselves—their relative meaning has only to do with the degree to which inequality and inclusion inhibit an economic principle—"growth"—the inherent value of which remains an objective and unquestionable fact. In other words, even the key social tenants of liberalism—inclusion and inequality which, in the Haitian crisis, are tied to education, healthcare, food security, and so on—are nothing other than tools for economic growth. In short, the promises of liberalism—including the key ideological justification that the free market capitalism would bring about prosperity, equality and democracy—are finally abandoned. Moreover, in calling for state intervention, even *neoliberal* doctrine is abandoned. All that remains is the path to growth.

This new ideology is perhaps most evident in the seemingly contradictory notion of authoritarian free markets. In the past, it seemed clear (to those in the democratic West) that state-run forms of capitalism developed in Singapore and later China were simply less advanced versions of Euro-American capitalism. If free market capitalism is inherently linked to democracy then, given time, these nations would catch up to their more advanced, capitalist-democratic counterparts. However, the narrative of capital-driven democratization is collapsing; as a result, this simplistic, linear understanding of "development" rings hollow. In other words, if there is no inherent connection between capitalist economics and democratic politics—if the "path to growth" is the final judgment—then there is no contradiction between free market economics and authoritarian politics. It may well be the case, as Slavoj Žižek writes, that China's "version of authoritarian capitalism is not merely a remainder of our past—a repetition of the

process of capitalist accumulation…—but a sign of the future" (Žižek, *First As Tragedy, Then As Farce* 131).

In this sense, the supposed contradiction between the "end of history" and the "crisis of capitalism" is a false one. The either/or prospect of capital and crisis—either we have reached the end of history, or the crisis of capitalism will bring about a new historical epoch—has been replaced with a both/and: history is over *because* the world is in permanent crisis. For capital, crisis is the repetition of the same. Put another way, the very idea of political, social and ethical legitimation has been, in the words of Marx and Engels, drowned "in the icy waters of egotistical calculation."

2. Theorizing Crisis

i. "World History is the Last Judgment": Koselleck and the modern concept

Given the changes outlined above, is it possible to recover the once-revolutionary dimensions of the concept crisis? If so, can (and how might) this concept be rethought? The Greek "*krei-*" is the root for both crisis and critique. As Reinhardt Koselleck argues in his seminal genealogy *Critique and Crisis*, crisis remains inextricably linked to its cognate. In its ancient Greek origins, crisis means to separate or divorce, but also to decide, discern and judge; the concept has both subjective and objective dimensions (Koselleck, "Crisis" 358). For example, in Greek medical theory, crisis (an illness) is defined by a deviation from the body's normal (healthy) state, yet this objective situation is inseparable from the *experience* of the illness that the patient undergoes (Habermas 1). The subjective dimension involves a process of discernment and judgment, both

in a diagnostic sense (i.e. determining the cause of the illness and acting to remedy it) and in the trajectory of the illness (either the patient will either recover or not). Similarly, in ancient Greek political spheres the concept denoted judgment, trial, and legal decision—it marked a moment of disruption but also the judgment that (re)ordered the civic community. In such expressions, subjective critique and objective crisis are fused in a single term (Koselleck, "Crisis" 359). In all cases, the concept signified "life-deciding alternatives meant to answer questions about what is just or unjust, what contributes to salvation or damnation, what furthers health or brings death" (Koselleck, "Crisis" 361).

It is Friedrich Schiller who (outstripping eschatological conceptions of End Times) first understands the link between subjective critique and objective crisis in properly historical terms; this is the birth of the modern concept. For Schiller, all human history is a single crisis that is constantly and permanently taking place. The final judgment will not be pronounced from without, either by God or by historians in *ex post facto* pronouncements about history. Rather, "World history"—including all the actions and omissions of mankind—"is the last judgment." Georg W. F. Hegel expands this idea, suggesting that "world judgment" is rendered "not merely by its might and a blind destiny but by the necessary development of its self-consciousness, whereby a single nation or people is made responsible for implementing a single moment and stage, which it receives in the form of a principle" (Hegel, *Philosophy of Right* 306). History is defined by an essential movement or unrest in which both the form and content of history are fundamentally and irreversibly changeable. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel shows that reality tends to appear as a unity: despite their particularity, experiences, actions and events are expressed within a unifying, consistent and all-encompassing totality. From that one consistent

and all-encompassing worldview, however, a split emerges: an existing totality is inevitably challenged by another that is equally self-consistent and systematic, yet incompatible with the former. This second totalization, if it gains sufficient force, negates the absolute validity of the first; the first, while conserving a relative validity, is then absorbed and transformed through synthesis with the second (Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*). The second, in turn, produces a further contradiction through which it is subsequently relativized and subsumed, and so on *ad infinitum*. The method of foregrounding and investigating this endless movement, the essential restlessness of totalization, is for Hegel the dialectic of history.

In the Hegelian dialectic, and for German Idealism generally, the concept of crisis is marginal (or, one might say, notional). Hegel's heirs developed this notion and made it central to the understanding of history. For the Young Hegelians, and others of their era, crisis named the situation in which two contradictory systems overlap, in which things could fundamentally change due to a systemic incongruence or contradiction. Moreover, for the Young Hegelians the specific relation between dialectics and crisis became essential for understanding the relation between thought and the social and political upheaval taking place around them. As formulated by Arnold Ruge (a Young Hegelian and friend of Marx) in 1842: "Our time has now become especially critical…and the crisis is…nothing more than…the attempt….to break through and to discard the shell of the past, a sign that something new has already replaced it" (quoted in Koselleck, "Crisis" 384). Gustav von Mevissen, a German liberal politician, proposed a similar diagnosis: "The recognition of the presence of an organic affliction…presages a historical crisis. Today, as in similar epochs in the past, the sole reason for the crisis is the incongruence between

the culture [*Bildung*] of the century and its actual customs, forms of existence and conditions" (quoted in Koselleck, "Crisis" 385).

In the 1840s, crisis names a moment of transition wherein a contradiction between the already-present, new historical form discards the "shell of the past." But, more profoundly, it transforms the Hegelian conception of history by introducing the idea that time itself is historical and, subsequently, the idea that the world had entered a "new time" (*neue Zeit*) of history:

> Time is no longer simply the medium in which all histories take place; it gains a historical quality. Consequently, history no longer occurs in, but through, time. Time becomes a dynamic and historical force in its own right. Presupposed by this formulation of experience is a concept of history which is likewise new: the collective singular form of Geschichte, which since around 1780 can be conceived as history in and for itself in the absence of an associated subject or object. (Koselleck, *Futures Past* 236)

In other words, in the wake of Hegel's dialectical conception of history, the concept "crisis" makes it possible to conceive of history in terms of ruptures and distinct epochs rather than in linear time—it reconstitutes history as something defined by such changeability, by a historical consciousness that entails that history can be acted upon and changed (Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* 18).

In this sense, modern conceptions of crisis remain dialectically tied to critique. On one hand, the practice of critique made central by enlightenment philosophy is defined by reason—by the practice of analyzing and pronouncing judgment upon the validity of concepts, orders, institutions, and even historical epochs. In short, everything is opened to rational judgment. As Janet Roitman writes: "the constant quest to authenticate the supreme authority of reason transpires through the perpetual process of critique, which is based on the idea of duty toward the future and motivated by faith in the yet-to-be-discovered truth" (Roitman, "Crisis" n.p.). Thus, on one hand, critique introduces crisis; through its constantly destabilizing analysis, it gives rise

to the idea of contingency and changeability—in short, to the idea that historical crises might tip in one direction or another and, more importantly, that human action may influence the direction of history. On the other hand, for thinkers like Auguste Comte, Johann Gottfried Herder, and Thomas Paine, historical crisis bears an imperative to develop and practice a critical rationality. Comte, for example writes: "The great modern crisis can be resolved only by a total reorganization. This requires a sociological theory capable of explaining everything in humanity's past" (quoted in Koselleck 377). Similarly, Herder argues that a contemporary crisis necessitates an all-encompassing science of history and society:

> since for a variety of reasons we are living in the midst of such a strange crisis of the human spirit (indeed why not also of the human heart?), it is up to us to discover and assess all the inner forces of history rather than continue paying homage to a naıve idea of progress. (quoted in Koselleck 377)

In other words, for modern theorists, crisis necessitated a *critical science* of society conceptually powerful enough to explain not only the contemporary situation but also the "inner forces of history," including the conditions that produce specific crises.

The modern philosopher who finally developed a rigorous science of history insists that the real crisis—the crisis that would bring about revolutionary historical change—must be understood not in terms of the Hegelian historical consciousness but in terms of the existing material situation: "The real crisis," Marx writes, "can only be deduced from the real movement of capitalist production, competition, and credit" (*Theories of Surplus Value, Vol. II*). Marx argues that the thrust of critical thought is not only to understand history but to change it.

Bourgeois economists, then as now, assumed that the relationship between capitalism and economic crises was accidental; crises were interruptions that, while destructive in the short

term, were secondary effects, inessential to the mode of production itself. As such, crises would come and go as the states, markets, and economic agents responded to a vastly complex set of impulses and influences. Marx's science of history is founded on a critical practice that, eschewing commonplace positivism, examines why value is expressed in a particular way; this means, for example, instead of analyzing how capitalists generate profit, Marx examines why in the capitalist system value is expressed as surplus value. In doing so, Marx's analysis reveals that the logic of surplus value is determined by inherent contradiction: creating value requires labour; yet, in a system where value is determined relative to the competitive and ever expanding measure of capital, producing surplus requires eradicating wage-labour. Marx's critical science of history and crisis has little to do with demonstrating the evils of capital; rather, his great contribution is to have developed a critical method that can show—with historical and logical demonstration—that crisis is an inescapable dimension of capital and, hence, that the only way to overcome the tendency toward crisis is to overcome capitalism (Marx, "Theories of Surplus Value" 326). There is, of course, profound disagreement about whether capitalism *necessarily* produces the conditions of its own terminal crisis. Though important, this question is secondary to the fact of historical contingency—the fact, revealed by enlightenment critique, that history could be otherwise—which, in Marx, becomes an imperative of contingency: history *must* be changed.

ii. Recovering a transformative conception of crisis

I've suggested in the first section that, today, crisis—both the concept and the material processes that predominate post-2007—constitute a kind of dual force: "crisis" still signals the potential for

social and political transformation (the potential return of history signaled by the emergence of political organizations as well as a rethinking of key historical ideas). Yet the effects of contemporary crisis further entrench the status quo and have given rise to reactionary forces. Marx writes that the living revolutionaries "conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history" (Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" 277). Perhaps then it is also worthwhile conjuring spirits that are more theoretical; even if the concept of crisis has been, as Badiou has suggested, subsumed by the logic of the state, it may be possible to recover something of its once transformative force.

From this brief genealogical overview, there emerge four key features that, I will argue, gave (and potentially restore) the critique/crisis relation its transformative force:

1. The crisis/critique dialectic leverages the emergence of a political subject that is immersed in and counterposed to the objective movement of history. In its historical development, the relationships between subjective and objective dimensions of crisis and critique are indiscernible—as suggested, the ancient Greek concept *krino* describes both the condition of the patient *and* the intervention of the physician. In modern conceptions—i.e. in Marx via Hegel—subjective and objective dimensions are delimited, and crisis and critique become distinct concepts. Marx rightly foresaw the objective crisis of capital as well as the subjective crisis in which social differences are reduced to monetary relations. For Marx, a key link in revolutionizing this dual crisis was the emergence of a subject, the proletariat that, produced by the crisis of capital and enabled by the practice of critique, would finally overthrow capitalism.

2. Crisis organizes all forms of engagement into a combative logic that potentially creates the terms for class struggle and makes decision essential. The notion that crisis enacts opposing possibilities—already inherent in early Greek theories of medicine as the possibility of either recovery or death—is modernized in diagnoses of the French Revolution. For example, while Paine and Burke are opposed in their judgments about the revolution, both use the concept of crisis "to set out new, universally valid historical alternatives," thus transforming crisis into a concept "designed for combat" (Koselleck, "Crisis" 376). In this sense, the concept of crisis frames the material polarization which, following Engels' formulation of the connection between crisis and class struggle,[3] enacts a scission within both the objective situation of historical turmoil *and* the subjective experience. This concept, I hypothesize, provides theoretical leverage for subtracting the idea of historical change from the normative aspect of crisis—i.e. the moral diagnostic form that sees crisis as an aberration and thus implicitly contributes to the "natural" movement of history.

3. The concept of crisis structures an understanding of historical newness and provides a framework for understanding the temporality of how such newness potentially emerges in specifically historical terms. Chateaubriand, Saint-Simon and Herder argue that modern crises are inherently universal in scope and, if carried through, mark an irreversible turning point in

[3] Describing this connection, Engels writes that the crisis in Britain produced a reserve of unemployed men who ". . . begged, not cringing like ordinary beggars, but threatening by their numbers, their gestures and their words. . . Here and there disturbances arose. . .The most frightful excitement prevailed among the workers until the general insurrection broke out throughout the manufacturing districts" (Engels, *The Condition of the Working-Class in England In 1844* 88).

historical development. I suggest that this element, which simultaneously rejects theological notions of history and preserves theological temporality, provides leverage for a critical reading of the relationship between crisis and the event.

4. Derived from point 2 and 3, the concept of crisis grounds the transition from metaphysical to imminently historical notions of change. In situations where crisis is less a definable event than a general state of things—the primary example being psychology after Freud—this understanding of transition implies that the actualization of crisis requires subjective engagement. As noted, Schiller is the first to understand the inextricable link between crisis and critique in historical terms. Hence, the Schillerian dictum: "World History is the Last Judgment," which becomes so influential in Hegel. Following this initial intervention Marx can establish the universality of crisis, of which he writes: "The world trade crises must be regarded as the real concentration and forcible adjustment of *all the contradictions* of bourgeois economy" (Section 10 of *Theories of Surplus Value*).

These four insights guide the remainder of this dissertation; in particular, they orient a critical analysis of existing theories of crisis, as well as the more speculative project of attempting to recover a transformative conception of crisis for the present moment.

3. Chapter Outline

Marx establishes the immanence of crisis within history and, more specifically, in relation to the capitalist mode of production. In analyzing the theoretical relevance of the concept of crisis to contemporary social and political change, a central question is: how to theorize this immanent

dynamic in a way that facilitates an understanding of the relation *between* crises? This means both across contemporary spheres (economics, environment, social-institutions) and over time (the 1929 Stock Market Crash, energy and economic crises of the 1970s, the financial crisis of 2007, and so on). As stated in the introduction to this chapter, this dissertation analyzes and historicizes the concept of crisis, with an emphasis on the relevance of this concept in contemporary radical political thought. An understanding of conceptual inheritance is central to this analysis and to how I understand historicization. So, I ask, to what extent and in what ways can crisis—once a radically transformative concept—be inherited in a way that preserves or recreates its social, political and economic force? Among contemporary accounts, *Wertkritik*—an approach developed theorists of political economy—provides one of the most compelling conceptions of capitalist crisis. Established by Robert Kurz and developed by Claus Peter Ortlieb, Roswitha Scholz, Norbert Trenkle, Ernst Lohoff and others, *Wertkritik* reinvigorates Marx's conceptions of crisis by rigorously historicizing notions of crisis and value within current historical developments. Chapter 2 outlines the ways in which a critique of value furthers conceptions of capitalist crisis. My reading of *Wertkritik* emphasizes how the inner contradictions of capital—to which I lend clarity by developing the concept of "surplus paradox"—structure capital's inevitable drive toward its final crisis. I show how *Wertkritik* revives the relevance of capital's contradictions through a critique of key concepts—including labour, value and money—which, they argue, have become reified and naturalized in contemporary Marxist thought. Through this critical analysis, *Wertkritik* argues, they provide "theoretical and empirical proof that there will be no more new waves of secular accumulation, and capitalism has irrevocably entered a barbaric stage of decline and disintegration" (Trenkle 14). Thus, they argue that *the critique of value is a theory of terminal crisis.* In other words, by

showing how surplus value drives the expansion of capital, and by demonstrating that (beginning in the 1970s) capital reaches the absolute limits of this expansion, it can be historically and logically proved that capitalism has entered its irreversible, terminal crisis.

Wertkritik provides a compelling and productive starting point for understanding capitalist crisis today, but it is not without limitations. Chapter 3 analyzes *Wertkritik* more critically by interpreting it alongside *Neue Marx-Lectüre* [NML] philosopher Michael Heinrich. While Heinrich and *Wertkritik* have similar theories of the role of surplus value within the crisis dynamic, they diverge on the question of the terminal nature of capitalism's crisis. While *Wertkritik* authors argue that recurring crises lead to a terminal crisis, Heinrich argues that it is possible for capital to continue reinventing ways to generate surplus value. I show that differences between these two theories emerge from a philosophical distinction between *Wertkritik's* historical-substantialist approach (which understands value as a social *substance* inhering in the commodity) and Heinrich's anti-substantialist approach (which sees value as a relative measure that is only actualized in exchange). I suggest that this distinction is important, on its own terms, for understanding current Marxist conceptions of crisis. More significantly though, through this comparative analysis, I argue that a Marxist conception of crisis inevitably encounters a dilemma or impasse. While the crises of capital generate a growing population of precarious, surplus laborers, this surplus does not constitute anything like a unified (proletarian) political subject. There is no natural subject to connect the crisis of capitalism to social transformation. Without a proletarian subject to connect crisis and transformation, a dilemma emerges: either crisis theory is confined to structural historical analysis (i.e. a descriptive science of history as opposed to a prescriptive politics of transformation); or it connects historical

description to political meaning based on an unverifiable teleological understanding of history (i.e. one in which the contradictions of capital objectively bring about emancipatory social revolution). The former is the fate of critiques of political economy (including *Wertkritik*); the latter of ultra-leftist and workerist politics.

Ultimately, this dilemma cannot be solved within traditional Marxism; new theories of political subjectivity are needed. Chapter 4 outlines such a theory through an interpretation of the political philosophy of Alain Badiou, particularly his notions of the event and the subject. Like nineteenth century conceptions of crisis, the event is a rupture that creates a new time, transforming the basic temporal and structural coordinates of a given world; event thus recovers the more radical dimensions of the concept of crisis. However, unlike contemporary conceptions of crisis, the Badiouian event is inextricably linked to a theory of the subject; indeed, for Badiou, the subject is nothing other than the transformative actualization of the event in the world. Elaborating this idea in relation to Marx, I develop a theory of the crisis-event: a concept that recovers the transformative dimensions of crisis (i.e. those listed above: polarization, newness, and the transition to an immanently historical understanding of change), but situates them within Badiou's definition of the subject. Crisis, in this sense, is not an objective occurrence but an impasse in the relation between subject and world. For example, rather than a crisis of capitalism, it views the current situation as a crisis of socialism—a crisis, that is, in the possibility of thinking, affirming, and actualizing a transformative political truth. This transforms the problem outlined in the previous chapter: instead of a structural dilemma it becomes a problem of subjective intervention—how might political subjects transform a given situation through the affirmation of a truth?

The difficulty with this Badiouan conception, however, is that it is not clear how the subject of the event relates to the material situation of crisis; if "crisis" emerges as an impasse in the (potential) political subject, then how does it connect to the still very real crises that emerge from the contradictions of capital? Chapter 5 analyzes the relative strategic merits of the concept of crisis-event by examining it within a broader theoretical framework. Specifically, it analyzes the problem of the materiality of the subject in three overlapping theoretical frameworks: Marxist critique, Lacanian analysis, and Badiouan ontology. Ultimately, I conclude by arguing that this comparison must come down to a strategic theoretical decision. One of the primary factors in such a decision must be the metatheoretical relation between philosophy and political subjectivity. In the end, the philosophical attempt to define political truth or even political expediency will tend to reproduce the status quo. This is particularly true in times of crisis: the logic of crisis depends upon a projected, imaginary future, and in a historical moment where the future is already inscribed by the mechanisms of financialization—by capital's capacity to derive surplus value through speculated-upon future wealth—we must learn to trust in a politics of the present. If crisis is to become, once again, a concept that enables radical egalitarian transformation, we must look to those struggles waged by collective, embodied (and therefore precarious) political subjects.

Chapter 2. The Surplus Paradox: Value and the Crisis of Capitalism

Introduction: Capitalism is Crisis

In the decade since the 2007 financial crisis, there has been a resurgence in interest in the work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, as well as the 20th century theories of crisis Marx and Engels inspired. Among the more compelling accounts—and relatively new to Anglophone discussions of crisis—the *Wertkritik* (or value critique)[4] approache argues that Marxist theory suffers from an uncritical reification of key concepts, particularly labour and value. Building on Robert Kurz's 1986 essay "The Crisis of Exchange Value: Science as Productivity, Productive Labour, and Capitalist Reproduction," *Wertkritik* aims to show that a rigorous critique of these reified categories uncovers, at the heart of capitalist creation of value, a foundational dynamic that leads

[4] In this chapter, when I use the terms value critique and the critique of value I mean *Wertkritik*, not to be confused with French schools of thought, or with older conceptions of crisis based solely on the falling rate of profit.

inevitably to the terminal crisis of capitalism. As such, the critique of value is "essentially a theory of terminal crisis" (Trenkle 13). This chapter analyzes and contextualizes this claim. It does so, first, by demonstrating how key insights from *Wertkritik* contribute to a materialist account of crisis; and, second, by introducing the notion of "surplus paradox," a concept that names the core dynamic identified by value critique and situates this dynamic within the broader field of crisis theory.

Developed in the wake of the first global economic crisis of 1857-58, Marx's understanding of crisis emerges in a moment not unlike our own, and derives from analyses of capitalist processes and dynamics in historical context. While Marx's work may not have a consistent or complete theory of crisis, it founded a critical field that has produced significant insight into the dynamic of capitalist crisis. From early twentieth century debates on accumulation and crisis (Bernstein; Luxemburg; Kautsky), to 1970s crisis theory (Mattick; Wright), to more recent accounts that add much needed analyses of the relation between capitalist crisis, race and gender (Endnotes, *Gender, Race, Class and Other Misfortunes*; Scholz; Fraser), crisis theory frames a well-developed set of critical and analytical responses to the question: what does a capitalist crisis look like? However, the question of the relation between crises (a question that, already prominent in Marx, echoes through critical theories of crisis) is much less developed. This is at least in part because the systemic crises described by Marx are by their nature transformative; they change the situation in which they take place and, hence, undermine stable points against which change could be referenced and measured. As a result, it is exceedingly difficult to determine the cumulative effects of crises through time, across geographical regions, and between social, economic, and political spheres. This includes the

most complex questions in critical political-economic theories of crisis: Are successive crises necessarily more destructive? And if so, does an increasingly destructive sequence necessarily destroy the basic conditions of the capitalist mode of production, bringing capitalism to an end? And by what principle could such an end be measured?

Despite this difficulty, Marx provides analytical and methodological tools that, with added historical hindsight, establish two significant points of departure. First, crises are inevitable effects of capitalism: as an economic system, capitalism must produce surplus value to survive. It is not sufficient to reproduce already-existing value; capital must continually expand. Second, the resolution of each crisis generates the conditions for further crises. Capitalist crises are not accidental or secondary effects. Crises break down barriers to accumulation and in doing so free up new sites of expansion; however, each successive wave of accumulation must, at some point, reach a saturation point; hence, another crisis and (at least so far) new sites and forms of accumulation.

In Marx's moment, like our own, mainstream economics generally assumed that the relationship between capitalism and economic crises was accidental. In this view, crises appear as interruptions that, while destructive in the short term, are merely deviations, inessential to the mode of production itself; crises come and go as states and actors respond to a vastly complex set of impulses and influences. A notable exception, nineteenth century theorist Jean Charles Léonard Sismondi argued that cyclical crises were, in fact, an inevitable effect of capitalist production. The separation of market-determined exchange value from socially-determined use value, he argued, releases an excess in productive capacity which, instead of fulfilling human needs and desires, caused systemic overproduction; in short, production constantly increased, but

workers (whose wealth grew relatively much slower) were unable to buy the goods their labor produced.

For Marx, this insight was essential for a critical understanding of capitalism. "[P]rofoundly conscious of the contradictions in capitalist production," Marx writes, Sismondi:

> is aware that, on the one hand, [capitalism's] forms — its production relations — stimulate unrestrained development of the productive forces and of wealth; and that, on the other hand, these relations are conditional, that their contradictions of use-value and exchange-value, commodity and money, purchase and sale, production and consumption, capital and wage-labor, etc., assume ever greater dimensions as productive power develops. (Marx, "Theories of Surplus Value" 326)

By showing that these contradictory impulses were essential to the relations of production—and the cause of the instability of his own historical moment—Sismondi revealed that "crises are not accidental, as Ricardo maintains, but essential outbreaks—occurring on a large scale and at definite periods—of the immanent contradictions" (Marx, "Theories of Surplus Value" 326). If Marx did not fully develop the implications of this discovery, he did provide a way to examine the systemic nature of capitalist crisis, thus proving that crises both express and transform the historical processes that constitute capitalist society (Heinrich, *Marx's Capital* 170–72; Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* ix; Callinicos 153–55). In short, Marx proves that capitalism is crisis.

But, if capitalism is crisis, and crises constantly shift the political-economic terrain (thus undermining any stable point from which to measure and account for change) then how best to

frame this essential relation between capital and crisis? The theorists of *Wertkritik* ground their understanding in a renewed critical practice. Against the tendency to abstract and naturalize key political economic concepts, the critique of value grounds the moving contradiction of capital in the separation of use value and exchange value. In doing so, *Wertkritik* establishes a materialist and historically verifiable conception of crisis.

To elaborate the significance of value critique's contributions, I begin by outlining the *Wertkritik* account of the relation between value, crisis and the end of capitalism. I show how *Wertkritik* reconceptualizes the relation between value, labor and crisis in relation to the following three assertions:

1. *Labor as such is an abstraction* (Trenkle 2). Labor is neither a universal precondition nor a transhistorical anthropological constant, but instead a historically constituted form specific to commodity society (Trenkle 2). Whereas Marx distinguishes between concrete labor (the concrete material properties of specific kinds of activity) and abstract labor (the reduction of labor to the common equivalent of money), *Wertkritik* argues that labor emerges alongside the capitalist system. In that system, labor is always already separated (i.e. abstracted) from its specific, concrete properties. In other words, *labor is an abstraction*: it is not the concrete real against which the value relation constitutes itself; rather it constitutes the obverse of value under capital, the flip side of the same coin. In this sense, as we will see, labor cannot provide an ontological ground for political emancipation.

2. *The real moving contradiction of capital is not found in labor but in the separation of wealth and value*. The contradiction at the heart of capital—the one that drives capital's

crisis dynamic—is located in the process by which material sources of wealth (which appear as use value) are increasingly separated from, and subsumed by, the abstract valuation of value (determined as exchange value).

3. *The critique of value is a theory of terminal crisis.* According to *Wertkritik* a historical critique of political economy (point 1) grounded in the separation of wealth and value (point 2) reveals the *terminal crisis* inherent to capitalism. The historicization and de-reification of social practices (labor in particular) reinvigorates and radicalizes a Marxist theory of capitalist crisis by providing "theoretical and empirical proof that there will be no more new waves of secular accumulation, and capitalism has irrevocably entered a barbaric stage of decline and disintegration" (Trenkle 14).

Following a summary of the key tenets of *Wertkritik* (Section 1), the second section will zero in on the third point, aiming at a concrete understanding of the relationship between the critique of value and terminal crisis. What about the current moment substantializes the claim that the capitalist mode of production has, in fact, entered the terminal crisis of capital? I analyze the question from a methodological perspective: grounding an understanding of crisis in the critique of value, as *Wertkritik* does, reorients political economic critique by insisting upon the historical nature of basic concepts—value, but also, commodity, money, labor. The de-reification of these "natural" facts reveals the essential contradictions (between wealth and value, embodied in the destruction of labor and material environment) that, according to *Wertkritik*, inevitably lead to systemic collapse.

Building on these three points, I focus on the ways in which capital's dependence on the generation of surplus value perpetually expands and intensifies exploitation (particularly of

labor and the environment).[5] This expansion and intensification produces what I call the surplus paradox. On the one hand, surplus value depends upon the *quantitative* expansion of use value: to continue generating surplus value requires constant growth in production and, subsequently, constant growth in the exploitation of labor and environment. On the other hand, the actualization of surplus value requires the *qualitative* subtraction and destruction of use value. Capital, lest we forget, is a system of abstraction. A common mistake, found often enough even in Marxist discourse, is to ground capitalist crisis in the Malthusian claim that infinite expansion cannot take place in a physically finite system. This formulation is at best insufficient, for it is not the case that society will reach some pre-existing economic or geological limit, but rather that capital itself makes extraneous (irretrievable, immeasurable, imperceptible)—and thus effectively destroys—the material conditions on which it depends. In short, the limits to capitalism are *produced by capital*.

Finally, I return to the broader theoretical stakes of the question of terminal crisis. I argue that the critique of value wrests, from other contemporary theoretical trends, an account of crisis that incorporates both structure and historical movement. *Wertkritik* reveals historical movement within structures; in doing so, it moves beyond progressivist critiques—those that seem content to make visible the interminable sites of exploitation—by demonstrating that structures of exploitation are constantly shifting. Moreover, against the tendency to celebrate the crisis of

[5] As Ortlieb writes: "The growth of the mass of surplus value and — as long as productivity is increasing — the related and even stronger growth of the material output is the unconscious raison d'etre of capital and the condition *sine qua non* of the continued existence of the capitalist mode of production" (Ortlieb 107).

capitalism as emancipatory *per se*, the critique of value accounts for why a terminal crisis of capital does not necessarily imply the end of exploitation; in other words, the collapse of the historico-economic processes that separate exchange value from use value is not equivalent to destruction of the political structures that sustain inequality, as numerous Marxist thinkers and theories (from Engels to accelerationism) tend to presume. In short, the critique of value constitutes a recommencement of the dialectical critique of political economy, while resisting prominent teleological tendencies.

1. Central tenets of Wertkritik

At the heart of value critique, and the Marxist tradition more broadly, is the claim that political economy reifies and naturalizes key analytical and historical concepts. Perhaps most prominently, in both critical and liberal analyses, labor is generally understood as a transhistorical and innate category of human existence—i.e. as any active process by which human beings acquire (directly or indirectly from nature) the means of survival. Against this tendency, *Wertkritik* demonstrates that labor is a specific, historically constituted activity, the development of which is tied to the emergence of capitalism.

