

# TIME AND SUBSUMPTION

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This is a paper about the concept of subsumption, and its problematic status within Marx's thought. What I want to do here is to explore subsumption through an analysis of its *temporal* dimensions, and in doing so depart from readings of the concept which conceive of it as a primarily historical category - that is, one that could be used to periodise different phases in the development of the capital relation. I want to challenge this view by first briefly reconstructing Marx's arguments about subsumption, then giving an outline and critique of this historical reading of the concept, then lastly I'll propose an alternative notion of the relation of subsumption to historical development through the idea of a synthesis of disjunctive times.

## ***Marx on subsumption***

The concept of subsumption was bequeathed to Marx from German philosophy of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, where, beginning with Kant, it was used to conceptualise the process of subordination whereby an individual is brought under a general concept or category, and thus determined as a particular instance of that category. In Kant's first critique, for example, this process forms the basis for cognition, as intuitions are transcendently subsumed under the categories, and thus given conceptual unity within the continuum of conscious experience. Marx's use of subsumption retains the conceptual structure of this subordinating particular-universal relationship, but deploys it in an altogether different context. Instead of grasping the relationship between intuitions and concepts, or for example the finite and the infinite (as you get in Schelling), in Marx's critique of political economy subsumption is used to describe the relation of domination that obtains between capital and labour - so that labour can be said to be subsumed under capital, that is, determined as a particular instance of capital.

At its highest level of abstraction, this relation is embodied in the capitalist production process as such, which Marx describes in the first volume of *Capital* as 'a unity, composed of the labour process and the process of creating value'<sup>1</sup> These are, of course, both descriptions of the same process given from dialectically opposed standpoints (much as the commodity is figured as both a use-value and a value); but their unity is hierarchically structured. Individuals from the subordinate series - here concrete processes of labour whose results are real use-values - are determined as mere instances of the dominant concept - here, value in its movement of self-expansion. So Marx says in one of the early manuscripts for capital, that 'the labour process is as it were incorporated in [the valorisation process], subsumed under it'<sup>2</sup>. Already, in this early conception of subsumption, Marx identifies the starting point through which the

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<sup>1</sup> Marx, *Capital I*, Penguin, p.293

<sup>2</sup> *MECW 30*, p.67

entire dialectic of capitalist social domination is established, in the doubly, and unevenly, determined process of production. It is here that capital takes a hold of the one force that can actualise it – the ‘living, form-giving fire’ of labour.

But this determination of the labour process as capitalist does not emerge *ex nihilo*, because as we know from the *Grundrisse*, ‘whenever we speak of production [...] what is meant is production at a definite stage of social development’<sup>3</sup>. Thus that which is subsumed under capital at the outset of this process is a non-capitalist production process:

*‘at the start of its formation, we see capital take under its control (subsume under itself) not only the labour process in general but the specific actual labour processes as it finds them available in the existing technology, and in the form in which they have developed on the basis of non-capitalist relations of production.’<sup>4</sup>*

So how does capital first determine this labour process as its own? Marx goes on to say that ‘at the beginning it only subsumes [the labour process] *formally*, without making any changes in its specific technological character’<sup>5</sup>. In this initial phase - what Marx calls ‘formal subsumption’ - production takes on a capitalist character purely at the level of the social form of the relationship that constitutes it. That is, as an economic relation between buyers and sellers, freely exchanging their own property as part of a process whose ultimate aim is the augmentation of value. Unlike the relations of direct domination that characterised feudal societies (for example), where surplus labour was extorted through violent means, the fundamental presupposition of capitalist production is that the buyer of labour-power and its seller enter in relation of their own free will.<sup>6</sup> So with formal subsumption, the domination of capital over labour consists only ‘in the worker’s subjection as worker to the supervision and therefore to the command of capital or the capitalist’<sup>7</sup>. This is how capital first subsumes labour: by buying the right to exert its command over labour’s activity in the labour process.

The formally subsumed labour process thus acts as ‘the general foundation of the capitalist system’ through its establishment of an exploitative economic *relation* between capital and labour<sup>8</sup>. But whilst

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<sup>3</sup> *Grundrisse*, Penguin, p. 85

<sup>4</sup> *MECW 30*, p.92

<sup>5</sup> *MECW 30*, p.92

<sup>6</sup> As Luca Basso points out in his recent book, for Marx ‘the recognition of free and equal individuals, and their subsumption under an abstract social power, are two ‘sides’ of the same coin’. *Marx and Singularity: From the Early Writings to the Grundrisse*, Brill, p.2

<sup>7</sup> *MECW 30*, p.93 (my emphasis)

<sup>8</sup> This relation primarily takes the form of a wage, but not exclusively so. Patrick Murray and others have developed Marx’s notion of ‘hybrid subsumption’ to account for modes of subsumption under capital not based on the wage. There are many examples, historical and current, of such forms (e.g. Merchant’s and usurer’s capital, putting-out networks, etc...) and their importance is far from marginal. At this level of abstraction, however, they can be grouped together with formally subsumed labour, because the crucial point to note is the distinction between transformations in a) the *social* relations of production and b) the technical organisation, or *material* forces of production.