Already in the work of Marx, there is considerable variation in the definition of this concept. On the one hand, it seems clear enough what labor *is*: as a practice, it is defined as that which "mediates the metabolism between man and nature, and therefore human life itself" (Marx, *Capital: Vol I* 133). On the other hand, the logical and historical status of labor is less clear. In *Volume I*, for example, we read that labor, "as the creator of use-values, as useful labor, is a condition of human existence which is independent of all forms of society; it is an eternal

natural necessity" (Marx, *Capital: Vol I* 133). As the practice that mediates between human communities and the natural world, labor seems to be an essential and transhistorical human activity that is, by definition, held in common by all societies at all times. Elsewhere, however, Marx writes that: "'Labor' is in its very being an oppressive, inhumane, and anti-social activity that both is determined by and produces private property. The abolition of private property thus only becomes reality when it is understood as an abolition of 'labor'" ("Uber Friedrich Lists Buch," quoted in Trenkle 2). And later, even more ambiguously: "The realm of freedom really begins only where labor determined by necessity and external expediency ends; it lies by its very nature behind the sheer of material production proper" (Marx, *Capital: Volume III* 958–959). Are we to understand, by the latter two accounts, that a post-capitalist society will have overcome alienation by overcoming the need for labor? (Fuchs, *Digital Labour and Karl Marx* 26) This would mean that labor is not a transhistorical "condition of human existence," but a historically conditioned activity that must be abolished to actualize freedom.

This distinction is central to twentieth century interpretations of labor and Marxism, especially in more philological debates; yet, it would seem, an orthodox reading aimed at a unified theory of the meaning of "labor" in the work of Marx provides, at best, an incomplete understanding (Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's Capital* 27).[6] More significantly, however, the

[6] There are caveats to this assertion. For example, Althusser, and Fredric Jameson after him, argue that the opening sections of *Capital Vol. 1*, from which the first quote on labor is taken, do not contain critical concepts of capital, value, or capitalism; rather, they aim to set the stage for the following section, which dialectically reveals the limitations of the earlier formulations. In other words, in the first chapter we're in the sphere of appearances; see "The Play of Categories" (Jameson). This does not mean Marx had a consistent definition of labor; only that he analyzed

specific nature of labor—and the ways in which labor shows up alongside related concepts, including value—depends upon how labor is framed as an object of critique. Is it: (1) an anthropological/ontological constant; (2) a historically constituted activity; or (3) either/both, depending on the conceptual context in which it emerges? The answer to this question is inextricably linked to one's interpretive method.

While maintaining a close adherence to Marx's work, *Wertkritik* affirms a strict methodological commitment to historicism[7]—both in terms of the concepts and objects under analysis, and of the theoretical framework through which critique of political economy is developed. As Trenkle writes: "Is 'labor' an anthropological constant? Can we use it as such to make it unproblematically into a point of departure for an analysis of commodity society? My answer is an unambiguous 'no'" (Trenkle 2). Indeed, for Trenkle, Kurz and Ortlieb, the idea that labor might be a transhistorical constant is symptomatic of broader tendencies in Marxist theory toward ontologization and dogmatism. This tendency is marked by the naturalization of social relation, as a result of which categories of capitalist society appear "reified and fetishized, as seemingly 'natural' facts of life and as 'objective necessities'" (Trenkle 1). Denaturalization not only of the processes of capital but also of the categories of critique has several consequences. Most immediately, it demands historical analysis of the co-emergence of labor and capital: to

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labor within a consistent methodology. I mention this only in passing here; the following chapter will develop this idea more directly and critically.

[7] This is not, of course, an uncontested position and I will argue later in this chapter that this assertion constitutes a significant difference in current Marxist philosophies: i.e. the split between historical substantialist and anti-substantialist readings of Marx.

understand labor we must understand the history of capitalism, as a part of which labour comes into existence alongside numerous other categories—most significantly, value. Moreover, insofar as labor is historically constituted, it cannot be understood (as is common in workerist and traditional Marxism) as a concrete constant against which the capitalist value relation constitutes itself. Rather, labor is always already a "real abstraction" (Trenkle 21; see also Toscano, "The Abstraction and Abolition of Value").[8]

i. Labor: historicizing an abstraction

Human beings have never voluntarily entered wage labor. Indeed, the actually existing abstraction of labor has a violent, centuries-long history[9] that is complexly bound up with class, gender and race[10]. This fact is enough to demonstrate that the social activity we call "labor" must

[8] Borrowing the term from Alfred Sohn-Rethel, Trenkle describes "real abstraction" as "a process of abstraction that is not completed in human consciousness as an act of thought, but which, as the *a priori* structure of social synthesis, is the presupposition of and determines human thought and action" (Trenkle 7).

[9] "It is well known that several centuries of evident compulsion and open use of violence were required before the mass of humanity had internalized this form of relationship to time, and no longer thought anything of arriving at the factory or office door punctually at a given time, giving up their lives at the factory door, and subjecting themselves for a precisely measured length of time to the metronomic rhythm of the prescribed productive and functional procedures" (Trenkle 5).

[10] Problematically, *Wertkritik* authors have written comparatively little on race. The research collective Endnotes has examined accumulation and race in contemporary contexts (Endnotes, *Gender, Race, Class and Other Misfortunes*; Endnotes, *Unity in Separation*). And, historical linkages between labor, race and capital have been developed by other authors. For example,

be understood, as a social practice, in terms of its historical emergence.[11] Toward this end, value critique emphasizes three spheres in which the social and historical specificity of labor as a practice is determined: the gendered nature of labor; the irrelevance of the qualitative content of labor; and the objective measurement of labor time.

The essential structural condition for the separation of life and labor is the gendered, dichotomous and hierarchical allocation of productive labor and reproductive labor. The unambiguously "masculine" sphere of productive labor is where, within the capitalist system, value is produced—i.e. through the valuation of abstract labor time which takes shape and circulates in the commodity form (Scholz 128; Trenkle 3). Marxist feminist perspectives demonstrate the ways in which the reproduction of existing social structures depends upon the extraction of human energy (through labor), which must be replenished both in the short term, day-to-day rhythms of individuals, and in the longer term at the level of generations. Drawing on both Marxist-feminism and value critique, Roswitha Scholz developed the key elements of dissociation theory, which analyzes the separation of "productive" (value-producing) from "non-productive" (non-value-producing) labor, which exists at the very heart of value as a fetishistic

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Paul Gilroy shows how the sugar plantations in the New World, prototypes for industrial factories, were the first sites of modern labor (see *The Black Atlantic).*

[11] Cf. Moishe Postone's *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, which derives a very similar conclusion within in a distinct context. Postone writes: "Marx's 'labor theory of value,'…is not a theory of the unique properties of labor in general, but is an analysis of the historical specificity of value as a form of wealth, and of the labor that supposedly constitutes it. Consequently, it is irrelevant to Marx's endeavour to argue for or against this theory of value as if it were intended to be a labor theory of (transhistorical) wealth — that is, as if Marx had written a political economy rather than a critique of political economy" (Postone 26).

form. As the creator of value, abstract labor only exists alongside and against a non-commodity form: the feminized, domestic (non-)labor. This is not merely an issue of (historical) reproduction (i.e. the fact that laborers must be fed, etc.); it is also an issue of (logical) definition: abstract labor only exists insofar as it can be defined against its opposite. Hence, Scholz argues: "capitalism contains a core of female-determined reproductive activities" that are *necessarily* "dissociated"—i.e. excluded from, as opposed to harnessed by—value and abstract labor (Scholz 127).[12] As Scholz writes in *Das Geschlecht des Kapitalismus*:

> From value, abstract labor and the related forms of rationality that attributes specific qualities such as sensuality, emotionality, etc. that are connoted as female to women; the man in contrast stands for intellectual power, strength of character, courage, etc. The man was under modern development equated with culture, the woman with nature. (Quoted in Fuchs, "Capitalism, Patriarchy, Slavery, and Racism in the Age of Digital Capitalism and Digital Labour" 3)

This dissociation is not a latent or secondary effect of capitalism. Rather, as Kurz writes:

> dissociation is "coeval" with the relation of abstract labor, that is, [dissociation] does not consist of either a secondary or a derivative aspect of abstract labor. It is not just the seemingly gender-neutral political-economic forms of the modern system of commodity production which constituted capitalism, but also, in the broadest sense, the relation of value-dissociation as the Gender of Capitalism. (Kurz, "Grey Is the Golden Tree of Life, Green Is Theory")

Therefore, to understand the development of capitalism, and within it the development of labor, it is necessary to understand the processes through which the gendering and dissociation of reproductive activities take hold.

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[12] I.e. as opposed to other Marxist feminists, including Leopoldina Fortunati and Maria Mies, who argue that reproductive labor is productive because "it produces and reproduces the individual as a commodity" through the reproduction of labor (Fortunati 70; see also Mies).

Second, the qualitative content of labor—what is produced, how it is produced and used, the social and environmental cost of production—becomes entirely irrelevant from the perspectives of capital and of labor. From the perspective of capital, what matters is that the commodity produced can be transformed into money and, subsequently, back into labor:

> The fact that any commodity demands a concrete use…has no relevance for the economic rationality for which the product is nothing but a carrier of once expended labor, or "dead labor". The accumulation of "dead labor", in other words "capital", materializing in the money form is the only "meaning" the modern commodity producing system knows about. (Krisis-Group, "Manifesto against Labour" Section 5)[13]

The same is true from the perspective of labor: separated from the means of production, and continually and forcibly sold for subsistence, labor is primarily "a fundamental extraction of vital energy" (Trenkle 4). The irrelevance of the qualitative content of labor implies that the opposition of labor and capital that grounds labor or workerist politics is a false opposition, for labor and capital in are fact two elements of the same process: "the social opposition of capital and labor is only the opposition of different (albeit unequally powerful) interests within the capitalist end-in-itself" (Krisis-Group, "Manifesto against Labour" Section 6). Thus, insofar as it is defined by the simple contradiction of labor and capital, class struggle was not a true historical opposition—at least not insofar as it is conceived of in the dichotomy (A/B) form. It was, instead, "the form of battling out opposite interests on the common social ground and reference system of the commodity-producing system"; in this sense, again, the problem is that instead of

[13] See also Jappe's "Toward a History of the Critique of Value" which affirms that: "Value, as a social form, does not recognize the actual usefulness of commodities. It only considers the quantity of 'abstract labor' that they contain, that is, the quantity of pure expenditure of human energy measured in time" (Jappe, "Critique of Value" 2).

seeking to *abolish* the basic categories of capital, labor-based struggle "was germane to the inner dynamics of capital accumulation" (Krisis-Group, "Manifesto against Labour"). The properly emancipatory social programme, then, would not aim at a "liberation of labor" but rather, as we shall see, a "liberation from labor" (Krisis-Group, "Manifesto against Labour").

Third, the separation of life and labor is defined by an acutely, objectively measured form of time that is in no sense natural. This is demonstrated by the fact that it took centuries of violent coercion before humans had, in adequate numbers, internalized measured time to the degree that factory workers (more or less) obeyed the diktats of the working day. As an historical process, this separation is most legible in the early stages of industrialization: the relentless expansion and intensification of factory production is due in part to the ever-increasing efficiency of automation. But the factory also serves the disciplinary function of separating the laboring body, both spatially and temporally, from all other social spheres. Whereas, prior to industrialization, the local bakery, the blacksmith, and the family farm were embedded in a web of interrelated social spheres (the family, the village, the guild, etc.), the waged worker is required to labor inside the walls of the factory for a determined number of hours.[14] Moreover, forcing laborers to work in a specific space allows the capitalist to prescribe, surveil and enforce the temporality of work. Each laborer must adjust the movements of her body to the speed of production set by the assembly line.

[14] The extreme nature of this disciplinary measure is proved by the amount of time and policing initially required to enforce it: laborers have never simply agreed to show up at a designated time to begin work.

This process is driven by surplus value: the generation of new value must continually increase in relation to labor-cost. This increase is produced in three ways: through an absolute increase in the amount of labor (i.e. by increasing the number of hours worked in a day or year) or through relative increase, either by reducing wages or by increasing the productivity of labor. The latter has been achieved, for example, through time-based rationalization: the more simple and specific the task, the more the movements of the body can be determined, the more vital energy can be extracted from the laboring body in a given amount of time, the more surplus value can be derived.[15]

Of course, labor in general is not reducible to "factory labor"; there are real social and economic differences between the factory worker and, say, the entrepreneur. Yet, contrary to common assumption, the processes that define the supposedly postmodern economy or "creative capitalism" constitute not a reconvergence of labor and life but a more advanced separation of labor from life, and a more complete subsumption of the latter by the former. One need only skim the massive amount of writing by and for entrepreneurs to recognize that, to emancipate oneself from traditional middle-class work (symbolized by the boss, the office, the suit, the 9 to 5, etc.), one must also sacrifice all non-labor activities and social forms associated with the middle-class (leisure, the nuclear family, the suburban home, and so on). The result: to be free from labor, one must work all the time. The immediate result is well-documented. Constant increases in efficiency (through social and technological innovation) increase the overall amount

[15] I will develop this idea further in the following section.

of time worked by an individual laborer. Moreover, this process has also intensified the ways in which time is measured and valorized: previously unproductive spheres are organized around labor (women are absorbed into the work force and leisure time is oriented toward the reproduction of the self to labour better); and apparatuses for extracting labor from "leisure" (social media, user generated services, etc.) now play a significant role in our lives and in the economy. At a more general level, the formation of labor as an abstract form of social practice constitutes, through the process of separation, its opposite: the categorization of all that is abolished from labor.[16] Only more recently has it become clear that the abolishment of non-labor activities from the sphere of labor implies their abolishment in general.

ii. The Absence of Ontological Condition of Social Emancipation

The critical historicization of labor, along with the argument against class struggle as an essentially historical contradiction, have profound effects for how one conceives of social emancipation. Most immediately, many on the left have tended to view labor as an essential human capacity (Larsen, Nilges, and Robinson x). As a result, the primary political problem was viewed in terms of how to justly redistribute the fruits of human labor to ensure that those most essential to, and alienated by, the production process are adequately compensated for their labor. In this trajectory, theorists and social movements point to massive imbalances in power between, on the one hand, transnational corporations, banks, hegemonic governments, etc., and, on the

[16] As Trenkle argues: "the historical establishment of labor is accompanied by the formation of further separate spheres of society, into which all those dissociated (abgespaltenen) moments are banished" (Trenkle 3)

other hand, increasingly individuated, desocialized publics.[17] This imbalance in power, the argument follows, is at the heart of global inequality and alienation: those who maintain hegemonic control (led by corporate greed, generated through financialization, and facilitated by alliances among governments [especially the US], corporations and the police) must be held morally responsible. Value-critique rightly points out, however, that such theories naturalize labor as a transhistorical human capacity. This naturalization reduces the causes of inequality which, it is presumed, have little to do with labor itself and everything to do with how existing surplus (economic and otherwise) is, and isn't, available to those who have produced it. In short, labor itself serves as the principle on which emancipation is based. This ultimately leads to a very limited set of theoretical and strategic possibilities.

The critique of labor situates labor within the history of capitalism and, in doing so, establishes that labor is always already a "real abstraction." Thus, for *Wertkritik* there is no real contradiction between the value relation and labor; rather, the value relation "encompasses labor as precisely another of its forms of appearance" (Larsen, Nilges, and Robinson x). This undermines theoretical recourse to any notion of "labor" as such: if labor is always already a real abstraction, then there can be no positive Marxist science of the economy.[18] To put this

[17] This line of thinking grounds theories of anti-/alter-globalization political theories (from Naomi Klein's *Shock Doctrine*, to Liberal theories of land rights, to redistributionist post-Marxist socialism) as well as anti-corporate "movements" (local/slow food movements, Fairtrade movements, etc.).

[18] It is worth noting that, in the development of this critique, the role of the worker changes substantially. Kurz's early essay "The Crisis of Exchange Value" affirms the role of the working

differently, any attempt to redirect or better manage resources, value, profit, and so on, only serves to further reify the essential categories of capitalist production. According to this perspective, a legitimately emancipatory critique of political economy would aim, instead, to *abolish* the categories of capitalism[19]—not only labour but also the commodity, exchange value, money, in short, the entire social structure. Hence, *Wertkritik* argues that: "There is no ontological principle upon which social emancipation could base itself. Instead, *capitalism must be surpassed solely by means of a concrete, historical critique of its basic forms*" (Kurz, "Current Global Economic Crisis" 349).[20] Kurz' pithy phrasing circumscribes both the most forceful element of the critique of value (its powerful and strategic opposition to reified notions of emancipation) as well as its limits (does critique really engender historical change?). We will return to the latter in section three. First: what is the connection between the critique of value and the crisis dynamic?

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class and party as the revolutionary subject; later writing, however, is entirely critical of these notions.

[19] As Anslem Jappe writes: "If the USSR was not 'socialist,' this was not only due to the dictatorship of a bureaucratic class, as the anti-Stalinist left claimed. The real reason was that the central categories of capitalism—the commodity, value, labor, money—had never been abolished. All that had ever been claimed was that these were better 'managed' for the 'benefit of the workers'" ("Towards a History of the Critique of Value": 2).

[20] This is an essential point, both ontologically and politically, to which I will return in the final section.

2. Value Critique and the Crisis Dynamic

Kurz's seminal essay "The Crisis of Exchange Value" was published in 1986. While the critique of value is rife with shifts and fissures, this essay remains foundational for its conception of how the capitalist mode of production set in motion processes that drive the progressive separation of material labor processes from the process of value creation. Over time use value and exchange value diverge on a larger and larger scale. Subsequently, this ever-increasing divergence produces a relative disproportion between wealth and value: increases in productivity (induced by the market and actualized through the rationalization and automization of labor) ultimately lead to a decrease in the global production of surplus value such that the valorization of capital reaches its limits, both in terms of labor and in terms of the planet (Ortlieb 78). This, according to value critique, produces the terminal crisis of capitalism. How does the separation of use and exchange value develop historically? What drives the decrease in surplus value? And how does the valorization of capital reach its limit?

i. Capital and the separation of use value and exchange value

In *Theories of Surplus Value*, Marx argues that bourgeois political economy obfuscates the capitalist tendency toward crisis by

> forgetting or denying the first elements of capitalist production: the existence of the product as a commodity, the duplication of the commodity in commodity and money, the consequent separation which takes place in the exchange of commodities and finally the reliant of money or commodities to wage-labor. (Marx and Engels, "Crisis Theory" 445).

The critique of value is grounded in a rediscovery of the contradiction—the "duplication," "separation" and reliance—and on a rigorous attempt to bring concrete specificity to this contradiction. According to Kurz:

> it is precisely this contradiction between use value and exchange value as it is laid out as a contradiction in the process of commodity production that makes capital into a contradiction in process, because it transforms itself under the capital relation from an apparently static relationship into a real historical process that drives toward resolution. (Kurz, "Crisis of Exchange Value" 20)

Thinkers on the left fail to maintain this distinction, which produces a "petrified historical interpretation of Marx" in which the material- and value-determined elements of productive labor are no longer analytically distinct. The central dialectical thrust of Marx's argument is thus lost. Against this oversight, Kurz argues, productive labor must be understood as a "dual concept":

> firstly, in relation to use value, on the material side of the process of labor as the process of the metabolism between humans and nature; but secondly, in relation to exchange value, to the process of the formation of value, as the social metabolism of humans with one another, in which labor appears to be dematerialized, as abstract human labor. (Kurz, "Crisis of Exchange Value" 20)

In the first (in terms of use value), the concept of productivity refers to "the relationship between (natural) material activity and material useful effect, a relationship which itself depends on the form and quality of the means of labor and the objects of labor" (Kurz, "Crisis of Exchange Value" 20). In the second (in terms of exchange value) productivity "refers exclusively to the abstract process of the formation of value, to the expenditure of abstract human labor as the fictitious substance of value, which on the surface appears reified as exchange value" (Kurz, "Crisis of Exchange Value" 20).

Framed in terms of the individual producer, this distinction appears merely perspectival: viewing the commodity from the perspective of use value reveals the material utility of that which is produced (productive labor, in short, refers to any useful activity); viewing the commodity from the perspective of exchange value reveals that which is immediately presented as a social real abstraction (productive labor refers to value as determined by abstract labor time) (20). In this sense, there is no necessary contradiction between the two: it is clear enough that, in pre-capitalist society, products of artisanal labor contain, simultaneously and unproblematically, both utility and value.

To understand the critical distinction between use value and exchange value, however, this distinction must be analyzed in relation to the emergence of the capitalist mode of production. The latter separates material labor process (associated with use value) from the process of valuation (associated with exchange value). Through this increasingly uneven divergence, the former is subsumed by the latter (Kurz, "Crisis of Exchange Value" 22). How? For Kurz, the "motor" of this process is the way capitalism organizes labor cooperation. When concrete production is undertaken by an individual producer, that producer embodies the unity of use and exchange value.[21] When production is transformed into a cooperative process (as, for example, in the factory) the unity of labor is projected onto a "total productive worker, the totality of the persons active in the cooperative labor process" (21). Capitalist production breaks

[21] Embodied by the individual laborer: "Concrete, qualitative labor and value creation appear as one and the same, which they indeed are, because the abstract expenditure of the nerves, muscles, or brain as human labor, as such, proceeds from one and the same personal corporeality as the particular concrete, material labor process of the blacksmith, the cobbler, or the tailor" (Kurz, "Crisis of Exchange Value" 21).

down the limits that prescribe and localize production on the basis of each individual producer's place in society—class, occupation, family, etc.[22]—dispersing production, projecting it onto a social average—labor time—which becomes the primary and perhaps only measure and source of wealth. While unleashing greater productive potential, this dispersal means that use value and exchange value are no longer unified in the body of the producer; labor time is increasingly abstracted from the working body.

> [T]o the degree that large industry develops, the creation of real wealth comes to depend less on labor time and on the amount of labor employed than on the power of the agencies set in motion during labor time, whose "powerful effectiveness" is itself in turn out of all proportion to the direct labor time spent on their production, depending rather on the general state of science and on the progress of technology, or the application of this science to production. (*Grundrisse*, 704-705)

The abstraction of labor formalizes a series of related, yet in themselves unproductive, processes (Kurz, "Crisis of Exchange Value" 22). For example, the processes of buying and selling do not produce anything, but they facilitate the circulation and consumption of already produced goods. As such, these processes "have neither immediate nor mediated influence on the product, yet they are contained in the nature of production as the production of commodities" (23) insofar as these "special labor processes" are economized and expanded into a plethora of commercial activities: marketing, retail management, market analysis, advertising, and so on. This formalization, economization and expansion result in the "increased social division of labor which reaches beyond the narrow limits of the individual branches of production that until that

[22] See the discussion of 'subjective crisis' in the introduction to Chapter 4.

point had been inflexible and hermetic, and thus dissolves these limits" (Kurz, "Crisis of Exchange Value" 23).[23]

Keeping in mind the historical processes of separation described in section 1 (the separation of masculine "productive labor" from feminine "unproductive labor", of the content of the commodity from its form, and the time and space of labor from social activities) we can formulate an understanding of capitalist crisis that is not only economic but also, and more profoundly, social. In a society oriented toward the generation of wealth and the satisfaction of human needs, "growth in productivity would only cause a few problems, which could easily be solved technically and could unburden human life, leading to a reduction of labor but nonetheless to an increase in the number of useful goods" (Ortlieb 105–106). Such a society, however, would necessarily be non-capitalist, because "[w]hen value is the form of wealth, the goal of production is necessarily surplus value. That is, the goal of capitalist production is not simply value but the constant expansion of surplus value" (Postone 308). The separation of material wealth (use value) and abstract value (exchange value) cannot but lead to the domination of the former by the latter. This necessarily leads to crisis.

[23] Marx's insights on the dissolution of the social sphere in the modern world were only possible once the separation had taken place. "Marx's feat of thought," Kurz writes, "only became possible in the first place at the point in the development of society when material and value-related production actually began to separate from one another" (Kurz, "Crisis of Exchange Value" 22).

ii. Conditions of crisis: labor and environment

> Capital itself is the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labor time to a minimum, while it posits labor time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth.
>
> -- Marx, *Grundrisse* (706)

According to the critique of value it can be logically and historically demonstrated that the abstraction of value ultimately produces a terminal crisis. In a material sense, crisis is the result of a contradiction between a dependence on labor and the expulsion of labor, both of which inescapably result from surplus value. Krisis Group—a collective closely associated with *Wertkritik*—sums it up succinctly:

> On the one hand, [capital] lives on the massive intake of human energy generated by the expenditure of pure labor power – the more the better. On the other hand, the law of operational competition enforces a permanent increase in productivity bringing about the replacement of human labor power by scientific operational industrial capital. (Krisis-Group, "Manifesto against Labour")

Let's examine these elements separately.

Element 1:"[capital] lives on the massive intake of human energy generated by the expenditure of pure labor power." The production of any commodity requires multiple forms of energy, including labor power. At base, value is derived not from any natural material fact—so far, Marx notes, "no chemist has ever discovered exchange value either in a pearl or a diamond" (*Capital Vol. 1*)—but in the living processes that coagulate into reified form as mediated by abstract labor time. This occurs, first, through absolute surplus value. Assuming that fixed and variable operating costs remain constant, absolute surplus is derived most immediately through

an increase in the overall amount of labor extracted from the worker: say a laborer is paid $50/day, and produces 1 "X" per hour, which sells at $5 per X above production costs. To reproduce its value, each worker must work 10 hours per day. Absolute surplus is realized by extending the working day beyond 10 hours (at a surplus of an additional $5/hour). The greater the number of hours labored, the more value is produced.

Element 2: "the law of operational competition enforces a permanent increase in productivity bringing about the replacement of human labor power by scientific operational industrial capital." The expansion of absolute surplus value has limits. While these limits have often been interpreted in an immediate, natural sense—labor can only be extended as long the human body is capable of enduring—they are, in fact, socio-historical limits—i.e. the absolute limits of abstract labor time actualizable within a social system, as determined by, among other things, who is deemed capable of productive labor, legislation limiting the length of the working day, and so on. Regardless, the fact that the market enforces operational competition between producers requires the constant expansion of material wealth.

Wherever absolute surplus reaches a physical limit, the expansion and valuation of wealth shifts from absolute and expansive development to relative and intensive development.[24] In other words, the movement of absolute surplus value shifts to a movement of relative surplus value, which Ortlieb defines as:

[24] See Ortlieb: "The production of relative surplus value is the form of production of surplus value appropriate to developed capitalism, and is bound up with the real subsumption of labor under capital" (Ortlieb 91).

> the surplus value that emerges as a result of the process in which, by means of the increase in the productivity of labor, and therefore the reduction in price of labor power, the necessary labor time can be shortened and the surplus labor time correspondingly increased, without lowering the real wage or lengthening the working day. (Ortlieb 91)

In the past, as is well documented, surplus was primarily actualized through expansion of capital's geographical reach and through the generation of new needs. As this first expansion is saturated, however, surplus value is increasingly actualized through the intensification of accumulation through technological innovations that have (a) facilitated the rapid systematization, rationalization and automation of labor, [25] and (b) extended the reach of capital further and further into non-labor activities and, in doing so, developed new ways to derive value.[26] Both of these trajectories produce a situation in which laborers are either superfluous (as in the case of the factory) or free (as in the case of user generated content [UGC] platforms).

However, production is only one side of value:

> because the perpetually growing material wealth must not simply be produced, but also find a buyer, an irreversible crisis dynamic gets underway: a material output that remains constant, or even that increases, but less quickly than productivity, results in permanently shrinking production of surplus value, through which in turn the opportunities for the sale of the material output become fewer, which then has a greater effect on the fall in the mass of surplus value, and so on. (Ortlieb 106)

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[25] For a value critique perspective on these interrelated processes see Kurz's "The Crisis of Exchange Value," especially the section entitled "Science as Productive Force."

[26] Currently, the most visible examples include all forms of online frameworks, including social media, that derive surplus value from content developed and uploaded by users, ostensibly in their leisure time

Moreover, because exchange value is measured in terms of abstract labor time, any increase in the rate of production creates, over time, a decrease in the value of a given unit of that commodity. The ultimate result is a system with hyper-efficient productive capacities which, having made wage labor (and hence, consumption of wage earners) extraneous, grinds to a halt. Attempts to redistribute wealth might reboot the market, but only temporarily.

The contradiction between dependence and destruction constitutes the general framework of what I call the Surplus Paradox. In pre-capitalist situations value and wealth are unified in the working body—i.e. the individual or group that work to produce the object. However, through the abstraction of labor—the process of making labor cooperative—wealth and value are separated; value, understood in terms measured by capital, subsumes all forms of potential wealth. Hence, the contradiction, which can be understood as a negative feedback loop:

1. Capitalist production requires the extraction of human labor;
2. To generate surplus, productivity must be increased;
3. Once expansion of absolute surplus is impossible, increased productivity requires further automation and rationalization of production;
4. Automation and rationalization of production destroy labor by making it irrelevant, even though (returning to Point 1), capitalist production requires the extraction of labor.

As a given historical sequence realizes the limits of absolute surplus (i.e. wherever it is no longer possible to expand the number of labor hours extracted), the cycle of accumulation collapses, and must be recovered through the generation of new forms of absolute or relative surplus. According to *Wertkritik*, however, the current sequence is, for capital, the final one. Its demise is

defined by "falling production of surplus value at the same time as growing consumption of resources, overladen by the prospect of wars over increasingly scarce material resources, squandered in the valorization of capital, and for the chance to valorize the last remains" (Ortlieb 116–117).

An analogous dynamic exists in the relation between capital and the planet's resources. As Marx writes:

> [A]ll progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is a progress towards ruining the more long-lasting sources of that fertility. The more a country proceeds from large-scale industry as the background of its development…the more rapid is this process of destruction. Capitalist production, therefore, only develops techniques and the degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth-the soil and the worker. (Marx, *Capital: Vol I* 638)

Beyond the limitations inherent to the expansion of absolute and relative surplus in terms of labor, there are also concrete planetary limits. It is increasingly obvious from natural scientific perspectives that the current mode of production, and corresponding rates of consumption, have devastating, unsustainable effects on the planet's systems. And, moreover, that limited mineral and energy resources are being used up at higher and higher rates. However, the limits of production imposed by climate and resource have not been rigorously connected to those imposed by contradictions in value. Indeed, they are driven by the same processes—the separation of use- and exchange-value and the subsumption of the former by the latter; and they take a structurally similar form. Like economic crises, environmental crises have produced social and technological innovation that, forcing a new state of equilibrium, facilitate the continuation

of accumulation and production (Moore 1). However, this pattern of crisis and innovation, like the current economic one, is approaching its limits.

Marx recognized the contradictory impulse inherent to the ways in which capitalism situates man in relation to the planet: "The productivity of labor is also tied up with natural conditions, which are often less favourable as productivity rises… We thus have a contrary movement in these different spheres: progress here, regression there" (Marx, *Capital: Vol I* 875).[27]

In fact, the expansion of productivity increases *exponentially* at the material level. As Ortlieb explains: "if the production of more and more material wealth becomes necessary for the realization of the same surplus value, capital's material output must accordingly grow even more rapidly than the mass of surplus value" (Ortlieb 106). Requiring infinite expansion within a finite situation, the material planetary expansion of capitalism has reached its limits such that "the exhaustion of the planet itself as one, global mass of material for the valorization of capital has without doubt become a fait accompli today: there is now no spot on the earth and no branch of production that has not been delivered up to into the grip of capital" (Ortlieb 107–108).

Here, again, we encounter the Surplus Paradox: environmental conditions and resources—clean water, stable climate systems, etc.—are forms of *wealth*; yet they only have *value* insofar as they are mediated by labor into a form of value; determined by surplus value,

[27] There are, it should be noted, numerous passages like this that demonstrate—against the assumption that Marx believed in straightforward, linear forms of scientific development—a complex understanding of knowledge and its associated historical processes.

this system necessitates constant, exponential growth; however, exponential growth is not only restricted by "natural" limits (for the time being, the bounds of this planet), such growth depends upon the social modes determining the metabolization of nature (i.e. destruction of sources of material wealth—land, air, water, solar energy, and the natural systems they support).

Attempts at curtailing ecological destruction by re-linking natural wealth to economic value are logically absurd. For example, in recent decades numerous governmental strategies—carbon taxation and cap-and-trade systems, most prominently—bind greenhouse gas emissions to economic disincentives. In doing so, these programs appear to alter the connection between wealth and value: in short, increasing the cost of GHG emissions leads to an increase in the *value* of green energy, which preserves natural *wealth* (in the form of relatively clean air, reduced ecological destruction, etc). While the basic rationale is proving effective in reducing emissions at the state level, the value critical approach demonstrates that this is only a relative deduction; since they remain entirely within the structures of valorization, such strategies reproduce the underlying wealth/value distinction within which "nature" can only be accounted for in terms of surplus value. By putting the immediate destruction of the natural world at bay, such strategies extend capital's reach into ecosystems.

3. Beyond Structure and Movement

The conceptual force of value critique inheres in its capacity to simultaneously interrogate the multiple tendencies of capitalist exploitation—in particular, the contradictory tendencies toward, on the one hand, a stable structure of exploited dead labor and, on the other, the need to regenerate or develop new forms of environment, energy and labor necessary for the continued

creation of surplus value. This provides a rigorous critical framework for revealing the limitations of existing theories of crisis and transition.

Overly structuralist accounts emphasize the unbending, synchronic systems of exploitation in which the movement of history is a purely objective process bending toward the end of history. Whether that end is utopic, dystopic, or, in Fukuyama's famous iteration, the liberal capitalist system we live today: in all its forms, it denies the role of chance and intervention. On the other hand, subjective affirmationist theory—today most commonly spouted in the jargon of accelerationism—celebrates the emancipatory potential supposedly found in every space of flow and line of flight, in every moment of destruction or creation (Noys, *Malign Velocities*). More to the point: every moment of crisis is, in and of itself, a moment of emancipation. We read, for example, in Harry Cleaver's understanding that:

> Negri's analysis helps us see that capitalist crisis is always a crisis in its ability to control the working class. A global crisis, such as the present one, Negri argues, can only be produced by the combined and complementary struggles of the world's working classes operating simultaneously in production and reproduction—at the highest level of socialization. (Cleaver xxii)

From *Wertkritik*, we know this is not exactly right. Crises are grounded in the split nature of value; capital's ability to "control the working class" is a possible, secondary effect of the surplus paradox. Overly structuralist and workerist approaches hold in common an underlying progressivism; they maintain, explicitly or not, the idea that capitalist developments, and technology in particular, contain an emancipatory kernel, founded on the progressivist idea that these developments reduce necessary labor time, hence producing the conditions under which humans may be emancipated from labor. To the contrary, recent developments, events and analysis reveal that economic crises have as much to do with the reactionary entrenchment of

existing modes of appropriation and exploitation as they do with the revolutionary capacity of the working class—not only in their effects, but in their causes and mediations as well. In historical perspective, the 2007 crisis can be understood in terms of political struggle—not only the visible movements that emerged *post facto* but also the working class struggles that improved labor conditions in the US and elsewhere (and, hence, limited the domination of labor by capital). However, this conception is entirely one-sided. As I have already argued, crisis occurs due to an imbalance, a saturation of the existing limits. But those limits are not the "natural" limits of finite systems (whether of the planet or of labor). Instead, capital produces its own limits. If capitalist crises appear as immediate expressions of the political force of the working class, this is due to a failure of mediation—a failure, that is, to identify the ways in which the putatively natural elements and processes that constitute the present are, in fact, abstractions particular to and irrecoverable from capital. Current trends in the automation of labor, for example, alienate laborers from both the knowledge and capacities of production (Bernes, "Logistics, Counterlogistics and the Communist Prospect," np; Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character*: 68).

It is symptomatic of the current socio-political situation that the most prominent populist forms of leftism seem to have adopted both an acceptance of the current situation and an optimism in the human capacity to "make a change." From progressive political campaigns to local and slow food campaigns to anti-globalization protests, the "movement" strategy aims to identify specific sites of exploitation: See? Here we have yet *another* example of capitalist (or, more likely, "neoliberal") exploitation. Following a moralizing sermon some new solution is spun: from the trite and immediate (for each pair of shoes you buy, a pair to a child in Africa) to

the expansive and abstract (international labor law, carbon taxation to alleviate Greenhouse gas emissions, and so on). In contemporary progressivist discourse, analysis ends at the identification of exploitation, as though it might be possible to develop a positive science of emancipation by opposing, stopping or reversing each instance of exploitation.

Value critique not only demonstrates the impossibility of such a project, it demonstrates that the impulse behind it is essential to the continuation of the capitalist mode of production: progressivist policy traces a direct line from surplus to use value in order to direct profits back to workers, to reduce emissions, or to stabilize the economy. Doing so, however, only perpetuates the broader system, at best deferring the crisis.

Wertkritik reveals historical movement within structures; thus, while structuralist perspectives aim to make visible the interminable sites of exploitation, the critique of value shows that structures of exploitation are constantly shifting, posited not by the natural limits of land and labor but by capital itself. Against the tendency to celebrate the crisis of capitalism as in-and-of-itself emancipatory, the critique of value facilitates an account of why a terminal crisis of capital does not necessarily imply the end of exploitation; in other words, collapse of the historico-economic processes that separate exchange value from use value is not equivalent to destruction of the political structures that sustain inequality, as numerous Marxists from Engels to accelerationism have presumed. *Wertkritik* achieves this critical distinction by reintroducing the historical dialectic of labor, value, and capital into the critique of political economy. Methodologically, *Wertkritik* facilitates a renewed dialectical understanding of crisis under capitalism. *Wertkritik* is not without its limitations. In the following chapter, I analyze more critically the philosophical framework that structures the critique of value.

3: The Ends of Capital: Historical Substantialism vs Anti-Substantialist Approaches to Crisis

The capitalist mode of production requires the constant generation of surplus value. Because capital undermines the basic elements from which surplus value is derived (material resources and labour) crises are inevitable within the systemic processes of surplus value generation. Therfore, so long as the capitalist mode of production persists, there will be crises. More theoretically and historically complex, however, is the relation between distinct crises over time. For example, in what sense is the economic crisis of 2007-08 tied to the oil crisis of 1973 and the economic recession of the 1930s? More to the point, critical political economic perspectives demonstrate that the relation between crises is not defined by *isolated* cycles (i.e. recurring periods of "boom and bust"). Rather, as the previous chapter establishes, these cycles compound over time; the resolution of one crisis constitutes a new cycle of accumulation, which conditions the next crisis, and so on. The recurrence of crises within capitalism, as well as the general crisis dynamic, is well established. Far more complex is the question of the end(s) of capitalist crisis. Is

there an absolute limit to the cyclical nature of accumulation and crisis? In other words, do capital's cyclically recurring crises *necessarily* lead to the terminal crisis of the capitalist mode of production and of capitalism? And can this terminal crisis be logically and historically demonstrated?

Building on the previous chapter, this chapter reads *Wertkritik* alongside *Neue Marx-Lectüre* [*NML*] philosopher Michael Heinrich.[28] Heinrich and *Wertkritik* have similar interpretations of the role of surplus value within the crisis dynamic. Both show that crises are inevitable within the capitalist mode of production, and that the crisis dynamic continually transforms the capitalist system. They diverge, however, on the question of whether it can be demonstrated that this transformative dynamic necessarily leads to the final crisis of capitalism. While Kurz, Ortlieb and Trenkle argue that recurring crises lead to a secular, terminal crisis, Heinrich argues that it is possible for capital to continue reinventing ways to generate surplus value. *Wertkritik* and Heinrich constitute two of the most compelling contemporary political economic theories of crisis and capital, and the debate they frame remains fruitful on its own terms. Herein, though, my aim is more abstract: parsing the differences between these two theories, I examine the philosophical operations that structure these two interpretations. This examination, I argue, orients an analysis of the concept of crisis within critical political economy. By emphasizing the more philosophical dimensions of this debate, I also connect the

[28] Michael Heinrich is a key figure within NML—and his book *Introduction to the Three Volumes of Marx's* Capital is one of the only recent NML books that has been translated and published in English (for an overview of the NML in relation to the broader field of Marxist critique see Bellofiore and Redolfi Riva).

critique of political economy to theories of subjectivity; this connection will be the key object of analysis in chapters 4 and 5.

This chapter is grounded in the dialectical dynamic common to both Heinrich and *Wertkritik*—what the previous chapter named the "surplus paradox." On one hand, use value (particularly in the forms of labour and environmental resources) is required for the generation of surplus value. On the other hand, the law of operational competition enforces a permanent increase in productivity, driving processes of rationalization and automation that either destroy use value or make it irrelevant. Hence, material sources of wealth (which appear as use value) are increasingly separated from, and subsumed by, value. In this view, a crisis may temporarily correct systemic imbalance, but these corrections preserve the substantive contradictions, which inevitably re-emerge in increasingly devastating crises.

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, *Wertkritik* authors argue that this dynamic necessarily destroys surplus value, and hence the system that depends upon it. Capital, Ortlieb writes: "is heading for a terminal crisis because increasing productivity means that in the long term the total social (or global) production of surplus value can only decrease, and that the valorization of capital must ultimately grind to a halt" (Ortlieb 78). Moreover, according to Kurz, Ortlieb, and Trenkle, the terminal crisis is underway. Each previous form of capitalism was defined by the expansion and intensification of capital's reach—i.e. geographical expansion of colonialist capitalism; the speeding up of production through industrialization; the rationalization of labour under "fordism"; and so on. Since the 1970s, new techniques for deriving capital are increasingly based on financialization and brokering. This includes the development of finance capital, but also the shift toward interface and "platform" capital. As TechCrunch author Tom

Goodwin notes: "Uber, the world's largest taxi company, owns no vehicles. Facebook, the world's most popular media owner, creates no content. Alibaba, the most valuable retailer, has no inventory. And Airbnb, the world's largest accommodation provider, owns no real estate" (Goodwin n.p.). According to *Wertkritik*, this expansion and intensification facilitated novel types of surplus value production. This process, however, has reached absolute limits: capital cannot survive unless it continues to expand, but it cannot expand without finally destroying the labour and the land upon which it depends.

Heinrich is aware of the transformations in labour and circulation. For him, however, crises are moments of restructuring, not out-and-out destruction, and there is no logical reason to believe capital can't continue producing surplus value. It can be logically demonstrated that surplus value necessarily generates its own crises. And historical materialism demonstrates that all previously existing societies have been destroyed by inherent socio-economic contradictions. Taken together, these ideas seem to demonstrate that the immanent contradictions of capital will bring about its terminal crisis. However, connecting these two insights requires the demonstration of some absolute limit; against *Wertkritik*, Heinrich argues that the existence of such a limit cannot be proved.

Situated in relation to ambiguities in Marx's work, the differences between *Wertkritik* and Heinrich's conceptions of crisis emerge from a basic theoretical distinction between a *substantialist* conception of value (which frames *Wertkritik's* understanding of terminal crisis) and an *anti-substantialist* conception of value (which frames Heinrich's relational understanding of value). For *Wertkritik*, capitalism constitutes the nature things; it doesn't make sense to conceive of an object outside the commodity form. Thus, value inheres in the commodity as a

kind of material property, a substance. This property does not exist in some natural state, it is conditioned by the form in which, in the current historical moment, value is expressed: i.e. in the commodity form. Producing a commodity requires multiple forms of energy, including the expenditure of labour power. That labour power, understood in its general, social form, congeals in the commodity as the substance of value. Thus, so long as it exists within a historical system defined by the commodity form, value is an essential property of the commodity. In contrast, in Heinrich's anti-substantialist framework value does not inhere in the commodity itself, it emerges once the commodity is set in relation to all other commodities; i.e. in the sphere of exchange. In other words, labour is an abstraction that, taking the form of exchange value, is always expressed in other commodities. Because Heinrich emphasizes the relational character of commodities, value does not appear as a substance but as a relative effect of the totality of relations among commodities. Put another way, *Wertkritik* emphasizes the way in which value is actualized in production; Heinrich emphasizes the way value is actualized in the market.

This basic philosophical difference (i.e. between historical substantialism and anti-substantialism) grounds more significant theoretical differences between *Wertkritik's* and Heinrich's conceptions of crisis. In particular, this difference determines how we can understand the relationship between critique (a *logical* process) and capitalist crisis (a *historical* process). Through this analysis, I argue that the socio-historical and critical methodology developed by *Wertkritik* ultimately runs up against the philosophical problem of mediating between, on the one hand, the analytically verifiable *historical* processes that constitute the contradiction between value and wealth, and, on the other, the provable (according to *Wertkritik*) imminence of the terminal crisis of capital. Among their major contributions to contemporary Marxism, *Wertkritik*

authors develop a rigorous critique of the tendency to reify key concepts—particularly labour and value. That degree of critique, however, is not (and I argue *cannot*) be brought to bear on the conception of crisis; in short, the value critical conception of capitalism's terminal crisis rests upon a (relatively) transhistorical notion of crisis. Historically, crisis emerges as a transformative concept—a concept that demarcates historical transformation while simultaneously bringing it about—within the enlightenment thought of the 18th century. Marxian conceptions of terminal crisis, including *Wertkritik*, have not managed to fully separate this concept from the historico-philosophical conditions from which it emerges. Insofar as crisis is used to imagine future horizons, crisis remains indebted to a teleological, enlightenment notion of historical progress, *even when* as in *Wertkritik* it is not assumed that the crisis of capital necessarily leads to emancipatory possibilities.

1. Crisis and the Substance of Value

i. Locating Value: Substantialism vs Anti-substantialism

Against the dominant economic theories of the time, Marx and Engels established that capitalism was fundamentally prone to crisis and, in their most optimistic moments, argued that the crisis of capitalism would bring about the proletarian revolution:

> how does the bourgeoisie get over these crises? On the one hand, by enforced destruction of a mass of productive forces; on the other, by the conquest of new markets, and by the more thorough exploitation of the old ones. That is to say, by paving the way for ever more extensive and more destructive crises, and by diminishing the means whereby crises are prevented. (Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* 42)

In the wake of the 1847-48 crisis, this theoretical dynamic, along with the very visible economic crisis and the subsequent political upheavals, made revolution seem all but inevitable. "The English industrialists," Engels wrote in 1850:

> are rapidly approaching the point where their expedients will be exhausted and where the period of prosperity which now still divides every crisis from its successor will disappear completely under the weight of the excessively increased forces of production … The proletarian revolution will then be inevitable, and its victory certain. (Marx and Engels, "The English Ten Hours Bill" 299)

But victory did not arrive, nor did the spectacular collapse of capital. And when, a few years later, Marx writes about collapse in *Grundrisse*, his tone is more analytical:

> As soon as labour in its immediate form has ceased to be the great source of wealth, labour-time ceases and must cease to be its measure, and therefore exchange value [must cease to be the measure] of use-value. The surplus labour of the masses has ceased to be the condition for the development of general wealth, just as the non-labour of the few has ceased to be the condition for the development of the general powers of the human mind. As a result, production based upon exchange value collapses. (Marx, "Grundrisse" 91)

Marx argues that the application of science drives the automation of labour to the extent that scientific-technological expansion displaces direct labour as the primary source of value. With this displacement, labour-time, and hence exchange value, ceases to be the measure of use value and exchange value collapses. The exact nature of the "collapse"—whether it leads to revolution and what exactly would constitute a collapse—is less clear.

After witnessing a widespread crisis that did not lead to full-blown revolution, Marx situates crisis within a more structural understanding of global economics, as opposed to an immediately causal understanding of political revolution. In *Theories of Surplus Value*, for example, Marx writes: "The world trade crises must be regarded as the real concentration and

forcible adjustment of all the contradictions of bourgeois economy" (Marx, "Theories of Surplus Value" 140). Emerging as the coalescence or conjuncture of historical forces and contradictions, crises provide a privileged site of analysis.[29] But the relationships between crises, the destruction of capital, and the connections between crisis and revolution are more heterogeneous.

Marx's conception of value, like his conception of crisis, seems to change over time. A key source of this ambiguity, as Heinrich argues, is that Marx uses two incompatible approaches: an anti-substantialist approach (which sees value as a social phenomenon), on one hand, and a substantialist approach (which sees value as having a reified character) on the other (Heinrich, "Ambivalences of Marx's Critique of Political Economy").[30] The ambiguity of Marx's conceptions of crisis and of value grounds key distinctions between *Wertkritik*'s historical substantialist approach and Heinrich's anti-substantialism.

In *Wertkritik's* substantialist account, value inheres in the commodity as the congealed labour through which it was produced. Producing a commodity requires multiple forms of

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[29] Along these lines, *The Capitalist Cycle* develops a notable and relatively early theory of the cyclical nature of crises in capitalism (Pavel Maksakovsky, 1928).

[30] Isaak Rubin, whose work on value was rediscovered in the 1970s, argues that: "one of two things is possible: if abstract labour is an expenditure of human energy in physiological form, then value has a reified-material character. Or value is a social phenomenon, and then abstract labour must also be understood as a social phenomenon connected with a determined social form of production. It is not possible to reconcile a physiological concept of abstract labour with the historical character of the value which it creates" (Rubin 135). Since the 1970s, a great deal has been written on the question of the nature of abstract labour (see for examples Bonefeld, "Abstract Labour"; Bonefeld, "Debating Abstract Labour"; Kicillof and Starosta; Murray).

energy, including the expenditure of labour power. The living, concrete processes coagulate in reified form in the commodity. This reified labour is never undertaken in isolation from the market; rather, it is organized in anticipation of exchange and circulation and, hence, capitalist production, circulation and exchange are inextricably intertwined. For *Wertkritik*, this implies that value is materially present in the commodity, because production always already anticipates circulation.

In Heinrich's anti-substantialist account, on the contrary, value is social and relational. Value does not exist *per se* in the commodity, rather the value of a commodity is determined through its relation to the totality of commodities, defined by abstract labour. For example, Marx states that when a coat is exchanged for linen, both are reduced "to an objectification of human labor per se"; however, "none of both is in and of itself value-objectivity, they are this only insofar as this objectivity is commonly held by them. Outside of their relationship with each other—the relationship in which they are equalized—neither coat nor linen possess value-objectivity or objectivity as congelations of human labor per se" (quoted in Heinrich, *Marx's Capital* 53). What constitutes this "relationship in which they are equalized"? Not a concrete substance but *abstract labour*—i.e. socially determined, objectified universal labour time. As abstraction, value is not primarily a material characteristic but a social characteristic; it "expresses the relationship of individual commodities (or, respectively, the individual acts of labor producing these commodities) to the entire world of commodities (respectively, the total labor of society)" (Heinrich, *Marx's Capital* 60).

According to *Wertkritik* theorist Norbert Trenkle, Heinrich's account maintains an artificial separation between production and exchange, a separation that can be traced back to

Alfred Sohn-Rethel's conception of the "real" or "actually existing" abstraction. A conceptual abstraction is developed in thought to synthesize disparate ideas. A real abstraction is lived as irreducibly social and material before it can be thought.[31] For Sohn-Rethel, whose central project was to develop a materialist theory of Kantian epistemology, real abstractions always precede and determine conceptual abstraction. One form of real abstraction plays a determinative role: value, the materialist form of which is exchange. This conception establishes a relation between the historical and the logical that grounds a powerful form of materialist critique. In brief, transformations in modes of thought are legible as expressions of transformations in forms of exchange. The trade-off, however, is that Sohn-Rethel separates production and circulation such that "the sphere of labor appears as a personal space in which private producers create their products" (Trenkle 8). According to Trenkle, by interpreting value in relational terms (i.e. by asserting that value does not inhere in the commodity but in the relation between commodities) Heinrich repeats Sohn-Rethel's error: both isolate value in the sphere of exchange, and only once production is complete do they "throw these products as commodities into the sphere of circulation, where, in the act of exchange, they are abstracted from their material particularities […] and thus morph into bearers of value" (Trenkle 8). By separating the sphere of production and the sphere of circulation Sohn-Rethel and Heinrich "completely [miss] the inner context of the modern commodity-producing system" (Trenkle 8), which is defined by the *unity* of production, circulation and exchange. Sohn-Rethel and Heinrich's error, Trenkle continues, is based on a systematic confusion of "two levels of observation: first, the necessary temporal

[31] For example, "[w]hile the concepts of natural science are thought abstractions, the economic concept of value is a real one" (Sohn-Rethel 20).

succession between the production and sale of a single commodity; and second, the logical and real social unity of the processes of valorization and exchange, a unity which these processes always presuppose" (Trenkle 8). In other words, Sohn-Rethel and Heinrich confuse an immediate temporal distinction (the fact that a commodity is made first and enters circulation second) with the reality that, in capitalism, all commodity production presupposes the sphere of exchange.[32]

Trenkle's critique effectively identifies one of the key limitations of Sohn-Rethel's exchange-based theory of alienation. In Sohn-Rethel's own words

> [t]he nexus of exchange is established by the network of exchange and by nothing else. It is my buying a coat, not my wearing it which forms part of the social nexus, just as it is the selling, not the making of it. Therefore, to talk of the social nexus, or, as we may call it, the social synthesis, we have to talk of exchange and not of use. (Sohn-Rethel 29)

Sohn-Rethel explicitly identifies "network of exchange" as the site of real abstraction and of the actualization of value. In this conception, value exists in the *act* of exchange in such a way that its existence would depend upon intentionality. This implies, as Anselm Jappe argues that, ultimately, "Sohn-Rethel grasps abstraction in psychological terms: as a postponement of satisfaction" (Jappe, "Sohn-Rethel and the Origin of 'Real Abstraction'" 11). At the least, Sohn-Rethel's account does not maintain critical distance from the idea (prominent in Smith and neo-classical economics) that value emerges through the rational consideration of individual producers and consumers.

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[32] Trenkle writes that "every process of production is from the outset oriented toward the valorization of capital and organized accordingly" (Trenkle 9).

The issue at hand, however, is not whether Sohn-Rethel's theory errs, but whether this error is repeated in Heinrich's relational theory of value. In this regard, Trenkle's reading is less convincing. Most immediately, Trenkle's critique assumes a linear temporality. For example, Heinrich writes that commodities obtain "their objectivity of value only inside the process of exchange," and that, "considered for itself, the commodity-body is not a commodity but merely a product" (quoted in Trenkle 8). The question is, however, does the idea that the isolated commodity-body only has value "inside the process of exchange" necessarily imply that labour appears within a purely private space? How we interpret this spatial question—the "inside" of the sphere of exchange versus the outside—depends upon a temporal question, namely: is this distinction grounded in a linear and homogeneous conception of time—a time in which the commodity-body is either in circulation or not in circulation? If we understand value in relation to a specific commodity object (this coat, or this roll of linen), as Trenkle assumes, then a linear time is implied and the answer is affirmative; in other words, insofar as we are discussing a *particular* thing, Heinrich's account indeed implies that the commodity is either "inside" or "outside" circulation, and thus repeats Sohn-Rethel's error.

However, within Heinrich's theory, the object of analysis is never a single commodity. And, if we begin with an examination of the totality—i.e. the value form in general—then the linear before/after time does not hold. To determine the way in which this difference emerges it is useful to summarize Heinrich's version of the opening pages of *Capital* Volume 1:

1. *Commodities have exchange values:* "One only describes something as a commodity if it is exchanged, something that in addition to its use value also has an exchange value" (Heinrich, *Marx's Capital* 40). Something (a coat, a chair, etc.) is a commodity if it is

exchanged for something else; the act of exchange confers upon a useful thing (a thing that has "natural" properties which give it use value) a second order of value. The latter does not inhere in the thing but obtains in the process of exchange, which is necessarily social: "To be a commodity, to therefore have an exchange value in addition to a use value, is not a 'natural' property of things, but rather a 'social' one: only in societies where things are exchanged do they possess an exchange value, only then are they commodities"; hence:, the fact that "the chair is a commodity is not a characteristic of the chair itself as a thing, but rather of the society in which this thing exists" (Heinrich, *Marx's Capital* 40–41).

2. *The generalization of exchange implies a relational definition of value*: "In the case of exchange as an isolated phenomenon, there can be various quantitative exchange relationships: I can exchange the chair at one point for two sheets of linen, or at another point for three, etc. But if exchange is the normal form in which goods are transferred, then individual relations of exchange have to 'match' each other in a certain way" (Heinrich, *Marx's Capital* 41). It must be the case, in other words, that if I can exchange a coat for a chair or 100 eggs, then I can also exchange 100 eggs for a chair. "For capitalist societies, in which exchange is the rule, we can therefore conclude: the various exchange values of the same commodity also have to constitute exchange values for each other" (Heinrich, *Marx's Capital* 41). Here, Heinrich's relational definition of value is explicit: value is constituted by the generalized *exchangeability* of things—by the society in which, because (almost) all things are exchanged, a relational system of valuation obtains. The relational dimension becomes clearer when considering non-object commodities: "Up until now, one might have had the impression that when the term

'commodity' is used, it refers solely to physical objects. But what is relevant here is the act of exchange, not the fact that physical objects are being exchanged" (Heinrich, *Marx's Capital* 44). Services are exchangeable commodities as well (according to Hardt and Negri, and others, they are the predominant kind of commodity), the only difference being the temporality of the commodity (in the latter, production and consumption occur simultaneously).

3. *The magnitude of value is determined by socially necessary labour time*: "Marx also sees the value of commodities as accounted for by commodity-producing labor… The magnitude of value is determined by 'the quantity of the 'value-forming substance,' the labour, contained in the article' (Capital, 1: 129)" (Heinrich, *Marx's Capital* 41). Labour is not measured in individual terms, but in terms of the generalization of the labour-time needed to produce a specific use value. And this measure is relative to the broader conditions of production.

As Heinrich argues, these ideas (contained in the first 7 pages of *Capital*) are often understood to contain the key elements Marx's theory of value *in toto*: "For many Marxists, and most of Marx's critics, this constitutes the core of Marx's value theory: the commodity is use value and value, value is an objectification of human labor, the magnitude of value depends upon the 'socially necessary labor-time' required for the production of a commodity (the last point is frequently referred to as the 'law of value')" (Heinrich, *Marx's Capital* 44). And, up to this point, Trenkle's critique would seem entirely correct insofar as the object of analysis seems to be the individual commodity. More importantly, even when Heinrich specifies the difference between an individual- and a socially-oriented conception of value, the language is not adequately concrete:

> With value theory, Marx seeks to uncover a specific social structure that individuals must conform to, regardless of what they think. The question posed by Marx is therefore completely different than that posed by classical or neoclassical economics; in principle, Adam Smith observes a single act of exchange and asks how the terms of exchange can be determined. Marx sees the individual exchange relation as part of a particular social totality—a totality in which the reproduction of society is mediated by exchange—and asks what this means for the labor expended by the whole society. (Heinrich, *Marx's Capital* 46–47)

If the difference ("in principle") between Marx and Smith is the logical order of inquiry (starting with the totality instead of the particularity), then the question posed by Marx is not "completely different." Moreover, within this conception Heinrich implies (at least in this text) a definition of ideology—"Marx maintains that people engaged in exchange in fact do not know what they're actually doing" (Heinrich, *Marx's Capital* 46)—that does indeed foreground the individual (only now it is an unknowing as opposed to a rational individual).

Heinrich does, however, substantialize the difference between Marx and classical political economy (and between his anti-substantialist and substantialist theories) with his conception of the general equivalent. "The magnitude of value of a commodity," he writes, "is not simply a relationship between the individual labor of the producer and the product (which is what the 'substantialist' conception of value amounts to), but rather a relationship between the individual labor of producers and the total labor of society" (Heinrich, *Marx's Capital* 60). As such, value is not produced in (and therefore reducible to) the act of exchange, as Trenkle charges. Rather exchange "mediates this relation to the total labor of society" (Heinrich, *Marx's Capital* 60), and it does so through the totality constituted by the money form.[33]

[33] "Value form analysis," Heinrich writes, "makes clear that value can only exist when we have an independent and general form of value — money… Money is basic for the existence of value

Moreover, as Lucio Colletti shows, Marx is quite clear on the inverted relation between the abstract and the concrete dimensions of value. In the first edition of *Capital Vol. 1* Marx writes:

> Within the value relation and the expression of value contained in it the abstract universal is not a property of the concrete, the sensuous-actual; on the contrary, the sensuous-actual is a mere hypostasis or determinate form of realization of the abstract universal. Tailor's work, which is to be found for example in the equivalent coat, does not have, within the expression of the value of cloth, the universal property of also being human labour. It is the other way round. Its essence is being human labour, and being tailor's work is a hypostasis or determinate form of realization of that essence. (quoted in Colletti 39)[34]

We might think of this in terms of potential. I've suggested that Trenkle's critique of Heinrich is based on an either/or understanding of exchange: either something has potential value (it has not yet entered the sphere of exchange) or it has actual value (it has entered the sphere of exchange). For Aristotle, there are two forms of potential or *dunamis*. The first form is the *capacity* to produce change. Something has a *dunamis* insofar as it acts as "an originative source of change in another thing or in the thing itself *qua* other" (Aristotle 1046a 12-13). The exercise of this capacity is movement or kinesis, which is closely connected to labour—for example, the carpenter's capacity is actualized in building (actualizing the form of a house), the teacher's in teaching students (actualizing the mental capacities of learners), and so on.

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as generalized social form of labour products, as something, which is present in the whole economy" (Heinrich, "Ambivalences").

[34] This appears in the first edition of *Capital* under the heading "The Form of Value," which later becomes "The Value Form, or Exchange Value."