this formal development is significant it does not yet signal capitalist production proper (i.e., productive activity that is 'adequate' to the essence or concept of capital: *valorisation*) because at this stage, the technical organisation and objective means by which labour is carried out remain unchanged; what capital commands is a labour process inherited from another mode of production. Therefore, the only means by which capitals can realise their aim of extracting surplus labour from the labour force is by extending that part of the working day in which workers perform surplus labour – that is, labour time beyond that needed for labour power to simply reproduce its own existence. This sole dependency on the length of the working day is why formal subsumption is linked to absolute surplus value – indeed, Marx says that absolute surplus value is the 'material expression' of formal subsumption.

There are, however, social and natural limits to the working day which place constraints on the amount of surplus labour capital can effectively demand from a formally subsumed workforce. So following the establishment of capitalist relations of production, once the capitalist has command of the labour process, a second strategy of increasing surplus value becomes available: the transformation of the actual material content of the labour process in order to increase productivity – what Marx calls the 'real subsumption' of labour under capital. Real subsumption involves the development of the social productive power of labour through the technical re-organisation of the labour process, through the implementation of co-operation, divisions of labour, machinery etc... Correspondingly, with real subsumption:

*a complete (and constantly repeated) revolution takes place in the mode of production, in the productivity of the workers and in the relations between workers and capitalists.*<sup>9</sup>

Whilst these developments are directly motivated by competition between capitals, they have a crucial aggregate effect throughout society: they lower the value of the wage by cheapening the commodities needed for the reproduction of the workforce. In this way, the component of the working day dedicated to labour's reproduction shrinks. So, rather than increasing the amount of surplus labour extorted from the worker by extending the amount of hours worked in absolute terms – i.e., by simply making the working day longer – the capitalist is able to use productivity increases to appropriate a greater proportion of the same working day. This produces 'relative surplus value', and with it 'the entire real form of production is altered and a specifically capitalist form of production comes into being (at the technological level too).'<sup>10</sup> Real subsumption consummates the dominance of capitalist production because not only does production take the form of a process directed towards the augmentation of value, but this goal is inscribed in its concrete actuality and determines its means, methods and development; the entire production process is determined *by, as and for* capital.

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<sup>9</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 1035

<sup>10</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 1024

### *Historical and conceptual development*

It is clear that the distinction between formal and real modes of subsumption presents us with a developmental dynamic: formal subsumption is the necessary but inadequate condition for capitalist production proper, which only commences with the onset of labour's real subsumption. They denote differing degrees of the actualisation of capital as the basis of social production. But despite this, the distinction between the forms made by Marx is eminently *conceptual* – all it says is that capitalist command is first realised at the level of social form, and that following this it becomes materially embodied in the labour process. The problematic status of subsumption then, regards how this dynamical distinction relates to the world-historical unfolding of the capital relation, and too what extent, if at all, the category of subsumption can form the basis for a periodisation of this relation. In short, whether we can speak of a discrete historical period of 'formal subsumption' which is at some identifiable point succeeded by 'real subsumption'.

The issue here is not just a clarificatory one regarding subsumption and its misprisions, but also bears upon the wider project of periodizing capital as such, and I think it's clear that a historical reading of subsumption brings to the fore explicitly what has implicitly become a paradigmatic reference point for reflecting on the post-68 political conjuncture. Broadly speaking, this perspective asserts the historical completion or totalisation of the process of subsumption, not just in the sphere of the traditionally conceived workplace (factory, office, etc..) but across the full compass of human life, penetrating the realms of culture, leisure, education and sociality – a vision of 'total integration'.

So let me take three exemplary cases of this reading of subsumption. The first is a quote from Antonio Negri's essay 'The Constitution of Time' written in the early 80's:

*[with real subsumption] use value cannot appear except under the guise of exchange value. There is no longer an external vantage point upon which use value can depend. [...] Real subsumption means the complete realization of the law of value [...] social labour covers all the time of life, and invests all of its regions [...] the entire time of life has become the time of production.<sup>11</sup>*

The second is from Frederic Jameson's recent book on volume one of capital, and formalizes his earlier conception of postmodernity within Marx's conceptual terminology. He refers to the present as:

*a stage of "subsumption" in which the extra-economic or social no longer lies outside capital and economics but has been absorbed into it [...] Where everything has been subsumed under capitalism, there is no longer anything outside it.<sup>12</sup>*

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<sup>11</sup> Antonio Negri, 'The Constitution of Time', *Time for Revolution*, Continuum, pp. 25-28

<sup>12</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Representing Capital*, Verso, p.71

The third is from a short text by the French group Theorie Communiste, for whom the concepts of subsumption unequivocally designate 'historical configuration[s]' (albeit in a manner that goes some way beyond the simplistic formal/real opposition):