The second form of *dunamis,* potentiality, refers to the possibility or potential to exist in a more fully developed state. *Dunamis* in this sense is not a capacity to produce change but a *way of being* something (Ide 3). Instead of defining this distinction, Aristotle outlines it by way of analogy, suggesting that actuality is to potentiality as "building is to that which is capable of building, and the waking to the sleeping, and that which is seeing to that which has its eyes shut but has sight, and that which has been shaped out of matter to the matter" (Aristotle 1048a38-b3). Whereas the first three examples are closely related to capacity—the capacities for building, wakefulness and sight, respectively—the fourth suggests, as Thomas K. Johansen argues, that potentiality refers to the way "the matter of the substance relates to the substance itself" (Johansen 209). In this sense, it may be that potentiality (which is tied to substance) is distinguishable from actuality (which is tied to form) not only diachronically—i.e. when someone capable of making music begins actively doing so—but also synchronically, as a remainder that persists alongside the actual, whether or not it is being actualized (Agamben 183). Just as a builder can be said to retain the capacity for building whether she is activating that capacity, matter (say, for example, wood) retains a kind of potential not reducible to its formal existence (as a table, an oar, a bowl, etc.). In short, potential is not only that which could become actual; it is equally, as potentiality, *a way of being* that exists alongside, or as a remainder of, the actual. Bellofiore and Finelli develop a similar analogy (Bellofiore and Finelli 55–56), which Pitts summarizes succinctly: "labour and value can be read along these lines, with labour power as 'the potentiality for labour', of which living labour is the actuality. At the same time, this actuality of labour is *potential* value, of which money is the actuality. Money then stands as 'potential capital', which can attain actuality through the valorization of the labour process by means of exchange" (Pitts 340). This implies, as Endnotes has argued, that value can take

different forms. More specific to the discussion at hand, thinking about value in these terms makes it clear that locating the actualization of value (i.e. the mediation that specifies and concretizes it) in circulation does not imply, as per Trenkle's critique, that production becomes a separate, private, pre-capitalist sphere. So long as the relational totality exists, production and exchange exist as a unified sphere in which potentiality and actuality of both labour and capital are mediated.

ii. Production, Circulation, and Exchange

Logically, insofar as capitalism is understood as an economic system, production, circulation and exchange are complicit in the actualization of value. As Christopher J. Arthur writes, capital "must *take charge* of presenting commodities to exchange through shaping industry as capitalist industry so as to guarantee that there *be* commodities for exchange, that there be *new value*" (Arthur 228). Historically, as well, economic developments of the last four decades suggest that production, circulation and exchange are, in fact, moments in a single process, particularly since the so-called "logistics revolution" (Allen; Bernes). Since the 1980s, rationalization of labour has emphasized connections between production and circulation, as opposed to the processes of production *per se*. For example, "lean" and "flexible" models of production—many of which are characterized by the general term "Just in Time" (JIT) production—maintain all commodities in a continuous flow. Facilitated in part by new logistical forms and technologies—containerization, amazon-ification, etc.—these models of circulation reduce standing inventory to an absolute minimum and eliminate the spatial and temporal (and, subsequently, economic) gaps between sites of production and sites of exchange (Bernes).

Even more recently, JIT has been outstripped by virtual interface forms that reduce the gaps between production and exchange to (almost) zero. Key examples include online interfaces in emerging forms such as the sharing economy (Uber, Airbnb), user generated content [UCG] media (Instagram, Facebook, user review sites, and so on), and online sales (Alibaba, Amazon, Kijiji): these forms of circulation still depend upon material infrastructure (the "cloud" is stored somewhere; it requires energy, maintenance; etc.). But they have no stock, relatively little fixed capital (hence, their high fixed-asset turnover ratios and geographical flexibility), and almost no waged labourers. In short, in the last four decades, *forms* of circulation seem to have become more important than the *content* of circulation (i.e. than the commodity understood as an individuated, concrete object).

This historical transition is heterogeneous. In an immediate sense, the logistics revolution is defined by a rapidly expanding industry: circulation-oriented companies and services (those named above, but also logistics companies such as UPS, DHL) capitalize on technological advancements that facilitate quantitative improvements for established forms of production, as well as the rationalization of production with logistics. Commodities circulate faster; production is more flexible and can be repurposed or relocated at a lower cost; and, hence, more surplus value can be produced with equal or less of fixed capital.

More pertinent to our discussion, recent developments in logistics seem to confirm a *qualitative* shift in the relation between production, circulation and exchange. As Jasper Bernes argues, the revolution in logistics "refers, metonymically, to a transformation of capitalist production overall":

> Logistics indexes the subordination of production to the conditions of circulation, the becoming-hegemonic of those aspects of the production process that involve circulation. In the idealized world-picture of logistics, manufacture is merely one moment in a continuous, Heraclitean flux; the factory dissolves into planetary flows. […] Logistics aims to transmute all fixed capital into circulating capital, the better to imitate and conform to the purest and most liquid of forms capital takes: money. (Bernes)

Through technology and rationalization, the spheres of production and circulation are not only inextricably linked, they are increasingly indistinguishable. But, as Joshua Clover notes in his recent *Riot. Strike. Riot*, it also seems to "affirm the proposition that the current phase in our cycle of accumulation is defined by the collapse of value production at the core of the world-system; it is for this reason that capital's centre of gravity shifts toward circulation, borne by the troika of Toyotaization, information technology, and finance" (Clover). While the capitalist mode of production is defined in relation to circulation and exchange, circulation and exchange do not, in themselves, create surplus value.

iii. Anti-/Substantialism and Crisis

This historical process allows for a more concrete distinction between substantialist and anti-substantialist perspectives. Most immediately, this transition verifies Marx's prediction that the application of science (both directly and indirectly through the rationalization of labour) would lead to scientific-technological expansion that would ultimately displace direct labour as the primary source of wealth. For *Wertkritik*, this displacement lies at the heart of the crisis dynamic: insofar as surplus value is derived from the rationalization of circulation (and not from production), labour-time is less and less the measure of use value. Moreover, the logistics revolution is not merely a business strategy but, more broadly, one aspect of a system that

depends upon the generation of surplus value. As elaborated in the previous chapter, *Wertkritik* argues that the capitalist mode of production separates material labour process (associated with use value) from the process of valuation (associated with exchange value), which generates an irreversible and ultimately terminal dynamic. While the substance of value is labour, the law of operational competition (i.e. the idea that continuation requires the constant production of surplus) "enforces a permanent increase in productivity bringing about the replacement of human labour power by scientific operational industrial capital" (Krisis-Group, "Manifesto against Labour"). In short, capitalism depends upon the constant production of surplus value; and the material source of surplus value is labour; but surplus value demands constant increase in productivity, which means the replacement of labour with machines. The system irreversibly and increasingly excludes the substance (i.e. labour) upon which it depends. And this fundamental contradiction ultimately leads to the collapse of capitalism.

Against this conclusion, Heinrich argues that the value aspect of capital's crisis-inducing process—the rule which "holds that less and less labor must be expended in the process of production of the individual commodities"—does not necessarily lead to a terminal crisis. The "riddle" of capital's internal contradiction—the idea that it will finally and absolutely destroy the land and labour upon which it depends—is decipherable, he argues:

> as long as one takes into consideration that what is important for the capitalist is not the absolute value of the commodity, but the surplus value (or profit) that this commodity brings him. The labor time necessary for the production of the individual commodity can by all means fall, the value of the commodity can decrease, as long as the surplus value or profit produced by his capital grows. (Heinrich, *Marx's Capital* 80)

Capital produces crises. But for Heinrich there is no logically or historically necessary collapse, no absolute and inevitable limit point at which capitalist production in general must cease.[35]

Given what we've outlined so far, the source of this disagreement is clear: whether the terminal nature of crisis can be proved rests upon whether value is or is not substantial. If, as *Wertkritik* claims, value inheres in the commodity as substance, then the exclusion of labour does indeed reach a limit point, destroying the foundations of the system. From this perspective, Heinrich's solution to the "riddle" conflates a logical contradiction and a real contradiction. As Ortlieb writes, Marx solves the *logical* riddle—i.e. the riddle that capital "presses to reduce labor time to a minimum, while it posits labor time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth"—but this does not do away with the real, objective contradiction—the moving contradiction between *value* and *use value* through which, as Kurz claims, "capital itself becomes the absolute logical and historical limit in the production of relative surplus value" (quoted in Ortlieb 81). If value is real—if it exists as abstract labour time congealed within the commodity—then the separation of use value that, literally and materially, destroys the source of value must reach a terminal limit.

However, if value is relational—constituted by the total abstract relation among commodities—the exclusion of use value doesn't necessarily threaten the reproduction of capital; what matters is that the generation of surplus value continues. In this view, too, changes

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[35] "[Capitalism] is not simply the repetition of the eternally same. There are developments, not just the development of the means of production, but also the thorough capitalization of new spaces, geographically as well as in terms of depth…but in terms of talking about a point of culmination, I don't see the arguments that could substantiate that" (Kurz and Heinrich: np.).

in the relationship between production, circulation, and exchange transform how value is constituted, but in the *longue durée* of capitalism it is nothing new. As Braudel argues, the fundamental feature of capital at the broadest historical level is precisely its flexibility and adaptability.

Distinct principles—*Wertkritik's* substantialism vs Heinrich's anti-substantialism—lead to different understandings of capitalist futures—in this case, to an apparent proof of capitalism's terminal crisis vs the apparent reproducibility of capitalist accumulation. This difference is not merely speculative or abstract for it influences how we understand exploitation and inequality in the present, and how (or if) we can imagine a post-capitalist future. How, then, to frame our understanding of crisis? How to decide, from a philosophical perspective, whether to affirm the historical-substantialist perspective like that of *Wertkritik* or an anti-substantialist perspective like Heinrich's? There are at least two ways to approach this. One would be to attempt to establish the truth of one or the other principle. A second would be to evaluate the arguments in terms of theoretical and political force; that is, in terms of the politics of each conception of crisis. It's not clear to me that we have adequate philosophical resources to establish the first (in any case, I lack such resources).

2. The Politics of Crisis

Marx's work distinguishes between historical necessity and political possibility. On the one hand, Marx is famously concerned not only with understanding the historical conditions of the world but with changing the world; not, first and foremost, with the scientific analysis of historical laws but with the overcoming of historical necessity with and through freedom. On the

other hand, while Marx insists on humanity's capacity to "change his own nature," he is critical of the idea of a spontaneous or direct political will: if "social being determines consciousness," then an immediate relation between consciousness and action can only reproduce existing social forms. Indeed, there are moments in which Marx sidelines questions about proletarian "free" action and agency in order to analyze "*what the proletariat is*, and what in accordance with this *being*, it will be compelled to do" (Marx, "The Holy Family" 37; also quoted in Hallward 526). Ultimately, Marx writes, communism is "the true resolution of the conflict between existence and essence, objectification and self-affirmation, freedom and necessity, individual and species" (Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts" 71; Marx, *Capital: Volume III* 959); as Engels writes, it is the resolution in which "Man's own social organization, hitherto confronting him as a necessity imposed by Nature and history, now becomes the result of his own free action" (Engels, "Anti-Duhring"). The question, then, regards the relationship between this economic crisis and "true resolution"; in other words, between an historical-economic rupture and socio-political transformation.

Interpretations of Marx's theory of crisis have not developed in a chronological, linear way. With the rediscovery and translation of the *Grundrisse* came a particularly notable interpretive shift. The "Fragment on the Machine"—which, in the late 1960s, transformed Marxist accounts of technology, labour, value and crisis—was first rigorously theorized in Italy, particularly by those of the *operaismo* movement (including Raniero Panzieri, Mario Tronti, and Antonio Negri) who discovered in it a new way of reading Marx. As Tomba and Bellofiore explain, in this new reading, "Capitalism is viewed and analysed as having reached its 'maximum level of development', and it is seen as giving rise to a contradiction between the

superabundant development of the machine-system and the system's limited foundation, a contradiction that renders absurd the 'quantitative measurement of labour'" (Tomba and Bellofiore 346). This reading, moreover, gives logical priority to the *Grundrisse*, and the "Fragment" in particular, to establish a theory of direct transition. "In the fragment we have cited," Panzieri writes, "one finds the model of a *direct* 'transition' to communism – against numerous passages from *Capital* and the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*" (quoted in Tomba and Bellofiore 346). In other words, the crisis dynamic inherent to capitalism—grounded in the development of technology, the displacement of labour, and the subsequent collapse of exchange value—objectively brings about the end of capitalism and the beginning of the communist future. In the logic of Italian workerism the inevitable, terminal crisis of capital is coterminous with the socio-political revolution that will have been realized by the proletariat.

This logic, however, collapses multiple dimensions of Marx's thought into a single, evental result, resolving the contradiction between freedom and necessity through conflation: the crisis of capitalism *is* the transition to communism. As Peter Osborne notes, however, Marx's own understanding of crisis is already split: "insofar as Marx has a 'theory' of crises, it is a critical political-*economic* theory of crises in capitalist production. In so far as 'crisis' has a political meaning for Marx, though, it is in its relation to the broader historical process of a transition to a new, non-capitalist mode of production ('social revolution')" (Osborne 21). There is a necessary distinction between a theory of crisis—a theory demonstrating how capital expands beyond its own limits—and a theory of the process of transformation that would bring about a post-capitalist mode of production. As Osborne argues: "the political significance of the concept of crisis motivating Marxist debates depends upon some projected articulation of these

two levels, some conjunctural political effectivity at the level of the mode of production, in response to 'periodic' crisis" (Osborne 21). The problem, from this perspective, has little to do with debates on whether to prioritize *Capital* or *Grundrisse*; rather, in the Italian workerist tradition, a specific notion of technological development stands in for (instead of articulating a way through) a theory of transition, thus eschewing a distinction central to Marx's thinking on crisis.[36]

The conceptions of technology, crisis, and the collapse of exchange value developed in "The Fragment" are also central to *Wertkritik*, beginning with Kurz's substantial essay "Crisis of Exchange Value." Like Panzieri, Kurz argues that the internal contradictions of capitalist society produce an inexorable tendency toward terminal crisis. Technological advancement, and its increasing role in production, is key to the crisis dynamic (Kurz, "Crisis of Exchange Value" 32).[37] This contradiction, they argue, is covered over by the misrecognition of key social categories as transhistorical. Hence, it is through critique that the historico-material inevitability of crisis is revealed. Thus, Trenkle can claim that the critique of value *is* "essentially a theory of crisis" (Trenkle 13) while, at the same time, insisting on the processual (as opposed to eventual-

[36] I would argue that this is equally true of many more recent, post-workerist theorists—including Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno. This tendency reaches fetishistic fervor under the banner of "accelerationism."

[37] Summarizing the role of technology in Kurz's philosophy, Jappe writes: "After two centuries, the capitalist mode of production had reached its historical limits: the rationalisation of production, which involves the replacement of human labour by technology, undermines the basis of the production of value, and therefore of surplus-value, which is the sole objective of producing commodities" (Jappe, "Critique of Value" 1).

theological) nature of capital's terminal crisis, and hence avoiding the uncritical assumption that communism naturally follows the collapse of capitalism. Kurz, in particular, is clear about the distinction: "One has to distinguish between a crisis or even the collapse of capitalism, and the transcendence of capitalism. Those are two different kettles of fish. The actual emancipatory transcendence of capitalism depends upon a critical consciousness, which can either develop or not. That is independent of the crisis."[38]

The way in which this distinction is formulated, however, prioritizes the critical dimension of Marx's thought—the critique of value as a theory of crises—over the political dimension—the transition to a post-capitalist society. This emphasis is explicitly embraced by *Wertkritik* authors, at least insofar as the latter refers to a political program. As Trenkle writes, Marx "never attempted to propose a positive theory that could be in any way used as an instrument of economic policy. His concern, rather, was to demonstrate the irrationality, the inner contradictions, and hence the ultimate untenability of a society based on value" (Trenkle 13). While the latter claim is true, strictly speaking, the logic is misguided; the relevant tension in Marx's work is not between economic critique and economic policy, but between the critique of political economy and a theory of socio-political transformation. Kurz provides a clearer formulation: "There is no ontological principle upon which social emancipation could base itself. Instead, capitalism must be surpassed solely by means of a concrete, historical critique of its basic forms" (Kurz, "Current Global Economic Crisis" 349). Here, the operative distinction—

[38] This citation initially came from a discussion posted on the website Principia Dialectica. It has since been removed and, while it is also cited on a few blogs, no clearly citeable text exists.

"ontological principle" vs "historical critique"—serves both a strategic and logical end. Insofar as the value relation "encompasses labour as precisely another of its forms of appearance" (Larsen, Nilges, and Robinson x), a politics grounded in the notion of labour, or any other category of identity proffered by the contemporary symbolic order, can only reproduce the existing order. Moreover, as Kurz writes: "Since the process of individualization as a phenomenon of crisis destroys the social filters, the socially atomized subject relates directly to the global value-relation" (Kurz, "Current Global Economic Crisis" 350). In short, there are no forms of positive identification that could ground a revolutionary social movement. Instead, what is needed is "the self-conscious organization of a concrete, historical critique of prominent categories that emerges out of the immanent working-through of contradictions" (Kurz, "Current Global Economic Crisis" 350).

This basic insight is even more significant as viewed within the *longue durée*: "Historical materialism analytically demonstrated and recognized that capitalist and bourgeois socialization under the form of the commodity arose as an embryonic form within feudal society" which "underwent a long period of development while the 'parallel and superior' feudal power was still dormant" (Kurz, "Anti-Economics and Anti-Politics"). Revolution, in this sense, is not the moment in which a new class takes power, but rather the final casting off of the "feudal husk," which revealed a bourgeois sociability that was already operative as a real form of socioeconomic production. Here, then, we find the historical conception that for Kurz bridges the link between a critical conception of crisis and a political conception of socioeconomic transformation: the transition from feudal to capitalist society did not begin with political revolution (such as the French Revolution, for example), but much earlier, so that later,

gradually, after a long development, it would prove to be a conscious power with its own intentions regarding the question of political power" (Kurz, "Anti-Economics and Anti-Politics"). For Kurz, the idea of political revolution only makes sense against the longer processes through which a "conscious power" emerges. A political program grounded in a positive element of an extant society reproduces (rather than transforms) that society; a conception of crisis grounded in critique, on the other hand, reads the potential for the new in the fissures of the old. This is why "capitalism must be surpassed solely by means of a concrete, historical critique of its basic forms" (Kurz, "Current Global Economic Crisis" 349).

3. Historicity of "crisis"

At this point, however, several difficulties emerge. First, however well-established the link is between, on the one hand, the value-critical theory of crisis and, on the other, the historical crises of the past and present, in order to demonstrate that the critique of value constitutes a theory of collapse it must project the logic of the crisis dynamic into the future. Generally, to name a situation a "crisis" is to confer upon that situation an exceptionality that frames meaning; "crisis" marks out a moment as distinct, as something which, like the master signifier, organizes the symbolic situation in which it takes place. Conceptually, though, to demarcate a given situation as exceptional requires the invention of a norm against which the exception is compared. In other words, crisis constitutes a distinction that, explicitly or implicitly, presumes some idea of a non-crisis (see Roitman, *Anti-Crisis*). This distinction can be synchronic (i.e. it distinguishes between an exceptional state of things and a [spatially distinct or ideal] non-exceptional state at the same historical moment), or it can be diachronic (i.e. it distinguishes between the state of things at one historical moment versus another). Both forms maintain a normative dimension insofar as the

norm (the non-crisis) against which crisis is defined is located beyond the situation itself: this is true of notions of crisis from Christian eschatology which posits crisis within a teleology of Last Judgement, to Enlightenment philosophers, who defined crisis in relation to a utopian idea of progress (Koselleck, "Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society"), to Obama, who argued that the actions of Americans in overcoming financial crisis would be judged by their children's children (Obama; Roitman, *Anti-Crisis*).

When Marx demonstrates that crisis is not an accidental or secondary phenomenon, but rather a dynamic immanent to capital, he is not merely positing a different interpretation or application of "crisis"—he transforms the nature of the concept altogether. In surplus value, Marx identifies a material dynamic that mutually grounds the synchronic distinction (change within the mode of production) in the diachronic distinction (historical time). Within this conception, "crisis" refers neither to an event nor a state of things—both of which require external, normative validation—but rather to a dynamic process of rupture and reproduction. Thus, crisis gains an explanatory force imminent to historical understanding: it effectively synthesizes a logical critique of political economy with a historical account of bourgeois society *without needing to define crisis against an external conception of non-crisis.* In short, Marx transforms crisis from a normative concept into a scientific concept.

To posit a *terminal* crisis, however, the burden of demonstration is significantly higher and, I would argue, of a different order. Beyond mutually grounding diachronic and synchronic distinctions, it must also demonstrate that at least one is absolute. In *Wertkritik*, for example, the distinction is between a present determined by surplus value and a future not determined by surplus value. This reintroduces the need for projection. The argument that capitalism necessarily

produces crisis and the argument that capitalism will be destroyed by this dynamic are more different than they appear: the former is based on the assertion of historical *laws* that remain more or less true even as their specific content is modified. As such, this argument is contained by the synchronic-diachronic dynamic. The latter however is an absolute claim and thus requires a different mode of demonstration. Consider two formulations of the basic claim:

1. Logical: Capitalism produces its own terminal crisis.
2. Historical: There is no possibility that capital can invent new ways of generating surplus value.

Claims 1 and 2 appear similar. In Kurz's account of crisis, claim 1 seems to follow the more demonstrable claim that crisis necessarily produces increasingly expansive crises. And, in a general sense, the logical claim does seem to demonstrate that "capitalism has irrevocable entered a barbaric state of decline" (Trenkle 14). However, to make the idea of *terminal* crisis meaningful—that is, to link a critique of political economy to social emancipation, as outlined above—it is the second claim, a claim about historical *possibilities*, that matters. This claim is not contained within the imminent conception of crisis, it requires an external dimension and therefore depends upon normative conceptions of crisis. In other words, there are situations in which one might claim to understand the full set of logical limitations on possibility, but to make the same claim about the historical limitations (in this case, the possibility of reinvented forms or spaces of surplus value) is difficult if not impossible.

Such a claim ultimately rests on a teleological definition of history. To test this, it is worth analyzing the historically embedded, processual nature of the abstractions that make the idea of "terminal crisis" intelligible. Crisis is itself a concept that, like any other concept, has a

history. As Reinhardt Koselleck's conceptual genealogy shows, at the close of the eighteenth century crisis emerges as a concept for demarcating historical transformations *and* for judging history in terms of its significance. This amounts to a profoundly new kind of historical consciousness. As Janet Roitman writes:

> For this historical consciousness, crisis is a criterion for what counts as history; crisis signifies change, such that crisis 'is' history; and crisis designates "history" as such. In this way, crisis achieves the status of a historico-philosophical concept; it is the means by which history is located, recognized, comprehended, and even posited. (Roitman, "Crisis")

Crises, in short, might name events or processes that occur within history, but crisis also *constitutes* history on a fundamental level: it is not only the designation of what counts as historical, crisis is what makes of history something other than the passage of events. Moreover, the historicity of this separation and its emergence as an historical concept is tied to enlightenment notions of progress: the dual conception of judgment made of history's emerging bourgeois class history's judges. In short, by postulating a conception of crisis that moved toward an end—i.e. the natural progress of humankind—this new class positioned itself as the judge of whether all spheres of activity conformed to this teleology. This does not imply that crisis is an inherently enlightenment concept, but it does suggest that an adequately critical account of crisis must not only distinguish itself from the notion of progress, it must also eradicate the teleological impulse inherent to conceptions of crisis and futurity.

Wertkritik authors have repeatedly and rigorously demonstrated the tendency, found throughout Marxism, to uncritically reproduce forms borrowed from bourgeois conceptions of social transformation—the political party, revolution as the direct seizure of power, and so on. The same historicizing impulse must be brought to bear on conceptions of crisis.

4. Crisis and Event: From Crisis of Capitalism to Crisis of Negation

A recommencement? Badiou with and against Marx

Alain Badiou argues that modernity is a negative reality. It is defined, first and foremost, by the breaking down of tradition, the eradication of millennia-old social structures over the course of three short centuries. Whether its trajectory is understood as revolutionary opportunity or catastrophic collapse, the processes levelling social structures are linked to the master-signifier of modernity: crisis. For Badiou, what is most striking about this "veritable tornado sweeping through humanity" is not the destruction of social, political, environmental, or economic spheres, but the corresponding *subjective* crisis. While historical analyses emphasize objective and structural accounts—the crisis of capitalism, the planetary crisis of environmental destruction, and so on—Badiou argues that the "true" crisis is defined by the eradication of symbolic structures that, in all prior historical periods, determined the place of individuals through class, occupation, race, religion, and so on. This subjective crisis is what is described by Marx and Engels, who already understood that, "wherever it has got the upper hand," the bourgeoisie

> has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors', and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment'. It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom — Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation.
>
> The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage laborers. (Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* 37–38)

The destruction that leaves only a single relational nexus is, in other words, a crisis in the symbolic forms that give individuals a place within the social order of things (Badiou, "True and False Contradictions" n.p.). What is historically unique to modernity, then, is only not the speed and thoroughness of its destruction, but the fact that, rather than generating new, stable symbolic distributions, differences in race, class and gender are reconstituted in the fluid and ever-changing image of capital.

In the wake of this destruction, two alternatives have emerged as the dominant—and we are told *only*—viable responses to this subjective crisis. The first is to ignore the subjective crisis, to affirm that liberal democracy is the ideal and natural outcome of human history, and (insofar as one is concerned with ideas like inequality) to bolster the structures of inclusion. The second is to affirm the reactionary desire to return to the traditional world (or, rather, to a nostalgic version thereof), to recreate against capital's worldlessness the hierarchical symbolization of the good old days. The putative opposition, however, reproduces a false

contradiction that, reinforced by narratives of future catastrophe, forces a "choice" between a return to democracy or the decline into barbarism.

We must ask, then: within this broader definition of modernity as a negative reality, is the post-crisis situation—the situation defined by the 2007 crisis, with its bank bailouts, mass accumulation, and political polarization—merely another moment or expression of social erasure? Or does the subsequent period of riots and revolts express a revolutionary kernel? Framing the question of the present, Badiou argues for the continued importance of Marxist political categories, and for the continued relevance of Marx's analysis: "Marx," he writes,

> rigorously analyzed the inevitable character of cyclical crises, which testify, inter alia, to the absolute irrationality of capitalism, and the compulsory character of imperial activities and wars alike…If we consider the situation in the world as a whole, and not just in our backyard, even the pauperization of enormous masses of the population is increasingly self-evident. Basically, today's world is exactly the one which, in a brilliant anticipation, a kind of true science fiction, Marx heralded as the full unfolding of the irrational and, in truth, monstrous potentialities of capitalism. (Badiou, *Rebirth of History* 11–12)

On a practical level, Badiou showed little enthusiasm for the immediate emancipatory potential of post-2007 situation. Critical of any attempt to ascribe immediate political meaning to these developments, Badiou nevertheless argues that, taken together, contemporary uprisings resemble "the first working-class insurrections of the nineteenth century" (Badiou, *Rebirth of History* 5). However sporadic, moments of upheaval—riots, mass demonstration, movements, etc.—signify the potential recovery of political possibility, toward the realization of a situation in which an emancipatory political event could take place, in which, "a rebirth of History, as opposed to the pure and simple repetition of the worst, is signaled and takes shape" (Badiou, *Rebirth of History* 5).

In relation to Badiou's most read and commented-upon works (*Being and Event*, most notably), the affirmative references to Marx and to his notion of crisis appear atypical, even contradictory. It makes much more sense, however, within the longer trajectory of Badiou's work. Taken as a whole, Badiou's relation to Marx is characterized by a series of ruptures, returns, and recommencements. Several of Marx's concepts, present in Badiou's earlier writing, disappear for years or decades, only to reappear, to begin anew in a reconfigured and newly rigorous sense. The idea of the dialectic, for example, is central to *Theory of the Subject* (1982). It then seems to disappear in *Being and Event* (1988) and *The Century* (2005), and is openly critiqued in *Metapolitics* (1998), where Badiou argues that dialectical philosophy belongs to a "saturated" historical mode that no longer provides any new possibilities. In *Logics of Worlds*, however, a revised understanding of dialectics—what he names the *materialist dialectic*—returns as a key dynamic within Badiou's philosophy. Similarly, the concept of crisis is absent in Badiou's most popular works (in the 1200-plus pages of the *Being and Event* and *Logics of Worlds*, the concept of crisis, named as such, is entirely absent). As Jason Barker writes in the introduction to *Metapolitics* (perhaps Badiou's most anti-Marxist text to date):

> Today, 'crisis' affects the very condition of our social existence, and has become the stock in trade of 'legitimate' democratic representation, such that claiming high or low points in politics, while of interest to biographers and historians, sheds no light on politics *in actu*. To be more precise, 'crisis', from Badiou's stand-point, is nothing but the opaque sign of the absence or invisibility of real politics, not a systemic or epochal fact. ("Translator's Introduction," Barker viii)

In short, the concept of crisis has been subsumed under the official language of the state and, thus, Badiou rejected the concept outright. More recently, however, Badiou has used crisis to refer not only to specific economic processes (the "financial crisis"), but also as a concept in its

own right (See for examples: Badiou, "True and False Contradictions"; and "Our Contemporary Impotence").

The disappearance and reappearance of concepts and influences should not be understood merely as conceptual shifts; rather, they express the broader dialectical movement of Badiou's thought. As an emerging philosopher, Badiou described Althusser's work as a "recommencement of dialectical materialism" (Badiou, "(Re)commencement"). Why "(re)commencement"? Because, for Badiou, Althusser's philosophy does not update or recover dialectical materialism, it negates and transforms it by demonstrating that dialectical materialism is itself premised on rupture. The various forms of "vulgar Marxism" hold in common the erasure of a difference, the form of appearance of which is the "question of the 'relations' between Marx and Hegel"; insofar as the question of the nature of the dialectic is couched in terms of the relation of Marx to Hegel—even (or perhaps especially) when that relation is viewed antagonistically, as a negation, reversal, "standing on its head," etc.—Marxism preserves an ideological form of Hegelianism. Indeed, in the 1840s and 1850s Marx suggests that there is a foundational shift between his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* and the critique of political economy at the heart of *Capital*. *The German Ideology*, Marx claims, was written as a critique of post-Hegelian philosophy but also to "settle up with our former philosophical conscience" (Marx 161; this argument is elaborated in Heinrich 21). To reconstitute the object of critique (i.e. moving from a critique of Hegel to a critique of political economy) means "to demonstrate that the problem of the 'relations' between Marx's theoretical enterprise and Hegelian or post-Hegelian ideology is properly speaking irresolvable, that is, un-formulatable…precisely because its formulation *is* the gesture that covers up the difference"; it covers up, in other words, the "epistemological

break"—"the rule bound construction of a new scientific object," the latter of which has "nothing to do with the Hegelian ideology" (Badiou, "(Re)commencement").

This applies not only to Marx, but also to Marxism. Whereas Marxist philosophers tend to trace lineages of continuity (Hegel to Marx to Lenin, etc.) and coherence (from young Marx through *Grundrisse* and *Capital*), Badiou argues that Marxism is defined by a series of foundational breaks or "epistemological ruptures"—Marx breaks from his earlier work and from Hegel, Lenin breaks from Marx, Stalin from Lenin, Mao from Stalin, and so on (Badiou, *Metapolitics* 58; Badiou, "(Re)commencement"). Each rupture is different in kind, constituted not by additional insight or knowledge, but by a new object of analysis. In this sense, any attempt to establish a unified understanding of "Marxist philosophy" is misguided.[39] Instead, "Marxism" is "the (void) name of an absolutely inconsistent set, once it is referred back, as it must be, to the history of political singularities" (Badiou, *Metapolitics* 58). How, then, can this "inconsistent set" be referred back to our contemporary moment? At the height of his Maoist stage, at least, Badiou argued that Marxism is defined by an impasse of political practice:

> Marxism is in crisis; Marxism is atomized. Past the impulse and creative scission of the 1960s, after the national liberation struggles and the cultural revolution, what we inherit in times of crisis and the imminent threat of war is a narrow and fragmentary assemblage of thought and action, caught in a labyrinth of ruins and survivals. […] To defend Marxism today means to

[39] As Althusser writes: "Marx's scientific theory did not lead to a new philosophy (called dialectical materialism), but to a new practice of philosophy, to be precise to the practice of philosophy based on a proletarian class position in philosophy"; unlike science, the labor of which produces an object of inquiry, philosophy "is a practice of political intervention carried out in a theoretical form" (Althusser).

> defend a weakness. We must practice Marxism. (Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* 182)

There are at least two forms of crisis here. There are "times of crisis": historical moments of contradiction, tumult, war and violence. Second, there is a "crisis of Marxism": a conceptual crisis defined by the "narrow and fragmentary assemblage of thought and action" that make "recomposing politics" an impossible task. This second crisis is not located in the objective conditions of history, but in the political subject; or, more accurately, in the absence and impossibility of a political subject. The ideas that once unified diverse material practices—the 20th century idea of communism and the idea socialism, in particular—have been saturated by a century of experimentation. Such ideas no longer inspire transformative practices; they no longer anticipate transformative new political subjects. In other words, rather than the objective contradictions of capitalism, our crisis is an impasse defined by the impossibility of the subject—i.e. the impossibility of inventing a collective subjective practice (in Badiou's words, a truth procedure) that might connect material conditions to a transformative Idea.

This chapter develops an account of the latter, more subjective form of crisis, situated within Badiou's philosophy more broadly. The first section develops an overview of the relevant aspects of Badiou's subtractive ontology. With an eye to key similarities and differences with *Wertkritik* authors, the second section argues that a subtractive ontology priorities the crisis immanent to a subjective process (while still preserving objective historical dimensions). Third, building upon subtractive and subjective framings of crisis, I develop Badiou's claim that "[t]he very nature of the crisis today is not… the crisis of capitalism, but the failure of socialism." While acknowledging key limitations in this understanding of crisis (several of which are more closely scrutinized in Chapter 5), I argue that a subtractive and subjective understanding of crisis

resists key problems in political-economic theories of crisis. As argued in the previous chapter, the latter tend to turn crisis into a teleological and transhistorical term; a subtractive account, on the other hand, may tend toward idealized conceptions of the subject, but it grounds crisis in the present, thus resisting both the teleological and transhistorical dimensions.

1. Subtractive Ontology: Count, Situation, and State

My reading of Badiou's subtractive ontology is oriented by two claims. First, a subtractive ontology asserts, with a long line of philosophers from Aristotle to Descartes to Heidegger, that philosophy must aim to say what is sayable of being as such (Badiou, *Being and Event* 16; Hallward, *Badiou* 50; James 135). Second, it asserts that pure being cannot be accessed through description. In other words, the "being" of an object—what something *is*—does not inhere in its predicates or qualities (shape, material composition, etc.); to the contrary, being only becomes sayable once all predicates and qualities have been stripped away or subtracted (James 135–36). Following the notion of subtraction to its limit, Badiou asserts that *existence* itself is a predicate and therefore must be subtracted from pure being. This radicalization separates being from existence; subtraction undermines the connection of being to substance, essence, thing-ness (James 136). But what is left when subtractive thought is pursued to its end? And how can it be thought at all?

Regarding the first question (what is left?): whatever pure being is, it cannot be empirically analyzed or confirmed. When taken to its limits subtraction can, however, reduce the nature of being to two essential possibilities: either being is fundamentally defined by "The One," understood as substance, god, spirit, etc. that founds an ontological unity. Or being is

defined by "the multiple – i.e. by the fact that there is finally only a disconnected, inconsistent unity. The ontological nature of being is, in this sense, logically and empirically *undecidable*—it is possible to deduce the basic outcomes of each possibility, but neither possibility can be confirmed or denied. Thus, the question of being, the question of what is, comes down to a *decision* regarding the primacy of the one or the multiple.[40] For most of the history of Western thought, some conception of unity or "the one" has been given priority. In contrast, Badiou affirms multiplicity, asserting that: "the one *is not*" (Badiou, *Being and Event* 23).[41] This affirmation of multiplicity reverses the relation between the one and the multiple; torqueing the (Parmenidean) assertion that "if the one is not, nothing is," Badiou asserts that "if the one is not, (the) nothing is" (*Being and Event* 36). Thus, to answer the first question, once all unifying characteristics are stripped away, the radicalized process of subtraction leaves only "inconsistent multiplicity"; all there is, is multiplicity for which multiplicity is the only predicate (Badiou, *Being and Event* 28).

This frames an answer to the second question as well: how can being be thought? To think history in a subtractive sense is to strip away the infinite complexity of a situation in order to arrive at the limit of what it is possible to know—to arrive at the specific point at which knowledge can no longer proceed, or in Badiou's words, "to purify reality, not by annihilating it,

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[40] Badiou writes: "The reciprocity of the one and being is certainly the inaugural axiom of philosophy" (Badiou, *Being and Event* 31). One might certainly ask, however, whether this "inaugural axiom"—and hence Badiou's question of the one and the many—remains the only (or best) distinction upon which to ground ontology.

[41] Here, Badiou follows Lacan's insistence on the ontological status of inconsistency. See Chapter 5.

but by withdrawing from its apparent unity so as to detect in it the minuscule difference, the vanishing term that is constitutive of it" (Badiou, *The Century* 65; see also Hallward, *Badiou* 163). Thus, to relate back to our two initial assertions: if philosophy aims to say what is sayable of being as such, if being as such does not inhere in the properties of beings, and if existence is itself a property that must be subtracted, then there is no immediate or necessary connection between the knowledge of what is and what is. And yet—although being is multiple and knowledge doesn't relate to being-as-such—the world appears coherent, both in itself (we experience the world as mostly unified and coherent situations) and in its relation to existing systems of knowledge (what we know about the world is mostly defined by sets of information that generally cohere with each other and with the world).

For Badiou, this coherence is constituted by an operation or effect. In other words, any *apparent* unity is the result of an ontologically posterior unification (or one-ification) of multiplicity—in Badiou's words, a "count-as-one" (Badiou, *Being and Event* 42). This one-ification is ontologically contingent: there are an infinite number of ways to "count" pure multiplicity. But this contingency does not imply that its operation is in any sense trivial. Pure multiplicity is (somewhat like Kant's *noumena*) too inchoate to make present; thus, it is only through "one-ification"—the counting of a situation as unified—that a world exists. In other words, the inconsistent multiplicity precedes the "count-as-one"; but existence is an effect of the count as one; hence, the pre-existent multiplicity can only be understood after the count-as-one.

The unified presentation is what Badiou names a "situation" (or, depending on scope and context, "World" or "Being"). Literally the "taking place of place" (Badiou, *Being and Event* 24), a situation names that which exists as well as the forms in which existence can be

represented; in short, what Alberto Toscano describes as the "structured presentation of reality" (Toscano, "Communism as Separation" 138). In this conception appearance (the fact that anything is presented) depends upon a single relation: its being counted, or in mathematical terms its belonging to a set. In other words, there is no pure and simple appearance and no situation-less appearance of the inconsistent multiple, there is only appearance *as* something (as an element of a set), and it is the situation that conditions the "*as*".

If a situation necessarily appears as a coherent unity, then how is the count itself counted? In other words, if the operation that actualizes an apparent consistency remains separate (i.e. is not part of the situation it establishes), then that which establishes the count disrupts the situation. Thus, any count-as-one must structure its own concealment; it must by definition be exhausted in the creation of a situation (Badiou, *Being and Event* 95). This involves erasing several truths about its own production; among these, the fact that structuring operation cannot be included within the count (if this operation was outside the count then the structure would not be unified). Hence, as Badiou argues, "a structure exhausts itself in its effect, which is that there is oneness" (Ibid).

In this sense, subtraction is a reversal of—or, more accurately, a withdrawal from—the count as one. Only through such subtraction can thought "tear itself from everything that still ties it to the commonplace, to generality, which is the root of its own metaphysical temptation" (Badiou, *Theoretical Writings* 44–45; also quoted in Hallward, "Depending on Inconsistency" 9). By presenting multiplicity axiomatically—by subtracting all predicates beyond the fact of belonging—Badiou's subtractive ontology reduces being to the most basic thinkable level.

In more historical terms, the "success" of capital is measured by its universality, but this universality only emerges once the constitutive operation is itself included within the count. Without delving into logical analysis, we might think of this in analogical terms. A feudalist situation is defined by a distinction between ruler and ruled; the "count"—i.e. all those subjected to a monarch's rule—is maintained by something that is external to it—the monarch. The monarch, however, is not included within its own count. Thus, to bring unity to the situation (to justify the count of the ruler over the ruled) a second-order count is required—in the western world this was provided by the Christian worldview, in which the power of the crown is synonymous with the power of God. Against this spiritual count, the development of bourgeois society is defined by the internalization of the count through the moralization and economization of politics. This takes root in Enlightenment notions of the social contract, which ground the count in a rational principal: it is better for all to agree to live in harmony. In this formulation, the count is internalized within the logic of the nation-state—as the rationally justified count of citizens by citizens-as-state. For this reason, Thomas Hobbes (not John Locke or Adam Smith) is the bourgeois philosopher *par excellence*: the notion of the social contract has nothing to do with a particular social bond; rather, it is premised on a prohibition of un-bonding (Badiou, *Being and Event* 109). As is clear in Hobbes, the social contract is apathetic regarding the kind of social bonds (it can equally justify monarchy or democracy); what matters is that the count—all citizens, the set of those who enter the contract—remains the same, even if the kind of social relation between members changes.

What changes, however, is the second-order count—not the count of individuals but the counting of subsets. In Badiou's terms, this second-order count is the state. Playing on the dual

meaning of the word—in English, the nation-*state* and the *state* of things—the state does not constitute the count, it re-counts that which has already been counted (Badiou, *Being and Event* 106). In other words, the state functions as a meta-structure that *re*-presents—verifies, orders, and enforces—what is already presented by the situation (Badiou, *Being and Event* 236). For example, in the capitalist situation—which, for Badiou, is not ontologically foundational but one situation among others—individuals and objects are "counted" in terms of the capitalist mode of production and private property, which divides society into two classes: for Engels, the bourgeois (those who own the means of production) and the proletariat (those who must sell their labor for wages). In a historical sense, the "count" is the result of an operation or process. As Heinrich and *Wertkritik* argue (see Chapter 2), it was only after centuries of bloodshed that the spaces and times of the capitalist world—of waged labor, the space of the factory, the separation of use value from exchange value—seemed natural. From a subtractive perspective, both the bourgeois and the proletariat are presented, but the bourgeois, by virtue of private ownership of the means of production, are *re*presented by the state, while the proletariat are not.

Like its content, the logic in which this meta-structural representation relates to subsets is derived from the situation itself. Capitalism is premised on a count which, oriented by the commodity form, demarcates which elements are presented. But, again, presentation is nothing other than a relation of belonging (or not) and has nothing to do with *how* an element belongs. So, at the elementary level, there is no distinction between worker, capitalist, entrepreneur, etc.; every person circumscribed by the commodity form is counted. The state, however, re-presents the counted elements in ways that preserve the count itself—that is, in ways that prevent the unbinding of the count. As Hallward writes:

> The chief task of [the capitalist] state, then, is to arrange these commodity-elements into parts whose relations are governed as much as possible by the rules that preserve and regulate the ownership of property. What such a state counts is only capital itself; how people are in turn counted or re-presented normally depend upon how much they themselves count (in terms of capital or property). (Hallward, *Badiou* 97)

In other words, in historical situations there is (at least) one element that belongs to the situation but is not included within it (for examples, illegal immigrants who sell their labor but don't have citizenship; or African Americans who are "counted" as citizens but excluded from political participation through criminalization). The State recounts the situation to stabilize the situation by controlling excessive (and thus potentially disruptive) elements—those that belong to the situation but are not represented by it.

Because the capitalist state re-counts distinctions established by capital, the individual elements that materially constitute the situation cannot be represented, or can only be represented insofar as they are counted in terms of capital. This includes distinctions between economic classes, but it also bears upon any element that might disrupt the count. For Badiou, this meta-political reading of the state is consistent with Marx. While nearly every political philosopher from Plato to Hobbes to Rawls assumes a relationship between state and individual, Marx understood that the relation between State and individual is mediated:

> Marxist thought…posits that the count-as-one ensured by the State is not originally that of the multiple of individuals, but that of the multiple of classes of individuals. Even if one abandons the terminology of classes, the formal idea that the State—which is the state of the historico-social situation—deals with collective subsets and not with individuals remains essential. This idea must be understood: the essence of the State is that of not being obliged to recognize individuals—when it is obliged to recognize them, in concrete cases, it is always according to a principle of counting which does not concern the individuals as such. (Badiou, *Being and Event* 105)

2. Decision, Subject, Truth

Given this reading of subtractive ontology, how can we define political truth? And, maintaining an eye to our overarching question, in what sense does crisis orient an understanding of the truth of the capitalist situation? Several negative definitions can be deduced, given what I've said thus far. At a general level, truth is not grounded in objective consistency—neither in socio-epistemological terms (in the correspondence between concept and world, in the creation of an adequate social structure for deliberation, etc.), nor in terms of subjective capacity (biological, logical, linguistic) for cognition or judgment. Any account of consistency is a more or less developed recount of what has already been counted. Returning to Badiou's foundational distinction between the one or the multiple, to affirm the primacy of the one (to decide that unity or the unit is the basic category of being) is to prioritize, as Hallward writes, "distinction, identification, and definition of individual entities or beings"; such an orientation will "be careful to supervise the appropriate means of representing such individual, of discerning their characteristic features and guarding against their misrepresentation" (Hallward, "Depending on Inconsistency" 7). This is the dominant logic in socio-political discourse—particularly with regards to liberal understandings of rights, culture, and social justice, wherein "justice" is equivalent to a social order that, while universally held, is tailored to the particular differences of predetermined subsets (based on class, culture, identity, and so forth).

For the same reasons, a political truth cannot be actualized through the state. The state does not constitute the order of things, it merely represents and enforces what has already been

presented. Transforming the state (for example, by instituting socialist party governance in place of liberal governance) does not in itself transform the "count"; rather it differently represents the same count. Nor can truth be actualized by affirming established interests or categories (for example, the economic interests of labor, or categories such as cultural identity). In the subtractive framework, such politics run aground on the contradictory idea that a social bond or unifying force could undo unifying forces as such (see Toscano 143). In other words, every situation is founded by a count; an understanding of politics based on an affirmation of an existing count (for example, that of laborers) may challenge some of the effects of the count by arguing for better compensation, better working conditions, etc.; but such an understanding ultimately reaffirms the count, and hence maintains the constitutive exclusion.

For Badiou, "Every process of truth begins with an event. An event is unpredictable and incalculable—it is a supplement of the situation" (Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics* 55). The event is the occurrence of that multiple—its taking place through self-presentation—which reveals the ever-present, but normally invisible, *inconsistency* that underlies all consistent multiplicities. This supplement emerges from within the situation, but is not of the situation, and therefore does not appear in any empirical or logical way. As purely haphazard, the event and its effects cannot be inferred, deduced or explained. Nor can its existence be proved in the moment of its occurrence. In other words, the event breaks with the logic of the situation—it is uncounted and outside of every existing set, and therefore beyond the pale of any logic by which things appear and are given a place within the situation. Hence, at the moment of its occurrence there is no framework through which to grasp the event. In short, the event has no ontological foundation

and because presentation is determined by belonging to the count, the event is not presented—it *inexists*.

While the event has no being or existence within the situation, it nevertheless takes place—it "punctures a hole"—at a specific, locatable point within a situation. This point is what Badiou refers to as the evental site. From a perspective within the situation, the evental site shows up, but has no elements in common with its situation; it has specificity only as void, as devoid of distinction: "it is presented, but 'beneath' it nothing from which it is composed is presented" (Badiou, *Being and Event* 175). However, it is precisely because the event is without distinction that it founds the situation. As singular and without distinction, the event shows up the limits of what can be taken account of; hence, "the event reveals the void of a situation" (Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics* 55). Neither truth nor the evental site *are* the void; rather the evental site, always on the edge of the void, is that point at which the void is revealed. This is perhaps clearer in Badiou's mathematical ontology of the situation. As mentioned, a situation is made up of elements, each of which is made up of further sets of elements—each multiple is a multiple of multiples. The exception is the evental site, which is an element devoid of distinction. As Badiou writes,

> evental sites block the infinite regression of combinations of multiples. Since they are on the edge of the void, one cannot think the underside of their presented-being. It is therefore correct to say that sites found the situation because they are the absolutely primary terms therein; they interrupt questioning according to combinatory origin. (Badiou, *Being and Event* 175)

As non-distinction and outside the situation's framework, how does the evental site become truth? Bursting forth as an uncountable multiple, the event is neither coterminous with, nor solely productive of, truth. Yet, while the event itself cannot be described, as a point the

evental site can be named. Thus: "A truth always begins by naming the void, by voicing the poem of the abandoned place" (Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics* 55). Once named, the evental site forces a decision: does one commit to the event or not? In other words, the determination of an event requires subjective affirmation that, yes, this event did occur, and yes, this event belongs to this situation and therefore exists within this situation. Because the event is necessarily undecidable, its affirmation is based not on discernment but on an unfounded fidelity. As Badiou writes: "The intelligibility of the choice lies in the choice itself, in the consistent process of the ensuing action just as an axiom can be understood only from within the theoretical developments that are supported by this axiom itself" (Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*; see also Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics* 26). The event defies the logic of the situation and thus breaks with any criteria that might enable contemplative or analytic judgment. It leaves only a wager: an emphatic yes or no (Badiou, *Being and Event* 201–4). Moreover, this means that the truth of the event can only be verified from within the truth procedure. In other words, the truth that emerges from an event cannot be didactically presented to a public (say, for the purposes of a referendum); its name becomes visible, but its truth can only be grasped from a position within the process of verification.

Once an event has been named and affirmed, the relation of the event to the situation remains undemonstrated. Yet, the event is universally open to investigation—that is, it makes its axioms visible in a way that may be examined by anyone. In other words, anyone might test the consequences of the foundational, evental configuration. It is through such testing—by relentlessly and creatively analyzing, exploring, and demonstrating the consequences of the event—that the subject emerges; in fact, for Badiou, the subject is *nothing other than* the process

that actively breaks down the distinctions, divisions and differences that determine the situation (Badiou, *Being and Event* 17; Hallward, "Order and Event" 98). Truth is neither the event *per se*, nor is it something that is discovered in the world; rather, based on a wagered hypothesis, it must be materially constructed through a series of inquiries, experiments, actions, and determinations. In this sense, a truth is *always* particular and localizable; truth is thus grounded in a concrete history. And yet, Badiou claims every truth is universal and eternal. How can it be both? As Quintin Meillassoux writes:

> It is because a truth is the bearer, by right, of an infinite number of consequences: a set of inquiries therefore, by right, inexhaustible, and capable of being extended to historical moments in profoundly different contexts. In other words, a truth is the bearer of theoretical movements that form among themselves a historicity both profound and discontinuous. (Meillassoux 3)

i. Affirming multiplicity against critique: Truth and Immanent Decision

To affirm the primacy of multiplicity—the notion that there is, fundamentally, neither an overarching unity nor predetermined units—thought must begin with the "process of limitless self-differentiation" (Badiou, *Theoretical Writings* 42). A rupture in the normal or "natural" operations of a world does not imply an imperative to regain consistency, to restore harmony, etc. If, as Badiou argues, inconsistency is the real of the situation, then the imperative is to extend rupture, to test its relation to truth, and finally to define the disrupted world in terms of the rupture by faithfully actualizing the consequences of an event.[42]

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[42] Skeptics have argued that the "undecidability" of the event leaves open the possibility that what appears as an emancipatory event may in fact be the opposite—a violent closure of emancipatory possibility (this, it would seem, was Heidegger's failure: to have mistaken the

In this general sense, there are points of overlap between Badiou's ontology and the critique of value discussed in the two preceding chapters. For both, a theoretical account of the situation does not develop positive principles upon which a politics can be built. Both are attuned to the fact that Marx's theory of capital did not aim at a positive, strategic economic theory; rather, his concern was to "demonstrate the irrationality, the inner contradictions, and hence the ultimate untenability of a society based on value" (Trenkle); or, in Badiou's words, to analyze "the absolute irrationality of capitalism" (Badiou, *Rebirth of History* 11). Positivist "knowledge" of the situation covers over more dynamic realities (for *Wertkritik*, through reification; for Badiou through "one-ification"). Politics grounded in positive ontological principles derived from an understanding of the situation are misguided. Thus, while the critique of value and subtractive ontology each develop theoretical systems of understanding, both argue that there is no immediate, positive connection between historical conditions and the transformation thereof. For Kurz and *Wertkritik*, analysis is grounded in historical critique—in understanding how surplus value produces the crisis of capital—but knowledge about the objective crisis cannot in itself found egalitarian transformation. For Badiou, this is developed in ontological terms: philosophy aims to say what is sayable of being as such; however, "being as such" does not inhere in the properties of beings, and therefore, as Bosteels writes, there is "no immediate or

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Third Reich for a world historical event). The framework of the one vs the multiple, however, provides an objective distinction between, for example, the extreme one-ification of fascism (which erases the multiple by emphasizing a unification based on nationalism, race, etc.) and the multiplicity of true communism (which affirms the breakdown of all counts, including class, gender, race, religion, etc.).

spontaneous link between history and politics or between the socioeconomical determination of classes and the political class struggle" (Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics* 27). There is no immediate or necessary connection between what is and the knowledge of what is. This shared notion is expressed in Badiou's commitment to a *political Marxism*, defined by rupture, over and against all forms of theoretical, descriptive, and critical frameworks. Marxism, writes Badiou:

> is neither a branch of economics (theory of the relations of production), nor a branch of sociology (objective description of 'social reality'), nor a philosophy (a dialectical conceptualization of contradictions). It is, let us reiterate, the organized knowledge of the political means required to undo existing society and finally realize an egalitarian, rational figure of collective organization for which the name is 'communism'. (Badiou, *Rebirth of History* 8)

The key distinction, here, is between knowledge about the situation and "knowledge of the political means required to undo existing society." The former positions the political subject as a kind of master, as having a bird's eye view of historical development; the latter can only be understood from a subjective perspective, immanent to the process of transformation.

How to theorize this immanent, material process of transformation? On this, Badiou and Kurz diverge; and they do so in ways that facilitate a better understanding of key distinctions between crisis and event. For Kurz, as we have seen, the politics of capitalist crisis are grounded in the practice of critique: "There is no ontological principle upon which social emancipation could base itself. Instead, *capitalism must be surpassed solely by means of a concrete, historical critique of its basic forms*" (Larsen, Nilges, and Robinson 349). This implies that the capitalist situation bears an internal contradiction—one that can be brought to light and exacerbated through the practice of critique. This is why, for example, when *Wertkritik* authors rail against other Marxists, their primary complaint is that Marxism (and the left more broadly) has failed to adequately historicize key concepts, including value.

For Badiou, on the other hand, the defining problem in Marxism is a crisis that, as Bosteels writes, "must be understood immanently, from within the weakness or the exhaustion of the referential value of the Marxist discourse in actual political and militant processes" (Bosteels, "Introduction" xx). Thus, as opposed to a critique of political economy (one that reveals and exacerbates contradictions in the objective structures of capital) Badiou argues for a politics that is "identified and thought on its own terms, as a homogeneous singularity, and not in terms of the heterogeneous nature of its empirical future" (Badiou, *Metapolitics* 127). As noted, truth has nothing to do with correspondence; it is defined by the subjective fidelity to the void multiple—a multiple that bears neither distinction nor any relation or logical correlation to the situation other than the fact that it takes place. The most immediate implication is that any claim to or affirmation of this void multiple cannot be derived from, or verified by, the situation from which it emerges. In other words, detaching knowledge of the situation from the transformative truth of the situation, thought (including the choice to affirm, through fidelity, the potential truth of the event) is internalized within the process of verifying the truth.

ii. Thinking the Factory as Multiple

Take, for example, the factory. From both Kurz and Badiou's perspectives, insofar as the factory is significant for thinking politics, it is not because there are qualities that can be ascribed to factory workers (class consciousness and so on), nor because factories constitute a privileged place for political organization or activity. Rather, the factory is a site of labor that constitutes a kind of surplus or excess. For Kurz the excess is defined by a contradiction between use and exchange value. Use value (particularly in the forms of labor and environmental resources) is

required for the generation of commodities, which are the bearers of surplus value. However, the law of operational competition enforces a permanent increase in productivity, driving processes of rationalization and automation that increasingly separate it from exchange value. Hence, material sources of wealth (which appear as use value) are increasingly separated from, and subsumed by, value. Thus, factories produce the excess that brings about their own crisis. For Kurz, then, the excessive dimension emerges from the crisis dynamic inherent to a system organized in terms of surplus value.

For Badiou, on the other hand, the factory is defined by excess in that the workers that comprise the factory are, in themselves, invisible to the count of the state:

> the factory, by which I mean the factory as a workers' place, belongs without doubt to the socio-historical presentation (it is counted-as-one within it), but not the workers, to the extent that they belong to the factory. So that the factory – as a workers' place – is not included in society, and the workers (of a factory) do not form a pertinent "part", available for State counting. (Badiou, "Factory as Event Site" 173)

Rather than a site at which, through the process of accumulation, workers are increasingly made superfluous, or at which use value (as in Kurz's analysis) is irreversibly separated from exchange value, the factory is a site of excess in that workers are structurally precluded from the "count"—from any form of representation. The factory thus remains "a site that is a particular form of the multiple in situation" (Badiou, "Factory as Event Site" 172; see also Power and Toscano 96). In terms used in Section 1, the factory belongs to and is counted by the capitalist situation as productive of surplus value; however, constitutive of surplus, laborers themselves belong to the situation, but are not *represented* by it (even in a practical political sense, workers themselves are only acknowledged by the state as union members; it is this subset [i.e. the set of members belonging to a union] and not the workers that are represented by the state).

This also means the excessive or uncounted part (the laborers that are presented but not represented) are potentially mobilized in a process of subjectivization. It is this excess that potentially makes visible and contests the structure determining the *place* of the proletariat, the modes in which the proletariat can (and cannot) appear—in short, the imperialist, bourgeois world. Rather than a founding contradiction (for example, labor/capital), the politics of the factory is for Badiou grounded in a self-dis-placement that undoes the system of places. In other words, the factory worker is emancipated from the capitalist system not by taking the place of the bourgeois or, as many crisis theories would have it, by exacerbating the inherent and terminal crisis of capital. Rather, an emancipatory politics of the factory emerges in its relation to the project of communism, understood not as an economic program based on positive principles but on the abolition of "any place in which something like a proletariat can be installed. The political project of the proletariat is the disappearance of the space of the placement of classes. It is the loss, for the historical something, of every index of class" (Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* 7).

Here, a further distinction emerges between Marxist theories of crisis and Badiou's theory of the event. Whereas Marxist epistemologies maintain an explicit link between critique and political transformation within that situation, a subtractive politics destroys any such link by internalizing the connection between the intelligibility of the situation and politics. This is not to say that, within an evental conception of crisis, the critique of political economy is irrelevant. It does, however, break any direct relation between such a critique and politics. Badiou writes:

> The part of Marxism that consists of the scientific analysis of capital remains an absolutely valid background. After all, the realization of the world as global market, the undivided reign of great financial conglomerates, and so forth – all this is an indisputable reality and one that conforms, essentially, to Marx's analysis. The question is: where does politics fit in with all this? I think what is

> Marxist, and also Leninist – and in any case true – is the idea that any viable campaign against capitalism can only be political. There can be no economic battle against the economy. (Badiou and Hallward 105)

This difference is clarified in Badiou's engagement with dialectics, and is most visible in his treatment of Hegel. In a broad sense, it is based on a decision against Kant (who represents synthesis and unity) and for Hegel (who represents scission and multiplicity); whereas Kant treats scission in epistemological terms as a problem to overcome, Hegel asserts that scission and inconsistencies in knowledge are, in fact, scissions and inconsistencies in the *object* of knowledge (Žižek, *Less Than Nothing* 149).

The undecidability of the Badiouian Event and the internalization of thought is, as Žižek explains,

> uncannily similar to the Hegelian dialectical process in which, as Hegel himself made clear […] a 'figure of consciousness' is not measured by any external standard of truth but in an absolutely immanent way, through the gap between itself and its own exemplification/staging. An Event is thus 'non-All' in the precise Lacanian sense of the term: it is never fully verified precisely because it is infinite/unlimited, that is, because there is no external limit to it. And the conclusion to be drawn here is that, for the very same reason, the Hegelian 'totality' is also 'non-All'. (Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* xx)

More concretely, however, this difference is constituted by a split or scission *within* Hegel. Prior to his expressly anti-dialectical period, Badiou argued in the *Theory of the Subject* that the Hegelian dialectic conflates two processes:

> a) A dialectical matrix covered by the term of alienation; the idea of a simple term which unfolds itself in its becoming-other, in order to come back to itself as an achieved concept.
>
> b) A dialectical matrix whose operator is scission, and whose theme is that there is no unity that is not split. There is not the least bit of return into itself, nor any connection between the final and the inaugural. (Badiou, *Theory of the Subjec*t 4)

With this scission, the question becomes "not *whether* Hegel should be revived but rather *which* Hegel" (Bosteels, "On the Subject of the Dialectic" 56). And for Badiou, a commitment to the multiple (over and against the one) means a commitment to the latter (the Hegel in which every unity is always already split) against the former (the Hegel in which the split is a temporary scission within a synthetic unity).

Following the affirmation that "there is no unity that is not split"—the affirmation, that is, that the one is always already a multiple—Badiou argues that dialectical scission is not a contradiction between something and something else (A/B: labor/capital, proletariat/bourgeoisie, good/evil, light/darkness, and so on). Rather, it is defined by the separation between these contradictory elements (both of which are presented by the state) and that which is excluded by the dichotomy.

3. Critical Junctures: Crisis of the Situation vs Crisis of the Idea

This conception of dialectics has clear implications for a theory of crisis, and for understanding new sites and forms of riot and upheaval that emerged in the wake of the 2007-2008 crisis. In the aftermath, many understood political movements (the Arab Spring, Occupy, Anti-austerity movements, and so on) and seemingly apolitical riots (those in the UK, for example) as having revolutionary potential. While Badiou does not ascribe immediate political meaning to these occurrences—they are not events—he nevertheless argues that they resemble nineteenth-century, working class upheavals. As such they signal a kind of pre-evental situation wherein a "re-birth of history" potentially takes shape (Badiou, *Rebirth of History* 5). Instead of engaging in analytical disagreements (for example, about whether, and in what sense, looting might be

understood as a political act) Badiou asserts that, to actualize political transformation, such political development must link sites of experimentation, rupture, and emergence to an Idea. "Lest this moment flounder in glorious but defeated mass mobilizations, or in the interminable opportunism of 'representative' organizations," he writes, "the rebirth of History must also be a rebirth of the Idea" (Badiou, *Rebirth of History* 6). But, how can the "rebirth of history" be manifest as a relation between, on the one hand, the localization of a political grievance in the form of a riot and, on the other, the rebirth of an Idea? How can crisis be understood as a process that is interior to politics? And, how can we understand the temporality of crisis without resting upon the teleological temporality of the Hegelian dialectic?

To begin with, the notion of crisis must be located in the subject, not merely as a series of contradictions or shifts in the objective or historical situation. In the interview, "The Crisis of Negation," Badiou claims that: **"**The very nature of the crisis today is not, in my opinion, the crisis of capitalism, but the failure of socialism." This crisis, Badiou suggests, has three dimensions:

- The crisis of the idea of revolution;
- The crisis of negation; and
- The crisis of dialectics in the Hegelian sense.

i. Crisis of the idea (of revolution)

A subtractive conception makes clear why there will be no purely objective or historical "crisis of capitalism" that will bring about a qualitative transformation of the mode of

production. If the real is a multiplicity whose unification is the result of an operation, then changes at the level of second-order representation (i.e. of the state) do not, in themselves constitute changes of the count. Moreover, capitalism cannot be understood as the only ontological or historical totality; however powerful its formal effects, it is one situation among many. Thus, the transformation of a situation depends upon the affirmation of the indiscernible, void multiple. In this sense, there is a reversal in the position from which crisis is thought: rather than aiming to understand crisis through a critique of the political-historical processes, crisis should be understood as internal to the subject. A crisis designates an impasse: the impossibility of conceiving of an idea adequate to the transformation of the situation—in other words, "of the idea of another world, of the possibility of, really, another organization of society, and so on. Not the crisis of the pure possibility, but the crisis of the historical possibility of something like that is caught in the facts themselves" (Badiou, Del Lucchese, and Smith n.p.)

As suggested, to negotiate between the particular, separated element and the universal ideal requires an internalization of how the situation is thought—or, in other words, an internalization of the process by which political decisions are justified. As a gap between an emergent, singular, subjective process and a universalizing idea, crisis is located neither in the situation nor in the subject but in the process of developing and maintaining a material connection—always fragile and always under threat—between the two, in the possibility of the new as a subjective reconfiguration of a world or situation. Crisis, in this sense, remains essential for naming an impasse in the immanent processing of the link between the subtracted (singular) element and the affirmed (universalizing) Truth; it emerges in the modality—precariously teetering between strengthening or dissolving, between recovery or death—of the force with

which a subtracted or separated element turns back upon and potentially reconfigures the situation. To put it another way, crisis names the exhaustion of the concrete, emancipatory possibilities structured by an idea—a saturation not of the objective structures of an existing historical situation, but of the possibility of generating a subjective process to work through the historical situation. The present is determined not by a crisis of capitalism, but by a crisis of a new transformative understanding, including what Lenin names "The ABCs of Communism"—i.e. the idea "that the masses are divided into classes, the classes are represented by parties and the parties directed by leaders" (Badiou, Del Lucchese, and Smith).[43] Both as a "really existing" form of state organization, and as an idea that facilitates revolutionary transformation, socialism seems a saturated idea. Certainly, this is true in all cases that imagine socialism as the logical and historical outcome of the crisis of capital.

ii. Crisis of the Negative

More broadly, this understanding of crisis rests upon a crisis of the negative; a crisis in the idea, dominant from the French Revolution until near the end of the 20th century, that negation leads to some productive synthesis or the emergence of the qualitatively new. This point can be understood historically: the putatively emancipatory projects of negation (Stalin's USSR, but also Castro's Cuba) ultimately produced an increasingly barbaric repetition of the

[43] Here, Badiou's conception is problematic. Badiou's politics rests upon a conception of the masses; however, without the party, it's unclear to me how "the masses" relate to the subject, especially since it isn't the masses (even in Badiou's own examples) that carry out political transformation (unless "the masses" means only "the excessive element").

same. But there is also a connection here between logical and historical critique, as argued by the *Wertkritik* authors. As established in Chapter 2, *Wertkritik* theorists argue that the material conditions of capitalism are defined by a paradoxical development: on one hand, use value (particularly in the forms of labor and extracted resources) is required for the generation of surplus value. On the other hand, the law of operational competition necessitates a permanent increase in productivity, driving processes of rationalization and automation that either destroy use value or make it irrelevant. Hence, material sources of wealth (which appear as use value) are increasingly separated from, and subsumed by, (exchange) value. In this view, (objective historical) crises may temporarily correct systemic imbalance, but they preserve the substantive contradictions. Significantly, surplus paradox theories of crisis (centrally, Kurz and Trenkle) facilitate a rigorous understanding of the historical and logical dynamics of capitalist development. In doing so, they also critique theories (from Engels to *operaismo*) that conflate crisis with revolution, as though the crisis of capitalism and the emergence of an egalitarian society were necessarily one and the same process. To the contrary, Kurz and Trenkle, like Badiou, argue that the negation instantiated in repeated crises has produced a trajectory toward barbarism. Unlike Badiou, however, their account relegates the role of the subject to the practice of critique; capitalist crisis, it would seem, is a totalizing and purely objective process.

To locate the crisis of the negative in the subject is to situate crisis as something internal to a subjective determination of the consequences of a certain kind of contradiction—the contradiction between a world and the excess revealed by the event and named by the subject. If *Wertkritik* critically separates the crisis of capital from the actualization of a post-capitalist world, this more subjective understanding further separates the idea of crisis from the objective

and apparently transhistorical nature of capitalist crisis. In doing so, it reintroduces transformative dimensions—i.e. those outlined in Chapter 1—that have been appropriated by official state discourse. Perhaps most importantly, it reintroduces the process of *decision*: in relation to the event, crisis becomes, once again, the moment "in which a decision is due but has not yet been rendered" (Koselleck, "Crisis" 361). As such, an evental understanding of crisis subjectivizes crisis (against the teleology and historical necessity embedded in Marxist conceptions of crisis) without crisis to a generalized state or affirming the pure will (against the "affirmative" philosophies embedded in "radical left" theories—particularly post-Deleuze).

iii. Crisis of Dialectics

The third dimension suggests that the crisis of the negative constitutes a "crisis of dialectics in the Hegelian sense" (Van Houdt and Badiou 1)—the sense, that is, in which "the negation of the negation produces a new affirmation" (Badiou, Del Lucchese, and Smith). As suggested, following the affirmation that the one is always already a multiple, Badiou argues that dialectical scission is not a contradiction between something and something else (A and B) but the separation of these contradictory elements (A/B) and that which is excluded by the dichotomy (the remainder). As I argued in Chapters 1 and 3, the logic of crisis is generally defined by temporalities of historical judgment in which the present is mediated through a projected future. In more concrete terms, during a crisis, we are conditioned to respond in a way that a future perspective—the post-crisis moment, often anthropomorphized as "our children's children"—would deem virtuous or good. This futural projection introduces a normative element that inherently privileges the existing hierarchies of power. By placing the logic of crisis

squarely in the present, Badiou facilitates a reconfiguration of that logic in a way that refuses the normative and situationally reproductive dimensions of crisis.

Here, then, is a decisive point: Badiou challenges a form of the Hegelian dialectic—the one in which the owl of Minerva takes flight only at dusk, in which the truth of a situation is embodied in its future resolution. This is in part a matter of temporality: a politics based on the interiority of the decision is a politics of the present. Following Sylvain Lazarus, Badiou writes that "a political sequence should be identified and thought on its own terms, as a homogeneous singularity, *and not in terms of the heterogeneous nature of its empirical future*" (Badiou, *Metapolitics* 127, emphasis added).[44] Such a politics may be grounded on a prescriptive notion of the revolution to come (i.e. the subject may develop out of an axiomatic assertion in the future perfect tense: this will have been revolutionary). But this "to come" is entirely grounded in the present, not in its futural outcome.[45] As Badiou writes:

> every political decision tears itself away from any dialectic of the subjective and the objective. No, it is not a matter of leading to action a consciousness of what there is, of changing, through reflection and operation, necessity into liberty. There is no passage here from the in-itself to the for-itself. The beginning, under its evental injunction, is pure declaration. (Qtd in Hallward, "The Politics of Prescription" 772).

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[44] It is worth noting that, unlike *Theory of the Subject*, which aims to preserve significant elements (as well as the language) of the Hegelian dialectic (as noted in the previous section), *Metapolitics* was written during Badiou's most explicitly *anti*-dialectical period.

[45] The following Chapter contains a more in-depth analysis of the temporal nature of a subtractive politics.

This conception gives logical and historical priority to the present (which will have been a revolutionary moment) over and against the future (based on a utopic/dystopic projection of the future). In other words, the internalization and subjectivization of crisis not only tears the logic of crisis from transhistorical and teleological dimensions, it also separates that logic from its normativization of the subject.

Conclusion

If Badiou is to be utilized as a turning point in this shift in the relation between crisis and politics, it is necessary to examine a significant and widespread error: the fetishization, by supporters and critics alike, of Badiou's notion of the Event, and the tendency to collapse truth and event. Implicit in what I've developed herein is an insistence, following the work of Bruno Bosteels, that Badiou's most well-known concept (the Event) and his most prominent work, *Being and Event,* must be understood in relation to a broader trajectory. This means, as outlined in the introduction to this chapter, conceiving of Badiou's work as a series of ruptures that break with—but ultimately return to and transform—its key concepts, particularly those developed in *Theory of the Subject*. Most significantly, Badiou is not, first and foremost, a thinker of the event but a thinker of the situation, even if the truth of the situation is not derivable from a critical analysis thereof. Moreover, unlike *Being and Event*, Badiou's more recent work explicitly recognizes the need for analyses of existing situations, and affirms a turn toward the historicity of post-evental situations as well as to the various forms of social and historical relationality that emerge therein. Certainly, the hypothesis of the Event as a radical and absolute occurrence remains essential to Badiou's understanding of politics, as does the separation of any immediate connection between knowledge about and the transformation of a situation. However, Badiou's

philosophy is, in his own words, finally about "the situational unfolding of the event, and not the transcendence or the entrenchment of the event itself" (Bosteels, "Can Change Be Thought?" 242).

In the same vein, it is necessary to resist readings that conflate the Event with Truth itself and, in doing so, undermine the dialectical and materialist elements of Badiou's work. This is particularly significant in addressing the skepticism, expressed most cogently by Marxist thinkers like Daniel Bensaïd,[46] over the apparently miraculous and transcendental nature of the Event's emergence. If Badiou's conception of the Event is coterminous with Truth, then, in terms of the history of the concept of crisis, Badiou's philosophy is indeed a return to theological interpretive possibilities—to a politics of transcendental, apocalyptic expectation. Thus, we must maintain a distinction between truth and event: "Truth is what unfolds as a system of consequences, *secured by an unheard-of figure of the subject* as consequence of the rupture of the event" (Bosteels, "Can Change Be Thought?" 252). Political truth is not the Event itself but the process of unfolding the consequences thereof. Thus, the most pressing political questions do not depend on the origins of the Event, but on the material procedures by which the truth is subjectively actualized.

There is, moreover, a degree of irony in the charge that Badiou's notion of the event is theological in nature. Conceptions of historical transformation—*especially* those affirming the "terminal crisis" of capital—are both conceptually and historically linked to the Christian notions of end times and judgment. Yet, whereas Badiou explicitly theorizes the event as a link between

[46] See, for example, "Alain Badiou and the Miracle of the Event" (Bensaid, 2004).

the concrete actualization of a truth and its universality validity, Marxist theories of crisis have tended to repress the ways in which crisis carries out this same function. In such conceptions, "crisis" is itself the concept that—positioned beyond critique—unifies disparities between critical methodology and political meaning. As with any other count, if it is to appear consistent the critique of political economy must repress its unifying process (its count as one): crisis thus becomes the master signifier that organizes critical politico-economic understanding without maintaining meaning *per se*.

This does not resolve the issue entirely. It remains essential that we ask whether Badiou's philosophy provides the tools for mediating the spheres of economy and politics—and, in particular, for mediating between the subject and the (still very real) upheavals that emerge in the wake of economic crisis: this will be the focus of the following chapter.

Still, by insisting upon the material nature of the subject and the processual nature of Truth, a subtractive logic frames a recovery of objective historical contingency and subjective decision—the elements that tied crisis to revolution. If communism is, in the Nietzschean sense, dead, rather than comfort itself with the coming "crisis of capital" and its derivatives, the way forward would involve subjectivizing crisis. In Nietzsche's words, to become not more human, but dynamite.

5. Toward a Materialist Basis for the Subject of Crisis: Marx, Lacan, Badiou

Worldlessness names the situation in which all points of reference—established ideas, beliefs, values, and landmarks that orient experience—are absent or constantly undermined. We might imagine (to borrow Fredric Jameson's metaphor) a mental map of a city: our understanding of a city is organized as a series of spatial relations. Generally, the map is organized around a set of key points—the most visible or familiar landmarks, the location of which remain clear in our minds, no matter where in the city we are. Providing an overarching sense of the city, these landmarks frame an understanding of secondary points—familiar places to which we can navigate based on primary points. These stable points organize a map of the whole; through our map of familiar places, we can map and navigate to places that we may not have visited—the café five blocks south of my home, the pub located halfway between the university and the downtown plaza, etc. What defines the fully "postmodern" city is not only the absence of visible landmarks, but a constantly shifting and transforming landscape. Shopping no longer takes place only in malls but in pop-up shops and online stores; production is dispersed from factories to piece-meal maquileras and so many Etsy "shops"; sport moves from weekend soccer matches at

a designated stadium to Xbox tournaments held online and joined from anywhere with an internet connection. Worldlessness is the situation in which the absence of "landmarks" pertains to all aspects of experience—the city-spaces we inhabit, but also the symbolic worlds within which meaning, identity, decision and affirmation are possible. What is lost is the possibility of *shared or collective* landmarks.

The decades of theory that have attempted to organize and generalize such developments in terms of a new "postmodern" world—defined by the triumph of the virtual, the new creative economy, and so on—largely miss the point: that such developments are further effects of processes—atomization, accumulation, exploitation—that have defined capitalism for the past two centuries. Indeed, as Alain Badiou argues, the contemporary situation is largely the same as the one foreseen and described by Marx (Badiou, *Rebirth of History* 15). The contemporary situation does, however, constitute an unprecedented stage in the processes of atomization, accumulation and exploitation. In *Logics of Worlds*, Badiou describes this process in terms of "points": whereas previous historical situations or worlds were defined and stabilized by established and institutionalized points of reference (such as the Christian Worldview and the social hierarchy maintained thereby), such points have either been wiped away or are constantly re-organized, leading to a predominance of what Badiou calls the "atonic" or "atonal" world.

The previous chapter began with the assertion that modernity is a negative reality defined by the destruction of subjective positions. This chapter asks: what happens once the destructive reality exists not only as a process but as a generalized and internalized state of the situation? I argue that contemporary capitalism is defined by worldlessness, which challenges contemporary conceptions of crisis and historical rupture by further internalizing the "creative destruction"

inherent to capital. In pursuing this argument, I'm interested in the relation and distinctions among Lacan, Marx, and Badiou—as well as thinkers like Slavoj Žižek and Fabio Vighi who attempt to merge these three positions. Against the backdrop of worldlessness, I show that these thinkers hold in common a tripartite conception of historical transformation, defined by three concepts: non-coincidence, crisis and subject. By analyzing the way in which each of these positions—Marxist critique, Lacanian analysis, and Badiouian ontology—conceives of and organizes each of these terms—non-coincidence, crisis, and subject—I show how these three positions establish (and are limited by) their materialist conceptions of historical change.

1. Worldlessness

In theoretical terms, the basic premises of worldlessness are perhaps clearest in the language of Lacan's psychoanalysis.[47] Following Ferdinand de Saussure, Lacan argues that signifiers are not discreet units that correspond in any direct or natural way to objects in the world. Rather, "only signifier-to-signifier correlations provide the standard for any and every search for signification" (Lacan, "Instance of the Letter" 415). Signifiers take on meaning through negative, differential relations to other signifiers. In any structure of signification (the English language, for example), there is no natural relation between signifier and signified (between say, the word 'cat' and the

[47] Writes Badiou: "Like Hegel for Marx, Lacan for us is essential and divisible. The primacy of the structure, which makes of the symbolic the general algebra of the subject ... is countered ever more clearly with a topological obsession in which what moves and progresses pertains to the primacy of the real" (Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* 133).

specific set of qualities constituting its corresponding category, or a particular instance of that category); rather, the signifier designates the signified insofar as it is differentiated from other signifiers (the word 'cat' means 'not-dog' + 'not-mouse' + 'not-rabbit' + …). Therefore, meaning is never present in any signifier, it is always metonymically deferred elsewhere (Lacan, *The Psychoses* 268). This instability is compounded by the implication that, if the apparent stability of the symbolic world cannot be verified (because meaning is always deferred), there is reason to doubt that materiality has an inherent order. Thus, a scientific perspective (i.e. one that strips away unverifiable assumptions) would begin from the position of instability, or in Badiou's words from the assertion that "the one is not" (see previous chapter). In short, it cannot be demonstrated that signifier and signified are defined by an essential nature, only that they function through their multiple differential relations; i.e. their horizontal relations (signifier-to-signifier and signified-to-signified) and vertical relations (signifier-to-signified).

Even so, it must be acknowledged that signification constitutes a *practical* stability—after all, the world generally appears as, and can be signified as, a coherent whole. For Lacan, what makes signification (and the represented material sphere) practically knowable and navigable are key points that halt the infinite deferral from one signifier to another. Such points—which Lacan calls "quilting points" or later "Master-Signifiers"—are contingent, yet they structure (beyond language) the socially constituted material world: "[e]verything radiates out from and is organized around this signifier" (Lacan, *The Psychoses* 268). Though contingent, the Master-Signifier founds the situation so as to institute its own necessity. As Žižek writes: "the Master-Signifier designates the point at which contingency intervenes in the very heart of

necessity: the very establishment of necessity is the result of a contingent act" (Žižek, *Less Than Nothing* 424).

For example, in the socio-political situation of the West "human rights" are considered essential and inalienable. Inscribed as law, human rights "quilt" the symbolic structures of "rights" (understood as universal and natural law) to the material reality of the "human" (understood in terms of individual, embodied consciousness). While human rights appear as a *post facto* link between two naturally existing things—embodied individuals and universal rights—this linking-together in fact *constitutes* both in specific ways. Moreover, the constitution of both "human" and "rights" organizes the broader situation (including, for example, by representing the global socio-political situation in terms of a universal count of individuals) such that the initial constitution *appears* entirely natural and even necessary. This means, of course, that the institution of a new Master-Signifier potentially realigns the way signification maps onto the real of the material world; this, in turn, would change the structure of experience, determining anew what kinds of perceptions, significations and actions make sense, that would metaphorically quilt or tie down structures of presentation to material reality.

In this sense, common understandings of crisis—those found in the media and everyday language, from a personal crisis to the crisis of democracy—can be understood as the failure of a Master-Signifier to order its field of signification. For example, one experiences personal loss as crisis insofar as a previously-grounding signifier (spouse, parent, pet, and so on) no longer organizes the world. This leaves one to wander aimlessly from one meaningless context to the next. Representations of political-economic crises are structurally analogous. When a grounding figure or principle (the rule of law, a state leader, a particular commodity) no longer holds sway

over a situation, a crisis emerges. We can see for example that an "oil crisis" has little to do with a shortage of energy (though that may be the most immediately perceivable effect) and everything to do with the destabilization of a socio-economic system based on a Master-Signifier—fossil fuels—that constitutes both the field of signification and our perception of reality. In general terms, the collapse of a Master-Signifier leads to a re-establishment of the lost signifier, replacement with a new Master-Signifier, or in some cases a failure to do either resulting in fixation on the loss itself (i.e. the condition Freud names melancholia). What happens, however, when the disappearance of such a quilting point is not a single occurrence but a process generalized across situations?

I suggested in the previous chapter that modernity is a negative reality, defined by the destruction not only of subjective positions, but also of stabilizing structures. As Žižek suggests, the "postmodern" names a situation in which the basic stabilizing points are, if not eradicated, permanently destabilized. "The basic feature of our 'postmodern' world," he writes, "is that it tries to dispense with the agency of the Master-Signifier" (Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* 30). Our world is defined by the loss of "points" that ground, orient, and "count as one" a set of things, thus defining them as a world. Our situation is, in short, defined by the absence of worlds. This situation of worldlessness results primarily from the expansion and intensification of capital, and from the subjective crisis described in the previous chapter. On one hand, the widening gyre of capital has a totalizing effect. As Etienne Balibar argues, global capital constructs an increasing degree of interdependency between institutions, groups and individuals, but also, more importantly, between the "various processes which involve institutions, groups and individuals" (Balibar 147). Writes Marx:

> The more developed the capital, therefore, the more extensive the market over which it circulates, which forms the spatial orbit of its circulation, the more does it strive simultaneously for an ever greater extension of the market and for the annihilation of space by time… There appears here the universalizing tendency of capital, which distinguishes it from all previous stages of production. (Marx, *Grundrisse* 539–40).

As a system of economic circulation, globalized capitalism constitutes a universalizing tendency. All forms of value are reduced to exchange value, and exchange value (even outside normative and legal boundaries of exchange) is determined by capital.

However, this universalizing tendency is not synonymous with or generative of a social and symbolic totality. In the post-war era, and particularly since the fall of Sovietism, a pervasive liberal ideology promised that the spread of free market capital would bring about so-called Western democracy with all its glorified and supposedly natural characteristics: social equality, the eradication of poverty, a global community, and a significant increase in global wealth. Today, even the fiercest free-market ideologues have mostly abandoned these promises; structural adjustment aimed at the continuation of capital requires no external, unifying promise. Indeed, the failure of the liberal promise seems to have revealed, as Žižek has compellingly argued, that capitalism is

> the first socio-economic order which de-totalizes meaning: there is no global "capitalist worldview," no "capitalist civilization" proper: the fundamental lesson of globalization is precisely that capitalism can accommodate itself to all civilizations…Capitalism's global dimension can only be formulated at the level of truth-without-meaning, as the "real" of the global market mechanism…right now we already live less and less within what can be called a world. (Žižek, *Living in the End Times* 365)[48]

[48] Elsewhere Žižek explains this idea in terms of "capitalism with Asian values": China's "version of authoritarian capitalism is not merely a remainder of our past—a repetition of the process of capitalist accumulation ….—but a sign of the future" (Žižek, *First As Tragedy, Then*

In short, it is now evident that the liberal dream of a global village was actualized—but it was actualized inside out: today capitalism constitutes a universal form of exchange, but one that is defined by the *absence* or inversion of any corresponding world. Put another way, the adaptability of capital is paired with the process, unique to capitalism as a political-economic system, of internalizing all forms of difference.[49] In previous historical situations, structures are established and maintained through foundational exclusions. The meaning of a situation—for example, of "English" or "American"—was negatively defined in terms of ethnic or national identity (historically, as not Russian, not Jewish, not gypsy, not slave, not Latino, and so on), by gender, and by economic class (through clearly defined geographical flows from an exploited, external [post]colony to economic centres). In short, excluded parts were explicitly separated from the set. In the situation of late capitalism, however, such "excluded" parts are increasingly *internalized* as isolated and individuated elements. This is why, as Endnotes explains, the breakdown of "the machinery of accumulation" has not produced a revolutionary proletarian subject: "The market is the material human community. It unites us, but only in separation…If

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As Farce 131). The point is that capitalism doesn't need democracy; indeed, anti-democratic governance may be more effective for capitalist expansion.

[49] For Deleuze, who describes the effect as a transition from disciplinary societies to societies of control, it leads to "generalized crisis": "We are in a generalized crisis in relation to all the environments of enclosure—prison, hospital, factory, school, family. The family is an 'interior,' in crisis like all the other interiors—scholarly, professional, etc. The administrations in charge never cease announcing supposedly necessary reforms… But everyone knows that these institutions are finished, whatever the length of their expiration periods. It's only a matter of administering their last rites and of keeping people employed until the installation of the new forces knocking at the door. These are the *societies of control*, which are in the process of replacing the disciplinary societies" (Deleuze 3).

the world's workers stopped working—turning their attention instead to routing the capitalists and their goons—they would not find at their disposal a ready-made mode of social organization… Instead, they would be thrown into a social void, within which it would be necessary to construct human relations anew" (Endnotes, "Unity in Separation" 160–61).

Take for example the ways in which, in the wake of the 2007-08 crisis, proponents of neoliberal policy adopted and adapted the language of inclusion, rights, equality, etc. Regarding the crisis in Haiti, in 2012 Jim Yong Kim (then President of the World Bank) argued the need for more state intervention into the economy, stating that he:

> made it very clear to [the Haitian government] that the evidence from the rest of Latin America is that their path to growth has to include many, many more people. It has to open access to the market, to education and to health services to a much broader sector of society. That is not because equality is good and inequality is bad; it is because that is the path to growth. (quoted in Watts)

The rhetoric is symptomatic: state intervention is required to create greater equality; yet, the imperative has nothing to do with the *meaning* of equality ("good" or "bad"), only with the putatively objective category, "growth." The underlying argument is that, while free market capitalism has failed on its Liberal promise to bring about democracy, the basic assumption (the value of "growth") remains an objective and unquestionable fact. In other words, the poor (herein, "many, many more people") must be included by the situation ("the path to growth") through the reduction of inequality. But, in this conception, equality and inclusion have no intrinsic value—they are wholly subsumed under the rubric of "growth."

In more general terms, racist, gendered and classist logics of exclusion, exploitation and violence still structure socio-economic situations. But they are constantly restructured in relation to the broader logics of accumulation which internalize violence and exploitation. For example,

current research on race and the American prison system demonstrates that historical developments—particularly from Jim Crow to the contemporary prison industrial complex—transform racist exploitation, rather than abolishing it. As Michelle Alexander writes:

> In the era of colorblindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt. So we don't. Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color "criminals" and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind. (Alexander 2)

Historically, racialized subjects were excluded (i.e. from becoming citizens, from attending white schools, from waged labour, and so on). Today, the exclusion is internalized—in this example, quite literally: the set called "US Citizens" officially includes black citizens but, through the criminalization of these citizens, they are included *as* exclusions. Or, in Badiou's language, they belong to the situation but are not included within it. The same logic is at work in the new reactionary discourses on inclusion. For example, responding to Black Lives Matter, the most insidious forces do not counter that Black Lives don't matter (which would be explicit exclusion, amounting to hate speech), but rather that "All Lives Matter." Similarly, new forms of misogyny don't claim that women shouldn't have rights, but that women's and LGBT rights are overinflated and now infringe upon men's rights. While the effects are the same—Black Americans are confined and exploited, women and LGBT do not count as full members—the logic works on an internalized and self-transforming system.

The supposed inclusivity is not merely rhetorical, nor is it particular to explicitly reactionary politics. It is illustrative of the logic of neoliberal capitalism and multiculturalist ideology. As Žižek writes, "just as global capitalism involves the paradox of colonization without the colonizing nation-state metropolis, multiculturalism involves a patronizing

Eurocentrist distance and/or respect for local cultures without roots in one's own particular culture" (Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* 216). By emptying out one's own (ethnic, cultural, and economic) position, the multiculturalist positions himself in the "privileged empty point of universality," the apparent objectivity of which allows him to "appreciate (and depreciate) other particular cultures properly"; thus, "multiculturalist respect for the Other's specificity is the very form of asserting one's own superiority" (Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* 216).

In a "worldless" situation the functioning of ideology no longer requires the interpellation of individuals into determinate subject positions; modernity is a negative reality defined by the eradication of society as a structure that interpolates subjects into predefined placements (i.e. on the basis of social formations like family, occupation, class, etc.). This allows us to recognize that the predominant, pre-crisis (1946-2007) liberalism is not an endpoint, but a process of transition. This international liberalism prioritizes institutions—largely founded upon the idea of inherent human rights—that are posited as universal and objective. When this internalization fails—when, for example, ethnic, racial or gender differences threaten economic growth—the police violently restore order. This logic is explicitly stated by the World Bank. Under the heading "Social Capital and Ethnicity," its website states: "Ethnicity can be a powerful tool in the creation of human and social capital, but, *if politicized, ethnicity can destroy capital*…Social cohesion is less of a challenge when the populace shares similar heritage and belief systems…Ethnic diversity is dysfunctional when it generates conflict". In short, the social and ethical dimensions of liberal institutions are being vacated. Today it is clear that "universal" and "objective" simply mean that all decisions are ultimately based on the principle of economic growth. Moreover, this is facilitated through constant transformation. Inverting the direct, forced

exclusion of pre-capitalist society, the immanently self-revolutionizing process of late capitalism refuses the construction of quilting points, undermining and changing its own modes of exclusion and exploitation.[50]

Critique is not, in this regard, an innocent practice. Recall, from the introduction, Janet Roitman's analysis of Koselleck, which claims that in modern critical thought, "the constant quest to authenticate the supreme authority of reason transpires through the perpetual process of critique, which is based on the idea of duty toward the future and motivated by faith in the yet-to-be-discovered truth" (Roitman, "Crisis"). In postmodern situations, the restlessness of critique remains, but the socio-symbolic system—the situation of wordlessness—refuses the identification of "faith in the yet-to-be-discovered truth." The postmodern refusal of faith (which, as critics have noted, amounts to its own perverted mode of faith) collapses temporal distinctions: the future retains its hold over the present, both as judgment and (as argued in the previous chapter) as coming crisis—for example, we will have been judged for the impending ecological disaster or for the outcome of the financial crisis—but, without some stable position or truth, there is no point from which the past, present and future can be distinguished.

[50] For a concrete, historical analysis of this transformation, see my article "Subject to a New Law: Historicizing Rights and Resistance in Maya Anti-Mining Activism" (forthcoming in *Identities*). Therein, I argue that the militarization of Guatemalan society and the genocide of the country's Mayan population is reproduced (albeit in a different form) in the new logic of extractivism.

In theoretical terms, herein lies the deep-seated error of poststructuralist theory: foregrounding the oppressive nature of representation, poststructuralist theory affirms the infinite complexity of any situation and prioritizes the refusal or deconstruction of all sites and forms of signification that potentially allow for the stabilization of any representative structure—i.e. in Lacan's words, those that allow for the establishment of any Master-Signifiers. In this sense, Badiou argues, "the modern apologia for the 'complexity' of the world, invariably seasoned with praise for the democratic movement, is really nothing but a desire for generalized atony" (Badiou, *Logics of Worlds* 420). In other words, the constant "self-revolutionizing" processes that characterize the atonic world takes on a kind of imperative: not only are all subjective positions erased, all "subjects" are compelled to participate in this erasure such that "the 'complexity' of the world should be asserted unconditionally, every Master-Signifier meant to impose some order on it should be 'deconstructed,' dispersed, 'disseminated'" (Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* 30). As Oliver Feltham writes:

> The problem with poststructuralism is that exactly the same set of negative definitions [self-identical substance that underlies change, the product of reflection, the correlate of an object] serves to delimit its implicit ontology (whether of desire or difference): there are no self-identical substances, there are no stable products of reflection, and since there are no stable objects there can be no correlates of such objects. Thus, in poststructuralism there is no distinction between the general field of ontology and a theory of the subject; there is no tension between the being of the subject and being in general. (Feltham 3)

In other words, the supposedly position-less practice of poststructuralist critique undermines its own capacity to leverage any form of affirmation; at the same time, not only does it fail to achieve its aim of a truly position-less critique, the very idea of a position-less critique becomes a Master-Signifier.[51] Moreover, capital increasingly internalizes the role, formerly an essential dimension of critical thinking, of deconstructing stable signifiers and producing difference. As Brian Massumi writes:

> It's no longer disciplinary institutional power that defines everything, it's capitalism's power to produce variety – because markets get saturated. Produce variety and you produce a niche market. The oddest of affective tendencies are okay—as long as they pay. […] The capitalist logic of surplus-value production starts to take over the relational field that is also the domain of political ecology, the ethical field of resistance to identity and predictable paths. It's very troubling and confusing, because it seems to me that there's been a certain kind of convergence between the dynamic of capitalist power and the dynamic of resistance. (Massumi 224)

2. Non-coincidence, Crisis, Subject

Among the most significant effects, worldlessness and poststructuralist theory both undermine the possibility of decision. In practical terms, atonic worlds are "simply worlds which are so ramified and nuanced—or so quiescent and homogeneous—that no instance of the Two, and consequently no figure of decision, is capable of evaluating them" (Badiou, *Logics of Worlds* 420). Broadly, the generalization of crisis—the fact that, in the worldless situation, crisis is a condition rather than a moment of rupture or emergency—undermines a key element in

[51] Surely this is why, half a century on, Derrida's radical critique mostly serves forms of "identity politics" that, in the absence of self-identity, become nothing more than a cultural relativism.

conceptions of crisis from the concept's origins in ancient Greek medical theory through its modern political usage; namely, that as a determinate, critical juncture, a crisis necessitates decision. In his phenomenology of crisis, James Dodd writes:

> A crisis marks a turning point…it is the point where it is going to be decided whether the patient lives or dies. A crisis is thus dangerous and decisive at the same time… It is also an experience of necessity: a crisis is a situation where we can go no further, or carry on no longer, without a fundamental change; for better or for worse, in a crisis a decision must be made, it is a danger that must be resolved. (Dodd 44)

Certainly, as outlined in Chapter 1, this insistence on decision has its normative ideological variants. Nevertheless, the connection between crisis and decision allows us to isolate key points of convergence and divergence between conceptions of crisis, particularly: Marxist theories of crisis (based on contradiction); Lacan's conception of the real and non-coincidence; and Badiou's notion of the subject. The relation between subject, crisis and the real expounded by each of these theories depends upon how both the "experience" of, and the "decision" about, the dangerous moment are understood. More concretely, the relation and difference among these three positions are structured by three principles: non-coincidence (an ontological split or separation), crisis (the actualization of this split within a given situation), and the subject (the existence of some kernel or remainder that defies determination by the structure or situation). I argue that each theoretical field (Marxism, Lacanian analysis, and Badiouian ontology) centres on one of these three terms (Marxism on crisis, Lacan on non-coincidence, Badiou on the subject), which each uses to connect the other two. However, as I will argue, each fails to connect all three elements.

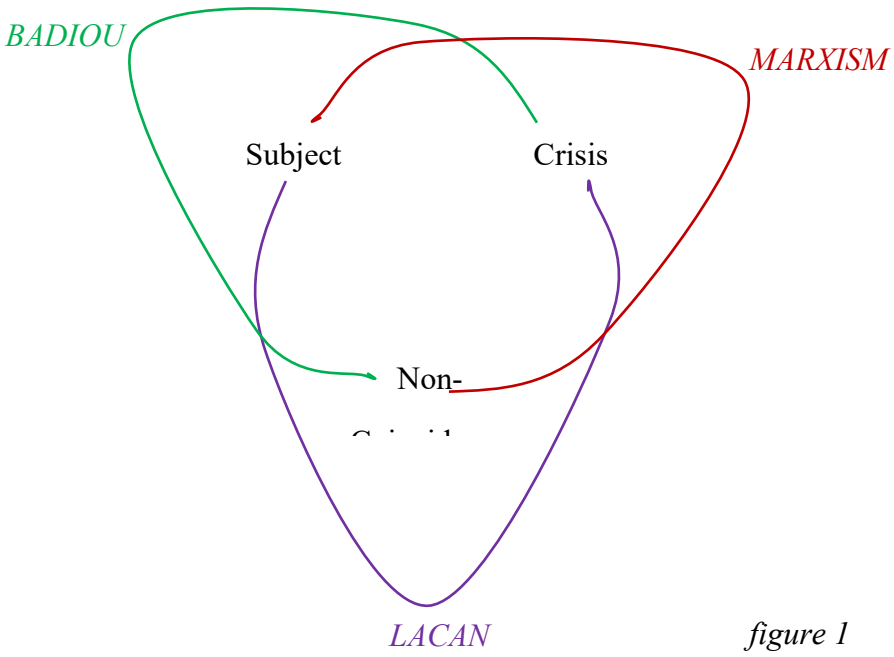

figure 1

The basic formulations, which will be the focus of the remainder of this chapter, are as follows:

i. Marxism: grounded in crisis, Marxism connects political-economic non-coincidence (the separation of use value and exchange value) to a political subject; but the historical determinism of Marxist crisis theory cannot connect non-coincidence to a subject (this is especially true since the failure of party politics).

ii. Lacan: privileging non-coincidence (subjectivity as an ontological split), the subject is linked to crisis through its existence as non-coincidence. But the subject does not relate to crisis (recall that, for Lacan, the foundational crisis, the Oedipus complex, produces the *objective* dimensions of the 'I').

iii. Badiou: situating crisis within the subject—i.e. as an impasse within the situation caused by a lack of subject—Badiou connects crisis to ontological non-coincidence (i.e. between being and event). But this seems to defer any relation between non-coincidence and crisis (as Badiou's Marxist critics have shown, Badiou's being/event distinction is entirely unrelated to economic crisis).

i. Marx

Marxist accounts foreground crisis as political-economic non-coincidence. The non-coincidence, Marx is clear, inheres in capital itself: "Capital itself is the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth" (Marx, *Grundrisse* 706). In short, the non-coincidence is the dual process that seeks to diminish or eradicate the very thing (labour time) upon which the historical system depends. This non-coincidence leads inexorably to crisis: "the forcible establishment of unity between elements ['moments'] that have become independent and the enforced separation from one another of elements which are essentially one" (Marx, "Theories of Surplus Value").

What, in this formulation, is the nature of subjective decision? This is a highly divisive question in Marxist theory.[52] For Kurz and Heinrich, who present among the most compelling contemporary Marxist theories of crisis, critique plays a key role: by de-reifying and de-naturalizing the terms of capital (including, notably, labour and value), critique makes visible the points of non-coincidence (the ways in which capitalism is irrationally split and thus crisis prone). In doing so, critique grounds an understanding of history. As *Wertkritik* affirms, the critique of value is "essentially a theory of crisis" (Trenkle 13), but it cannot serve as a positive ground for political transformation. Thus, there is a causal relation between non-coincidence and crisis (the "moving contradiction" of capital necessarily produces economic crisis), but there is *no material link between subject and non-coincidence*. This problem is compounded by the situation of worldlessness, particularly visible in the failure to establish the working class as a collective political subject. In a situation in which all stable points are constantly and immanently revolutionized, no positive principle (labour, the working class, etc.) could ground a collective subject. The result has been the development of a tendency toward economic determinism—that is, to see a historically necessary causality between the non-coincidence of capital (construed in purely economic terms) and the crisis of capitalism without any necessary or possible connection to subjective decision.

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[52] We leave behind the Hegelian versions critiqued in Chapter 3—the ones that involve "a simple term which unfolds itself in its becoming-other, in order to come back to itself as an achieved concept" (Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* 4)—i.e. the utopian teleologies in which the crisis of capital unfolds into a more egalitarian mode of production.

ii. Lacan

Where Marxism privileges crisis, Lacan privileges non-coincidence: the subject is linked to crisis through its existence as non-coincidence. For Lacan as for Freud, the basic form of crisis is the Oedipal crisis from which the ego emerges. Psychology (including Lacan's central target of critique, Anglo-American ego psychology) identifies the ego with subject. In figure 1, this would effectively close the gap between crisis and subject. However, Lacan insists that the ego is precisely *not* the subject but a conglomerate of objectified coordinates and desires, the source of which is entirely external and mediated. The Mirror Stage is key here: the ego is neither the baby nor her mirrored reflection *per se*, but rather the externalization of an identity—the Mother points to the mirror and says "look, that's you!"—which can then be bound up with any number of expectations projected upon it—"You're a good girl!", "Isn't that cake delicious?", "You're such a good artist!", and so on. The child internalizes the structure of desire, attempting to understand and anticipate the Mother's desire (in Lacan's terms, it tries to make itself the phallus of the mother's desire). That is, until the Father intervenes and thwarts the oedipal desire. At this point, the "ideal" ego no longer requires the material externality of a mirror image (or the presence of the mother) to objectively support the fiction that one is the agent of his or her own desires and is free to pursue them. Or, put differently, this external split is internalized. This is perhaps clearest in language—particularly the language through which one speaks about oneself. What does it mean, for example, to claim that "I am an honest person" or, more interestingly, "I am a liar"? The entity being spoken about—the "I" to which the characteristics belong—is the ego, the same objective entity that emerges in the mirror stage through the Other. But what is the source of the enunciation? The *subject*, as opposed to the ego, is that unconscious, enunciating

kernel of negativity that defies symbolization; while it "speaks" through the ego, the subject remains irreducibly distinct from the objective sphere of the ego. Or, more concretely, as Žižek writes subjectivity is the name "for this irreducible circularity, for a power which does not fight an external resisting force (say, the inertia of the given substantial order), but an obstacle that is absolutely inherent, which ultimately 'is' the subject itself" (Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* 159).

Lacan's theory of the split subject harkens back to and re-orients philosophical conceptions of non-coincidence. As Žižek points out, it was Kant who irreversibly (if unwittingly) drove a wedge between the subject and the real. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant summarizes the paradoxical nature of Descartes' *cogito*: "In the pure thought of myself, I am the being itself [ich bin das Wesen selbst], yet no part of this being is given to me thereby for my thought" (quoted in Žižek, "Forward" ix). As Žižek summarizes: "in the unique point of cogito as the intersection between being and thought, I lose thought as well as being: thought, because all and every content is lost; being, because all determinate objective being evaporates in the pure thought - and, for Lacan, this void is the Freudian subject of desire" (Žižek, "Forward" ix). Paradoxical by nature, self-consciousness "is possible only against the background of its own impossibility: I am conscious of myself only insofar as I am out of reach to myself qua the real kernel of my being" (Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative* 13).

Kant, however, shrinks from the more radical implications of his own discovery. As a distinction between phenomena and noumena, he came to understand this split in epistemological terms, and so as a problem of the limits of knowledge. Hegel, on the other hand, affirms that *epistemological* scissions and inconsistencies are in fact *ontological* scissions and inconsistencies in the object of knowledge (Žižek, *Less Than Nothing* 149). It is, finally, Lacan

who made this ontological gap primary and who, as Fabio Vighi argues, developed "a consistent theoretical framework where lack is presented as ontological – most eminently in his notion of the Real of jouissance – and yet not at all divorced from a dialectical understanding of the subject's relation to the world" (Vighi, "Ontology of Crisis" 4).

How does the privileging of non-coincidence organize the other terms (crisis and subject) in the formulation outlined above? In this formulation, crisis is not merely a decisive event or instance experienced by a subject. Rather, as non-coincidence, a subject is *constituted as* crisis. More specifically, as figure 1 shows, the *subject* is nothing but the critical and irresolvable distinction (the *non-coincidence*) between the subject and its placement (necessarily in *crisis*) as ego within the symbolic system. In this sense, as Vighi notes: "Crisis is not only immanent to the human condition, but, precisely because ontological – that is, rooted in being – it is humanity's condition of possibility" (Vighi, "Ontology of Crisis" 7).

Here Lacan echoes Marx's claim, analyzed in Chapter 2, that crisis is not an accidental characteristic of capitalism, but part of its internal dynamic. Indeed, for Lacan, there is a homology between Marx and Freud: each succeeds in inventing a discourse that exposes a hidden, crisis-prone, generative logic. Neither "discovers" a new object; rather, each invents a method through which a previously unformulatable object is presented for analysis (see "Chapter 1," Tomsic). As Žižek states, there is a "fundamental homology" between Freud's and Marx's interpretive procedures with the content of analysis; there is not "secret meaning" to the dream or "hidden kernel" in the commodity (Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* 3). Rather, they analyze the processes through which content is transformed, to understand how and why content

takes a particular form (how and why, for example, the social existence of value takes the commodity form).[53]

For Lacan, this homology is given further specificity in the notion of surplus which, he concedes, is invented by Marx. For Marx, capital is driven by surplus value: essentially, the "extra" value produced when labour continues beyond the socially necessary labour time needed to cover production costs. Rather than benefitting the labourer who produces it, this surplus belongs to the Other—to the capitalist and, so long as it is reinvested in production, to capital in general. Hence, surplus value is both the alienation of the laborer and the drive behind the system that enslaves labor. For Lacan, this is homologous to the basic mechanism of the more primordial drive, surplus *jouissance*. The realization of *jouissance* is defined by excess *and* lack: its excess results from having gone beyond the calculable and rational to get what one wants; a lack results from the fact that the actual enjoyment falls short of the expected enjoyment (or produces pain). In this gap or lack, moreover, the structure reasserts itself. As Lacan writes:

> "That's not it" is the very cry by which the jouissance obtained is distinguished from the jouissance expected... Structure, which connects up here, demonstrates nothing if not that it is of the same text as jouissance, insofar as, in marking by what distance jouissance misses—the jouissance that would be in question if "that were it"—structure does not presuppose merely the

[53] For Lacan, this homology affirms the inseparability of materialist and logical analysis: the invention of a logical discourse is, at the same time, the generation of a new object of analysis.

> jouissance that would be it, it also props up another. (Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality* 111–112)

In short, for both the subject and the Other the overarching structure of *jouissance* obtains because the subject *doesn't* get what it professes to want, and because its surplus alienates the subject and is always absorbed by the Other. Homologous to surplus value, there is always a remainder; and it is the remainder—not the structurally opposed terms (A/B)—that grounds the dialectic of desire, "reinvesting" it by propping up the next desire (which, in a never-ending metonymical chain, appears as the thing that will finally satisfy the subject's desire).

Like value, the material foundation of *jouissance* is a dialectical relation: it depends upon the generation of surplus that is actualized only insofar as the alienated subject reproduces the conditions of its own alienation. In both, however, the relational foundation is not merely productive but also reproductive. The desiring subject—if it *could* fully realize its expected *jouissance*—would be released from the constant tension of desiring and dissatisfaction that drives the libidinal economy. But this would amount to a psychical death. The key, then, is not to deny the structure of desire, but to will an alternative symptom.

And here, for thinkers like Vighi, Lacan provides key insights into social revolution. As Vighi writes:

> if the declared object of the capitalist drive is the realization of surplus-value into profits, which are then reinvested into the economy (capital accumulation), its aim is surplus-enjoyment, that is to say the infinite repetition of the movement (pressure) that brings satisfaction in the paradoxical form of a specific type of dissatisfaction – that of never realizing enough surplus-value. (Vighi, "Capitalist Bulimia: Lacan on Marx and Crisis" 427)

However, a question emerges: who or what is "never realizing enough surplus value"? For Vighi it does not seem to matter. He continues:

> As with the smoker, the gambler, the drug-addict or, as we shall see, the bulimic, the capitalist's accumulation-related enjoyment is always partial, or else it coincides with the constant, compulsive deferral of full and complete satisfaction. Capital, in other words, coincides with its own movement of expansion. (Vighi, "Capitalist Bulimia: Lacan on Marx and Crisis" 427)

Vighi's metaphor is confused. Who is the subject and the Other? The capitalist? The labourer? Or is capital itself the subject? A similar ambiguity emerges when Lacan critiques Marx for conceptualizing surplus within the framework of capitalism: "If…[Marx] hadn't computed this surplus *jouissance*, if he hadn't converted it into surplus-value, in other words if he hadn't founded capitalism, Marx would have realized that surplus-value is surplus *jouissance*" (quoted in Vighi, "Capitalist Bulimia: Lacan on Marx and Crisis" 421). What appears as a limitation in Lacan's formulation, however, is simply the fact that Marx's conception of surplus value has a material historicity. Moreover, as argued in Chapter 2, the labour that grounds surplus value is not a transhistorical or universal activity, but a category that emerges alongside the historical emergence of capitalism. Generalizing the mechanism of surplus, Lacan aims to uncover the full extent of Marx's discovery; instead, his reading simply erases of the historicity of surplus. The difference is clarified by the terms in *figure 1*: for Lacan crisis and subject relate as a non-coincidence (i.e. of subject and Other, of the gap within the self as other) that, however diverse its potential expressions, is the basic, unchanging condition of human existence. For Marx, subject and non-coincidence relate as crisis—as a contradictory relation determined by a specific set of historical conditions particular to a mode of production; and, moreover, one defined by the fundamental transformation of those conditions.

This difference is elided by Vighi's claim that Lacan's reading shows a way out of the current economic crisis: "it means having the courage to leave behind the increasingly obsolete logic of capitalist valorization, to which we perversely continue to sacrifice our energy despite its growing and irreversible sterility. It means, in short, inventing a new symptom around which to construct a new theory and practice of sociality" (Vighi, "Capitalist Bulimia: Lacan on Marx and Crisis" 431). The simplicity of this formulation is appealing, but it also raises doubts. In psychoanalytic discourse, the desire to transform the structure only recreates it (or, in Lacan's words, leads to the creation of a new master, a new figure to which one's surplus *jouissance* is lost). Marxism, on the other hand, is grounded in crisis; as something inherent to the social *structure*, surplus value constitutes the inescapable (and yet fundamentally unstable) core of the system. Thus, the inevitably crisis-prone nature of capitalism necessitates the transformation of the surplus dynamic (not its transference to a new symptom). To put it in more familiar terms, for Lacan the point is not to change the world but to (re)interpret it; for Marx, though, the point is not to interpret the world but to change it.

For his part, Žižek negotiates this tension by returning to Hegel's notion of the "automatically" deployed system:

> The subject is thus, at its most radical, not the agent of the process: the agent is the System (of knowledge) itself, which 'automatically' deploys itself without any need for external pushes or impetuses. However, this utter passivity simultaneously involves the greatest activity: it takes the most strenuous effort for the subject to erase itself in its particular content, as the agent intervening in the object, and to expose itself as a neutral medium, the site of the System's self-deployment. (Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* xv–xvi)

The supposedly transformative nature of this "utter passivity" is the key difference between Žižek's theory of politics and Badiou's. It makes clear that, from Žižek's perspective—and from

the Lacanian perspective in general—there can be no positive affirmation. To put it in our own terms, there is no relation between crisis and subject, only a mediation through non-coincidence. Historical crisis, in this view, is "automatically" deployed; and the subject, rather than acting upon the crisis, insists upon the fundamental non-coincidence on which it is constituted.

iii. Badiou

As developed in the previous chapter, an evental understanding of crisis situates the crisis within the subject—i.e. as an impasse within the situation caused by a lack of subject. In his simplest conception, Badiou describes the subject as "a relation between an event and the world," which we might translate as the universal (truth of the event) to the particular (historically specific) context of truth's occurrence. This subject relation "is exactly what happens when as the consequence of an event in a world we have a creation, a new process, the event of something" (Badiou, "The Subject of Art"). However, Badiou continues, "the subjective relation between an event and the world cannot be a direct relation. Why? Because an event disappears on one side, and on the other side we never have a relation with the totality of the world" (Badiou, "The Subject of Art" n.p.). More specifically, the subject is a relation between a "trace" and a "body":

> I call trace 'what subsists in the world when the event disappears.' It's something of the event, but not the event as such; it is the trace, a mark, a symptom. And on the other side, the support of the subject—the reality of the subject in the world—I call 'a new body.' So we can say that the subject is always a new relation between a trace and a body. (Badiou, "The Subject of Art")

In this formulation, crisis is the blockage or absence of bodies and traces. In other words, crisis inheres not in the situation itself but in its connection to non-coincidence, vis-a-vis the inactuality of a subject (as the absence of an Idea-process that could connect event to world).

To use one of Badiou's central examples, Christ (and the void Christ, the empty tomb that negatively signifies resurrection) is neither the truth nor the subject of Christianity, but merely a trace.[54] Rather, the subject is Paul who, through fidelity, constructs a link between a "trace" (the absent mark of a past event, the resurrection) and the "body" (the Church as, in Paul's own words, the "body of Christ").[55] This exemplifies, moreover, the internalization of the logic of crisis described in the previous chapter. In itself, the figure of Christ constitutes a potential rupture or non-coincidence within its objective situation; this might be understood as a crisis of legitimacy in the political situation (the Roman state) and the religious situation (Pharisee-led religiosity) in which it emerges. In this sense, the crucifixion is necessary to re-establish order. The real (and really transformative) crisis, however, is not the objective crisis (of state and religion) but the one internal to the process of subjectivization; that is, to the crisis that emerges from the facts that (a.) Paul, who had no direct relation to Christ or to the resurrection, was compelled to demonstrate that the Christ-truth was "of" the world; and (b.), that no logic or idea existed in the present through which such a demonstration could be made. For Paul, then, overcoming the crisis required the invention of the idea of universal truth (i.e. of universal salvation, which anyone might interrogate through a relation of fidelity). To return to our three terms, an evental theory of crisis posits:

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[54] Or, an apparent trace. For Badiou, Christianity is not, in the end, a Truth, even if it provides the most universal coordinates for understanding truth

[55] As Žižek writes: "any idiot can bring about simple stupid miracles like walking on water or making food fall down from heaven–the true miracle, as Hegel put it, is that of the universal thought, and it took St Paul to perform it, that is, to translate the idiosyncratic Christ-Event into the form of universal thought" (Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* 158).

- The subject as the process that links being and event, trace and body, and non-coincidence and crisis, by showing that one belongs to the other;
- Non-coincidence as the space between being and event, or trace and body;
- Crisis as the subjective impasse in which there is no relation between a non-coincidence and a subject.

Unlike Marxist conceptions, Badiou's conception maintains a direct relation between subject and crisis: as in Marx, non-coincidence is actualized as a crisis that transforms the situation. But, whereas in a Marxian theory of crisis this actualization is purely objective (if not entirely deterministic), in an evental theory of crisis, non-coincidence is actualized as crisis through a subjectivizing process carried out in the name of a truth. This is why, however ironic it might seem, Badiou's explicitly Christian-influenced conception of truth undermines the teleological and eschatological dimensions of Marxist crisis theory—particularly those that posit that the objective actualization of non-coincidence (the contradictory movement of capital) is expressed as a crisis (the crisis of capital) that, in itself, brings about the end of capitalism.

Unlike Lacanian conceptions, on the other hand, an evental conception of crisis maintains a relation between subject and crisis. Centered on non-coincidence—on an ontological gap—Lacan must insist upon negation. While Badiou shares Lacan's notion of ontological non-coincidence, his materialism is centred on a notion of the subject that emerges through affirmation. This is, as Žižek notes, the key difference between Badiou and Lacan:

> Lacan insists on the primacy of the (negative) act over the (positive) establishment of a 'new harmony' via the intervention of some new Master-Signifier; while for Badiou, the different facets of negativity (ethical

> catastrophes) are reduced to so many versions of the 'betrayal' of (or infidelity to, or denial of) the positive Truth-Event. (Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* 159)

To return to figure 1, Badiou's conception of rupture leaves us with the problem of relating crisis and non-coincidence. Indeed, this is at the core of the oft-repeated Marxist critique of Badiou—that he overlooks the relevance of economy; the critique is not entirely unfounded. Unlike a Marxist account of crisis, Badiou's ontology cannot account for how the internal contradiction of capital (i.e. non-coincidence in terms of the separation of use value and exchange value) produces a crisis within capitalism. Conceiving of crisis as a subjective mechanism, Badiou's theory creates space for an understanding of political will, but the crisis itself seems to emerge in miraculous relation to the event. Moreover, those moments when Badiou attempts to address this critique, he has offered relatively simplistic analyses of capitalism—as, for example, in *The Rebirth of History*, a book that develops several key insights, but also conjures a caricature of capital.

To respond, we must return to the temporality of the event. One key difference between Lacanian theories of non-coincidence, Marxist theories of crisis, and Badiou's theory of the event is that, unlike the first two, Badiou separates the generic procedures through which Truth is constituted from critique, analysis, and philosophy. As we have seen, Lacan privileges the negative. And, insofar as critique itself constitutes the practice that engages (and breaks down) "discourse" and "reification," it does indeed seem that negation is primary. But again, and this is a central point for Badiou's political thought, critique is not immediately connected to politics, nor is philosophy the guide to political Truth. Rather, Badiou reconfigures the relation between history and the critical, dangerous decision—both in terms of temporality and in terms of the relation between thought and politics.

As I have already shown, crises tend to be understood in linear time: a crisis necessitates a decision, which is arrived through a forward projection that is based on analysis of the present situation. In this sense, both the crisis and the decision *take place in time*. However, as I've argued in Chapter 1, the modern conception of crisis initially emerged as a way of expressing and constituting the *neue Zeit*—a new time of history that is self-grounding, a temporal rupture that can designate its own historical newness in relation to the past. This "new time" has the capacity to elucidate difference internal to the moment itself. Likewise, and here again Badiou is the arch-modernist, the Event occurs within measurable empirical time, but the historicity of the event is not reducible to empirical time. Instead, *time itself is a result of the event*. Or, more specifically, time is defined by the gap between two events understood in terms of intervention:

> the possibility of the intervention must be assigned to the consequences of another event. It is evental recurrence which founds intervention…in other words, there is no interventional capacity, constituted for the belonging of an evental multiple to a situation, save within the network of consequences of a previously decided belonging. An intervention is what is present at an event for the occurrence of another. It is an evental between-two. (Badiou, *Being and Event* 209)

The time of the event does not depend upon its specific relation to the past or to the future; the time of the event is always the present. How, then, does the Event take place? From where, and in what form of presentation, does the "evental recurrence" emerge within a given situation? In what sense does the Event materialize? Or, more directly: *what* decides? The most immediate answer is a negative one: *not* from the philosopher.

3. Conclusion: Embodying politics in the present

In *Logics of Worlds*, Badiou asserts that the subject (again, understood as a process of subjectivization) has a material body. Badiou takes, as an explanatory example, the Third Servile War, wherein revolting Roman slaves—unified by the assertion "we are slaves, we want to and we can return home"—produced a collective body under the guidance of Spartacus. From the perspective of the existing situation—the Roman world—the specific kind of collective body the slaves produced is easily nameable: it is simply an army of revolting slaves—a group, that is, which refuses to acknowledge and conform to its natural place in Roman society. From the perspective of a subjective political logic however, the existence of a body of slaves unified by the decision to return home constitutes a rupture that founds a new present: a present in which life is (at least in the moment) no longer defined by the logic of a slave society. This army-body of slaves moves in a 'new present', Badiou writes: "for they are no longer slaves. Thus they show (to other slaves) that it is possible, for a slave, no longer to be a slave, and to do so *in the present*" (Badiou, *Logics of Worlds* 50). In other words, the emergence of this new body delineates a juncture—a turning point—which does not depend upon negation or critique but on a decision: to join the body or not. The assertion of the existence of this new body in the present is constituted as material by the event's course, which draws its force from imaging what kinds of affirmations are possible. In this case, it is in investigation into the possibility of claiming the freedom to affirm a desire and to decide to enact it—to affirm, that is, that "we want to *and can* return home" (Badiou, *Logics of Worlds* 51).

The consequences of this investigation in turn necessitate a constant reorganization of the body itself in relation to the testing of specific "points"—in relation, that is, to "what confronts

the global situation with singular choices, with decisions that involve the 'yes' and 'no'" (51). In other words, to respond as a body to questions that emerge in the present: "Is it really necessary to march south, or to attack Rome? To confront the legions, or evade them? To invent a new discipline, or to imitate regular armies?" (Badiou, *Logics of Worlds* 51). In this sense, Badiou continues, "a subject exists, as the localization of a truth, *to the extent it affirms that it holds a certain number of points.* That is why the treatment of points is the becoming-true of the subject, at the same time as it were to filter the aptitudes of bodies" (Badiou, *Logics of Worlds* 52).

As a body the subject is spatial. But it is also temporal insofar as this "treatment of points" constitutes a newness, a taking of place that can only occur in the present: "We will call *present*…the set of consequences of the evental trace, as realized by the successive treatment of points" (Badiou, *Logics of Worlds* 52). What the slave who escapes his or her own situation to join Spartacus's troops thereby joins is, "empirically speaking, an army. But in subjective terms, it is the realization in the present of a hitherto unknown possibility. In this sense it is indeed into the present, into the new present, that the escaped space incorporates himself… the body is subjectivated to the extent that it subordinates itself to the novelty of the possible…the body to the trace" (Badiou, *Logics of Worlds* 52). In short, what this "army" enacts—materially and in its present situation, however short-lived—is a new truth: "that the fate of the wretched of the earth is never a law of nature, and that it can, if only for the duration of a few battles, be revoked" (Badiou, *Logics of Worlds* 53).

While the subject itself consists in an immediate and material making-present (both in the sense of presentation and in the sense of a temporal present), the embodied subject comports itself, in relation to a truth, via a projection in the future; that is, the actuality of the truth and the

meaning of the subject take place in the future anterior—in that which will have been—in the universe that will have resulted from the subject's (finite, real, local) intervention into the situation.

The axiomatic assertion—that the slaves had the freedom and autonomy to decide for themselves—was unverifiable from the perspective of the existing situation; the Event constituting the breakdown of a naturalized hierarchy between person and slave could not be rationally confirmed; it had to be tested through a series of concrete decisions—to march north, to evade or confront the Roman army, etc.—each of which attempted to verify the Event. Thus, while each individual decision may be deducible from the existing situation (from knowledge, we might say) the process of subjectification aims to (and briefly accomplished) a new present.

In terms developed in the preceding chapter, a crisis is located in the situation—i.e. within the Roman World. However, the meaning of the crisis (and ultimately its truth) is not legible from the perspective of the situation, or the state's official historians, or even a critical philosophical perspective; rather it is discerned, constructed, and tested immanently within the process of subjectification, and its validity can be confirmed only from within that process: truth is constituted on the basis of an encounter, the paradoxical conjunction between something irreducibly exterior. Analogous to the claim that what we are experiencing is not a crisis of capitalism but a crisis of socialism, a revolutionary history proclaims—against established historical accounts—that there was no "Crisis of the Roman Republic," there was a crisis of citizenship: a crisis marked by a gap between the body of slaves to overcome the order that denied them personhood.

Thus, to return to the three terms: like Marxian and Lacanian accounts, Badiou cannot close the tripartite loop—his ontology leaves open any connection between crisis and non-coincidence. Indeed, however limiting it might be, for Badiou this is not accidental; it is grounded in the broader relation of philosophy to politics. Or, rather, the lack of any direct relation between the two. The task of the philosopher is not to create truth, but to work out the "*intra-philosophical* effects" of truths that emerge in external "conditions"—those of art, politics, science and love. Philosophy, in this sense, is both *dependent upon* and *distinct from* these external conditions. On the one hand, as dependent upon its conditions, philosophical thought is never self-grounding. As Žižek writes, for Badiou "an authentic philosophical thought does not spin its web out of itself, following an 'immanent conceptual necessity'; it is rather a reaction to the disturbing impact of some external truth event…endeavoring to delineate the conditions of this event, as well as of a fidelity to it" (Žižek, "Forward" x). The provocation to, or necessity of, philosophy does not emerge within philosophy itself but from an encounter with an external real that traumatically contradicts, and potentially disrupts, the existence of a situation or world. On the other hand, however, as *distinct* from the set of external conditions, philosophy is founded on a mode of radical abstraction entirely detached from whatever is counted by—and thereby appears in—a given situation or world, including the worlds of politics, art, science and love.

In the previous chapter I argued that Badiou's understanding of the political must be grounded in the situation in order to avoid the conflation of truth and event that, in many of Badiou's readers, gives the notion of the Truth-Event a mystical if not outright theological quality. I've argued, further, that Badiou's politics, when read alongside Marx, facilitate the

recovery of those elements of crisis that historically made it a socially and politically powerful concept. In particular, positioning "crisis" within the trajectory of subjectification—that is, within the process of decision-making that connects a material body to a universalizing idea—distinguishes specific sequences of radical potentially from (seemingly new) repetitions and reiterations of established forms of social domination. Formulating a logic that powerfully configures the infinite complexity (and, subsequently, the infinite deferability) of a situation through the moment of decision—the moment, however rare, in which a decision between "yes" or "no" emerges—Badiou recovers the force of crises (the crisis as the moment that necessitates a decision) and the framework for thinking the crisis (the crisis as the moment that links the particular and the universal).

Conclusion: The Second Coming of Crisis

1. John Frum

The John Frum "cargo cult" emerged around the late 1930s on the island of Tanna in New Hebrides (now Vanautu). Ethnographers remain unclear about its emergence—perhaps "John Frum" was a local native dressed in western clothing, or a spirit vision induced when drinking an intoxicant called kava. In any case, John Frum prophesied a coming era in which, after evicting British colonizers and clergy, and returning to native customs, Melenesian islanders would finally obtain the life of affluence lived by their white neighbors. Thus, the stage was set for the arrival in the 1940s of American air and navy forces, which set up bases on islands in the south pacific, including Tanna. Ships and aircraft arrived loaded with soldiers and cargo—boxes containing radios, refrigerators, manufactured clothing, tents and weapons arrived by sea or quite literally fell from the sky. And the islanders observed firsthand the prosperity of Americans and the world's most advanced military machinery. They also saw the relative harmony of white and black soldiers working together, as well as the amicability (compared to missionaries and British colonizers) of the American GIs (Guiart, n.p.). At the close of the war, American forces packed

up and disappeared, airbases stood empty, and the cargo deliveries ceased. In their wake, ethnographers, missionaries and developers observed inhabitants of Tanna Island creating infrastructure, materials and rituals that replicated the foreign air forces they had seen. They built control towers, donned headphones carved from wood, and performed procedures imitating landing signals on the abandoned runways. Some built life-size replicas of airplanes. At the same time, the Christian narratives taught by missionaries were transformed and new social structures emerged. Melanesians revived practices that had been banned by clergy and colonizers: drinking the forbidden intoxicant kava and dancing became increasingly common, as did the resurgence of social practices like polygamy. Perhaps most troubling for colonial rule, native islanders began rejecting key political-economic tenets of the colony; not only did they reject the hierarchies of state, church and family, they extricated themselves from the colonial economy, in some cases by throwing all of their money into the sea. Heavy-handed efforts by church and state failed to repress the John Frum cult, which grew in popularity and in the challenges it posed to the colonial status quo.

For anthropologists, John Frum became an important example of the "cargo cult." There are, as Paul Sillitoe argues, several interpretive frameworks in which ethnographers have understood the cargo cults that emerged post-war throughout Melanesia. Early interpretations emphasized the ways in which cargo cults were "indications of stress and anomie in local populations unable to cope with the rapid social change thrust upon them" (Sillitoe 189). They provided a framework in which to confront and understand the crises wrought by colonial encounters. As Guiart's influential work states: "This is the value of the myth for a Melanesian society in transition, not only as a way out of the problems felt, but in the first instance as a

means of apprehending the contact situation, when the White man responsible has revealed his incapacity to offer a rational solution which would have seemed of value to the people" (Guiart 116). In other words, colonial contact produced a crisis grounded first in the drastic changes wrought by the colonial encounter, and second in the fact that neither traditional nor colonial ideology provided an adequate framework for making sense of these drastic changes. According to this understanding, John Frum provided a principle upon which new (or recovered) social forms could organize; but it also grounded a new symbolic order—a framework for conceptually organizing and making sense of widespread social and economic changes.

According to Sillitoe, a second prominent dimension of ethnographic interpretations emphasized islanders' recognition of material inequality, which caused feelings of resentment and inferiority. This resentment was based in part on the real disparity between colonizer and colonized, but also on the perceived unequal relation between the generosity of poorer natives and the tight-fisted British. A further interpretation emphasizes the ways in which cargo cults assert, in an underdeveloped form, Melanesian nationalism. While cargo cults lack the organization of effective nationalist movements emerging around the same time, they had real and immediate social effects: "By breaking down the barriers between independent and perhaps hostile stateless political groups, [cargo cults] promote unity among people otherwise too fractiously organized to protest effectively" (Sillitoe 194). Though limited in concept and scope, cargo cults unified power across disparate and divided native islanders.

Initially a topic of ethnography, cargo cults reached popular audiences through David Attenborough's 1960 documentary series *The People of Paradise*. In the episode "Cargo Cult,"

Attenborough, who interviews members of John Frum, provides the following account of the cults:

> Imagine […] you've lived all your life in what is virtually the Stone Age. You've never seen metal, or any of the other strange things that Europeans have. Then one day, you meet a strange white-faced man, who has the most incredible things. He has jeeps, he has petrol lamps, he has…glasses, he has simple things…like a fountain pen. And you look at a thing like this, and the first thing that you say is […] this couldn't possibly have been made by man. […] And if it isn't made by man, then it must come from the gods. The Ancestors. And if it comes from the gods, and it's come to your island, why has it come to these white-faced people? They've done nothing to deserve it. They don't make them themselves, you can see that. What's more, they don't even do any work. They don't fish in the lagoon, they don't sweat in the hot sun, digging their gardens and planting their yams. They don't cut coconuts. In fact, they do senseless, useless things. They put up great masts with wires on the top. And at the bottom, they have boxes, which they listen to, as they make funny noises. And then they dress up people in similar uniforms, and march them up and down in a senseless, useless way. They certainly aren't doing any good. And then it dawns on you - this is the secret. The white people are doing this as a sort of ritual, designed to make the gods, or the ancestors, send the goods to them - the 'cargo', as you call it in pidgin English. The cargo, to them. Therefore, if you want the cargo, you yourself must do these extraordinary things. So you put up a great mast out of bamboo and sit at the bottom of it and walk and put fences round it. And you clear great areas in the forest, like the white men do for their airstrips. And you dress up people in uniforms. And, at the same time, in many of these cargo cults, you believe that there is going to be one particular being, a sort of messiah, who, when the apocalypse comes, when the day of judgment comes, will bring all this cargo to you, in either a great white ship or an airplane when the day of judgment comes. This would be strange enough, if it had happened just once. But in New Guinea, alone, it has happened over 30 times and, as far as we can see, many of these uprisings are quite unconnected with any others. (Attenborough 1:17-4:09)

Attenborough's account incorporates elements of the three interpretative frameworks listed above—socio-cultural crisis, inequality, and nationalism. And, like most ethnographers of the same time, Attenborough situates cargo cults within an enlightenment logic of progress. In this cited section, the logic of progress is established by erasing the distinction between individual

rationality and historical context: the imagined "you," who first encounters Europeans, rationalizes the cause of material disparity between Europeans and natives, and is both leader and follower in "over 30" different cults. In short, the colonial history of Melanesian natives is represented as the consciousness of a rational individual. Within this framework, the cargo cult appears reducible to a simple logical error: cargo cults, it is assumed, generalize a *post hoc ergo propter hoc* error that mistakes *correlation* (x occurs, then y occurs) with *causation* (y occurs *causing* x to occur. The single, almost-rational consciousness witnessed a *correlation* of events: first, Americans constructed an airbase and performed associated rituals such as landing signals, etc.; second, airdrops arrived, delivering material goods. The native consciousness then *assumed a causation of events*: the structures and rituals of the American airbase *caused* things to fall from the sky. Thus, it is assumed, Melanesian islanders believed that if they could recreate the cause (i.e. by building airfields, reproducing landing rituals, etc.), the effect (the arrival of cargo) would follow.

There are a series of related ironies at play in both ethnographic and popular interpretations. The first is the simple irony in how colonial and church powers infantilized native logic; or, rather, their own projection of native logic. A social movement organized around the future return of John Frum is assumed ridiculous by a society that had ritualized awaiting the return of their own John Frum for two millennia. Indeed, this is not lost on the Frumians. In *The People of Paradise*, Attenborough patronizingly presses members on the fact that they have been waiting for 19 years for John Frum to arrive. An elderly leader responds: "I can wait. There's you waiting for 2,000 years for Christ to come. And I must wait over 19 years" (Attenborough 17:14-17:25). More importantly, there are two deeper ironies here, one historical

and one conceptual. The historical irony is grounded in the ethnographic-colonial gaze. The colonial interpreter purports to reveal something about the indigenous other. In giving an account of the other, however, the ethnographic gaze projects upon the colonized the anxieties of the colonizers. In the case of the BBC documentary, these anxieties are thinly veiled. In the section quoted above, for example, Attenborough's imagined islander resents the white colonizer: "why has [this bounty] come to these white-faced people? They've done nothing to deserve it. They don't make [it] themselves, you can see that. What's more, they don't even do any work… In fact, they do senseless, useless things" (Attenborough 2:14-2:27). In fact, in the documentary, John Frum members do not express resentment; yet it is frequently projected upon them, both by Attenborough and by white interviewees. In other words, indigenous resentment is, in the documentary, a *colonial* expression. But an expression of what? The key idea in the quoted section is the link between work and reward—or, more accurately, the absence of a direct link: the (white) people not working are rewarded. In fact, when Attenborough claims to describe the hypothetical thought of a cargo cult member, he actually describes the *exploitation of labor* ("they don't make it themselves…they don't even do any work"), expressed in terms of the racist and classist conditions that facilitate this exploitation. In short, what Attenborough offers is simply a description of class and race consciousness; he ascribes to the Melanesians the basic form of awareness that, in Western thought, produces the revolutionary subject.

Here, then, it is clear that the projection of resentment is, in fact, an expression of colonial anxiety. When cargo cults are explained in terms of socio-cultural crisis, a reduced sense of relative wealth, and a more unified sense of nationalism, they describe the decline of the

British colonizer at least as much as the colonized.[56] In short, cargo cults act as symptom: they externalize a fundamental crisis, a moment in history defined by the fracturing of empire and, in the wake of a devastating World War, a crisis in simplistic enlightenment conceptions of progress. This anxiety is further bolstered by rhetoric that characterizes Melanesians as both infantile and threatening. For example, describing a Frumian shrine, Attenborough says: "They were pathetically childish images, yet somehow they seemed to have a very sinister quality" (Attenborough 18:37-18:44). Why is the "childish" other so "sinister"? Why is the imagined irrationality of the native also a description of class and race consciousness? Because the crisis ascribed to the indigenous other is, in fact, a crisis of empire.

In historical terms, the projection of resentment is not unjustified. In 1960, the year Attenborough's documentary was made, colonial consciousness posed a growing threat to colonial interests. National liberation wars had spread across Africa, Asia, and the south east, where anti-colonial and communist currents had merged in movements like the Vietminh. In this context, John Frum exemplifies the transformation of colonial logic. It transforms the biblical logic of End Times, in which Christ returns to redeem his followers and reward the faithful, and ties it to anti-colonial practices, including actions that undermine colonial systems, like throwing currency into the sea. Yet Melanesians did not have directly revolutionary aims, and unlike many other colonial subjects, they were not violent and did not pose a physical threat.[57] This duality—

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[56] In symbolic terms, this is perhaps clearest in the dichotomy between British colonialist and American soldier. After World War II the dominant figure of the new international order was not the missionary, the colonizer, or the khaki-clad explorer/ethnographer; it was the American GI.

[57] As one of Attenborough's white interviewees elaborates, Melanesian islanders imitated the US military; at one point, they dressed in military gear and organized marches, but their "guns" were

the fact that islanders are both threatening and infantilized—allows the ethnographic gaze a degree of relativism, both cultural and epistemological. Culturally, cargo cults could be represented as examples of social phenomena—i.e. the colonized subject in crisis—without the weight of judgment. This permitted the colonizer (in the example at hand, Attenborough) to pose as sympathetic and understanding—not only an observer but, as Attenborough is at pains to show, a confidant and conversation partner. Epistemologically, cargo cults could be interpreted objectively in terms of pragmatic effects. The teleological dimension—the abundance that will result when the island rids itself of colonial powers—justifies actions that challenge colonial domination in the present. Thus, the ethnographic gaze can show that, in a concrete and pragmatic sense, what counts—what shows up within, and is represented by the situation—is not determined by whether the material reality ultimately corresponds to its speculative concept. Rather, the verity of a belief is defined by how effectively it orders the situation—in William James' words, a belief may be considered true if it "works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word."

And yet, Attenborough—and, the ethnographic gaze more generally—very clearly maintains a position of objective, rational superiority. What facilitates this dual understanding? The concept of crisis. As suggested, the earliest and still foundational conceptions understood cargo cults as a response to the crisis of the colonial encounter. Crisis names the gap between (a.) the pragmatic truth (cargo cults facilitate the navigation of the colonial encounter), and (b.) the

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carved sticks and, to the bemusement of the interviewee, marchers approaching the island's church quite simply turned around when asked.

realist truth—i.e. that no cargo will arrive and the Melanesians will come to realize their infantile logic. The ethnographic gaze permits a pragmatic understanding of cargo cults—one in which followers can be understood as rational insofar as their collective actions have the very real and useful effect of helping a society manage a crisis. But it is precisely by conceding the pragmatic truth of the cargo cult that the ethnographer preserves his objective authority.

2. Theory's Cargo Cults

The example of the cargo cult frames two key dimensions in our analysis: one conceptual and one political. First, it constitutes a symptomatic expression of crisis in the geo-political moment of internationalization. In the post-war, newly global era the concept of crisis is transformed from revolutionary event to a generalized condition.[58] The notion of the cargo cult facilitates the deconstruction of teleological understandings of history. The ironies inherent to its interpretation cast doubt upon any attempt to ascribe immediate causality to historical processes. Indeed, it seems to me there is a cargo cult tendency in crisis theory—a *post hoc ergo propter hoc* error: the dialectical co-emergence of materialist critique and revolution has led many (beginning with Engels) to believe that, if we could once again get critique right, revolution would follow. Even the more sophisticated variants like *Wertkritik* are not immune, as I've argued in Chapter 3, to an uncritical faith in the power of critique and the force of crisis. In broader terms, the deconstruction of the cargo cult signals the epistemological role of crisis. One way to summarize the argument I have developed in the previous chapters is this: crisis links the *pragmatic* theory

[58] Mark Greif develops a compelling if overreaching account of this crisis, which he describes as the "crisis of man" (see Greif).

of truth with a correspondence theory of truth as a kind of unity-through-difference. Crisis names the situation in which what is *pragmatically* true and what *corresponds* to fact—the "really" true—are currently separable but *will have been* the same thing. Moreover, to name the crisis is to position oneself as the one who understands the difference—i.e. the one who sees the difference between the pragmatic truth and the real truth, as well as their unity. In simpler terms, the logic of crisis writes the Machiavellian dictum in the future perfect tense: the ("real" truth of the) ends will have been justified by the (pragmatic truth of the) means.

To affirm this unity-through-difference is not merely a descriptive act, it is prescriptive. Crisis defines a situation in terms of a distinction—for example, between illness and health, between violence and peace, between economic instability and growth. This prescriptive dimension has three effects. First, the distinction itself affirms a normative orientation. In the distinctions listed, the first terms—illness, violence, and instability—only make sense insofar as they are defined against the second terms. But the second terms—health, peace, economic growth—do not exist in a natural state; they have no transhistorically constituted definition. These terms create rather than describe the "normal" situation—that is, the situation against which the crisis (an abnormal or extraordinary condition) can be defined (Roitman, *Anti-Crisis*; Roitman, "Crisis"). Second, the specific distinction is affirmed as *the* important distinction. Defining an extraordinary condition, a crisis reorients a situation around its key terms. In Obama's 2009 speech on the economy, for example, the financial crisis is connected to a waning of faith in the idea of America; together these two things constitute "a crisis unlike any we have seen in our lifetime" (Obama). In short, all other concerns—global warming, surges in race-related violence, the rise of fascism in Europe, and so on—are of secondary significance;

procedures of justification and legitimation must be grounded in the resolution of the crises of economy and state.

Taken together, these first two dimensions give crisis, as both concept and condition, its constitutive force. We have seen that, by joining a normative claim to an assertion of a fixed set of terms, the logic of crisis organizes the means of force. This is particularly true given that the discourse of crisis has been largely coopted by capitalist and state powers. As Obama states: "Let it be said by our children's children that when we were tested we refused to let this journey end, that we did not turn our back nor did we falter; and with eyes fixed on the horizon and God's grace upon us, we carried forth that great gift of freedom and delivered it safely to future generations" (Obama). There is a gap between the pragmatic truth (that the nation must respond to the crisis with "hope and virtue") and the "real" truth (that America is the bearer of the "the great gift of freedom); but this separation is unified by the projected future ("the horizon of God's grace") which, once judged by history (anthropomorphized as "our children's children"), will have been one and the same truth. Grounded in a normative dichotomy, this logic does not only establish a unified set of actions, it also legitimates the nation-state as the one that knows; by naming it a crisis of state and economy, Obama establishes authority over the situation and justifies the policing of its boundaries. Indeed, however idyllic the Obama era might seem in hindsight, it established unprecedented violence in policing—both within American borders (including the use of military weapons against American protestors) and beyond (through, for example, the use of drones).

Politically, the concept of crisis (including its dialectical variants) has tended to reproduce the kinds of objectivism we see in Attenborough's ethnographic discourse. I suggested

in Chapter 3 that, by showing that crisis is an internal and inevitable element of capitalism, Marx transforms the discourse of crisis from a normative socio-political term to an objective historico-scientific term. The conceptual force of this insight, however, seems to fizzle when applied to real historical processes. Marxist crisis theory, including the critique of value analyzed in Chapters 1 and 2, develops an immanent critique of capital showing that, from a critico-historical perspective, capitalism produces its own contradictions. According to *Wertkritik* and others, these contradictions inevitably lead to a non-capitalist society. However powerful this critical analysis is, it can only provide an analysis of objective, historical development; it cannot prescribe political meaning to such developments. Nor, as has become increasingly evident, can it account for those developments that potentially *could* ascribe political meaning to objective historical situations.

This is not, of course, a new problem for historical materialism. Jean Paul Sartre, for example, developed a nuanced dialectical account of subjectivity, class struggle and historical necessity. In spite of its subtlety and relative attunement to non-European political subjects, Sartre's theory does at points run aground in its attempts to relate the particularity of struggle to the universality of class struggle. On the *Negritude* movement, for example, Sartre writes:

> The Negro, as we have said, creates an anti-racist racism. He does not at all wish to dominate the world; he wishes the abolition of racial privileges wherever they are found; he affirms his solidarity with the oppressed of all colors. At a blow the subjective, existential, ethnic notion of Negritude "passes," as Hegel would say, into the objective, positive, exact notion of the proletariat… Negritude appears as the weak stage of a dialectical progression: the theoretical and practical affirmation of white supremacy is the thesis; the position of Negritude as antithetical value is the moment of negativity. But this negative moment is not sufficient in itself and the Blacks who employ it well know it; they know that it serves to pave the way for the synthesis or the realization of the human society without race. Thus Negritude is dedicated to

> its own destruction, it is transition and not result, a means and not the ultimate goal. (quoted in Fanon 112)

In Sartre's dialectical understanding of history, the *Negritude* movement is an instance that "passes" in the notion of the proletariat; it is a "stage of a dialectical progression" which "serves to pave the way for the synthesis of realization of the human society without race." Frantz Fanon, deeply critical of the reduction of *Negritude* to a mere "stage," writes that he "felt they [left theorists and Sartre in particular] had robbed me of my last chance… We had appealed to a friend of the colored peoples, and this friend had found nothing better to do than demonstrate the relativity of [our] actions" (Fanon 112). One might ask if Fanon's personalized critique is fair. Sartre falls short in that he finds "nothing better to do," but he was nonetheless mobilizing his considerable (if ultimately limited) intellectual force toward the affirmation of Fanon, of Negritude, and of the anti-racist and anti-colonial struggle. Moreover, we might ask if Fanon was justified in levelling this critique at Sartre, given that the difficulty seems to inhere in Hegel's conception of history. However, these questions sidestep the issue. Fanon points to Sartre's argument that:

> To each epoch its poetry, for each epoch the circumstances of history elect a nation, a race, a class, to seize again the torch, by creating situation which can express or surpass themselves only through Poetry. At times the poetic élan coincides with the revolutionary élan and at times they diverge. Let us salute today the historic chance which will permit the Blacks [as Césaire writes] to 'raise the great Negro shout with a force that will shake the foundations of the world' (Césaire, qtd in Fanon).

What is clearer, here, is the way in which Sartre's affirmation of Negritude—represented by Césaire's call to poetic arms—is understood *primarily* as an instantiation of objective historical development. As Fanon writes, in Sartre's formulation "I did not create meaning for myself; the meaning was already there, waiting. It is not as the wretched nigger, it is not with my nigger's

teeth, it is not as the hungry nigger that I fashion a torch to set the world alight; the torch was already there, waiting for this historic chance" (Fanon 113). Fanon is, of course, acutely aware that the Hegelian relation between the particular and the abstract universal remains an unresolvable philosophical problem. Fanon is highly critical of any attempt to skirt the violently dialectical nature of history—to imagine, as contemporary identity politics has tended to, some kind of peacefully realized mutual recognition. Moreover, Fanon argues that there is no clear way to relate the unresolved philosophical problem of dialectics to the equally complex historical problem of anti-colonial struggle. However, conceptual intricacy is not the problem; rather, Sartre's error—his betrayal—is to have affirmed the *absolute priority* of the objective logic of history over, and ultimately against, the subjective meaning of political struggle, to the extent that the latter is obliterated. And, in this sense, even Sartre, who rigorously critiques developmental notions of history and consistently affirms the authenticity of the Black subject and of Negritude, falls prey to a philosophical tendency: the objectivism that views each particularity as a potentiality that is becoming-actual, as a not-yet-realized end-point. The underlying, patronizing assumption is that the *real* processes of actualization are visible only to the philosopher.

The difficulty in navigating the relation between objective historical processes and subjective political meaning is, today, only more acute. And the concept of crisis does not bear this difficulty well. As I've suggested, crisis is structured by a form of belatedness. This realization, as discussed in Chapter 1, is already present in Hegelian thought and comes to the fore after Marx. In Marxist crisis theory, historical crises cannot be known until after their contradicting elements have been worked through. In the post-war era—as exemplified, in

particular, by poststructural theory—crisis is transformed from an event to a generalized condition. In this sense, the epistemological belatedness of crisis is delayed not momentarily but indefinitely—the "afterward" of crisis, the resolution that both actualizes and makes intelligible the crisis, does not arrive.[59] As I've argued, this indefinite belatedness erases the possibility of subjective decision, thus undermining political will.

How, then, to think politics in the present? From a political theoretical perspective, one of the key challenges is to theorize politics in a way that insists upon the political force of thought, without reducing political practices to instances of a predetermined conception of history. Today, myriad political subjects challenge social and conceptual hierarchies through feminist, indigenous, anti-colonial and anti-capitalist strategies. Isolated from these political subjects, theory engages structural understandings that—like those of *Wertkritik*—may offer powerful critical analysis but remain inescapably tied to objective and transhistorical forms. On the other hand, attempts to incorporate political subjects—such as Italian workerism or, in a different way, the Sartrean theory of Negritude sketched above—have tended to reduce political practices to examples that, effacing singularity, merely vindicate the explanatory force of a given theory. Lastly, equally insidious are those poststructural theories that would replace notions of truth with analyses of discourse and communication. Such attempts serve primarily to reproduce (if in a

[59] It was Hannah Arendt who made explicit the possibility that the major socio-historical crises of the twentieth century may have been, instead of a radical break from history, a banal result. This would become one of the most controversial philosophical statements of that century.

repressed sense) the authority of the theorist, for in such conceptions it is ultimately the theorist that is granted the power of indecision.

In spite of its limitations, Badiou's political ontology, including his theory of the event, posits a compelling way to situate thought in relation to politics. For Badiou the task of philosophy is not to *think* politics. Insofar as politics can be thought, this must be done from within the truth procedure—in short, it must be done by the political subject. Philosophy's relation is to metapolitics, which is concerned with the "consequences a philosophy is capable of drawing, both in and for itself, from real instances of politics as thought" (*Metapolitics* xxxix). Essential, here, is the notion that politics is tied to singularity—tied through fidelity and in the name of a "self-authorizing prescription" to a truth that, as singular, cannot be thought from the perspective of the situation (Badiou, *Metapolitics* 23). In this sense, for Badiou, as for Hegel, political truths are only fully legible to philosophy in a retroactive sense. The difference, however, is that rather than an instance of the dialectical development, the event constitutes the thinkability of dialectics.

This is, moreover, what those who see the event as a "miracle" continue to misunderstand about Badiou's ontology. Philosophy does not itself posit truths, nor does it prescribe ways of thinking, speaking, or acting politically. The apparently "miraculous" nature of the event stems from the simple fact that events don't follow philosophy, philosophy follows events. Put another way, the event only seems like a miracle if one assumes a unity between philosophical thought and political action. Beginning from the perspective of separation of politics and philosophy, one need only accept that events have happened and do happen. The pressing concern for a Badiouian politics, then, is not whether it can give an account of the material conditions of

capitalist crisis. Rather, the pressing concern is whether Badiou's ontology can succeed in accounting for political subjects—particularly, those oriented by feminist, indigenous, anti-colonial and anti-capitalist strategies that still evade overly-objectivist Marxist accounts.

Toward this end I've argued, against those systems of thought that view crisis as an objective process, that crisis must be understood from the perspective of the political subject. A crisis is not determined by an inevitable contradiction, but (in the first instance) by a subjective impasse, a gap between a particular subjective process and a universal idea. In this sense, crisis is not located in the situation or in the subject *per se* but in the process—always fragile and under threat—of developing and maintaining a material connection between the two. Crisis thus remains an essential concept for thinking revolutionary politics. And it retains from its original formulations the moment in which the subject precariously teeters between strengthening or dissolving, between recovery or death. But in this new formulation it names the exhaustion of the concrete, emancipatory possibilities structured by an idea—a saturation not of the objective structures of an existing historical situation, but *of the subjective capacity to will a way through them*. The present is determined not by a crisis of capitalism, but by a crisis of the idea. Thus, the relevance of this concept, central to radical political thought since the French Revolution, does not ultimately rest in some final vindication—the terminal crisis of capitalism as described by political economists. Crisis will have been, once again, a revolutionary concept when, through the negation of saturated ideas, it attunes thought to history's arrhythmia and affirms those who would will the newly singular idea.

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