*We can't be satisfied with defining real subsumption only on the level of transformations of the labour process. [...] Real subsumption is a transformation of society and [...] We can only speak of real subsumption at the moment when all social combinations are affected.*<sup>13</sup>

Now, all of these statements are the products of highly specific theoretical and political histories that I won't deal with here, I just want to take them as expressions of a (if not *the*) dominant reading of subsumption. There are two distinctive aspects to this reading I want to draw out. On the one hand it shares in a generalised sentiment regarding the particular mode of capitalist domination that characterises the present – as complete, or total, in its colonization of the lifeworld, and uses subsumption as the conceptual means by which to grasp this totalization. On the other hand, it conforms to the tendency for theoretical disputes over the actuality of capital to take the form of competing claims on the historical 'present' - conceived as a globally unified social temporality. These two tendencies converge in the claim that we are now 'in' real subsumption, because the socio-spatial totalization of subsumption supports and in turn is reciprocally supported by the idea of its synchronic totalization in a unified present.

There are a number of obvious problems with this as a reading of subsumption as it appears in Marx:

**Firstly**, the forms of subsumption may be logically successive, but this tells us very little about the actual chronology of their appearance. Given that real subsumption is present even in the most rudimentary rationalisations of the labour process – for example, in the implementation of basic co-operation within the factory – the historical gap separating formal from real subsumption is in many cases negligible; the wage relation is established and the labour process is immediately re-organised. The distinction between the forms is intended to do different work – that is, to differentiate between the *formal*, social command of capital and its *material* determination of the labour process.

**Secondly**, the real subsumption of labour is, as a process, generally limited to specific production processes or branches of industry. Different branches and forms of production will, in the same historical moment be at different levels of capitalist development, and furthermore in uneven interaction with each other (indeed, Marx says that as the process of subsumption matures in one branch of industry it can act as a condition for the incipience of subsumption in another). It is not, therefore, viable to totalise all production processes as being at the same conceptual stage of development. In addition, even the same industries are subject to geographical asymmetries in production, such that the latest production techniques might be employed in some parts of the globe whilst much less developed technologies still dominate in other regions. In such cases the deciding factor is accumulation: if there is a potential to

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<sup>13</sup> Theorie Communiste, 'Reply to Aufheben', *Aufheben* #13

increase profits then capitals will introduce technical innovations, but if, for example, low wages and poor environmental and safety regulations keep the cost of production 'competitive' then there is little incentive to do so (the extractive industries are a good example of this).

*Thirdly*, if it is implausible to posit a homogenous stage of development across all labour processes then the claim that all of 'life', or 'the social' has been really subsumed is even more dubious. The developments brought about by real subsumption do of course have impacts beyond the labour process and radically reshape the reproductive sphere, but these changes are not uniform and are always mediated through the production process itself. This is because it is only in production that capital directly determines labour's activity as its own – and this determination is precisely what is designated by Marx's account of subsumption. Capital's domination of the total social process can therefore only be understood as indirect and disperse (although this is not to discount the importance of direct extra-economic state violence, 'primitive accumulation' and modern forms of slavery in maintaining the conditions for this impersonal exercise of power).

Underlying this last error is a failure to recognise the irreducible non-identity that holds between *living labour* and the *labour-power commodity*; this difference fundamentally structures capitalist social relations, so that whatever depth of social commodification is achieved, analytically at least, the two sides of labour always remain distinct. Workers are not slaves, and their labour power is only ever sold for specific period of time (or task) outside of which they are no longer subject to the command of the capitalist, and thus not subsumed. Jettisoning the distinctions between living labour and labour-power, production and reproduction, use value and exchange-value as Negri does leaves us with a theoretical object that can no longer be called capitalist. Indeed, as he himself acknowledges, under this version of real subsumption the goal of social production is not valorization but the extension of 'pure command'.

### *The Disjunctive Synthesis of times*

Finally, I want to deal with the underlying premise of the 'periodisation' reading of subsumption – the notion of an historical 'present', understood as a synchronic totality in which all elements are related in a single time of contemporaneity – what Althusser termed an 'essential section'. This model of historical time is consistent throughout all the examples mentioned above, in so far as they take real subsumption to be *the* globally unified social temporality of the present, and in doing so use it to conceptually differentiate this current 'present' from its predecessors. As such, they are dependent on a variety of stageist assumptions about the linearity and uniformity of historical development – in both the chronological and geographic registers. I want to argue against such assumptions, and propose instead that the global unity of social relations and practices be thought as a *disjunctive synthesis* of conflicting and contradictory temporalities, which are distributed unevenly, develop asynchronously and reciprocally affect one another. The conceptual dynamic of subsumption is still at work here, but instead of providing an abstract schema of historical development, in this context it explicates the processes of mediation and regulation that unify the disjunctive temporalities within the global totality of capital – that is its conceptual significance.

So whereas the periodising account of subsumption is grounded in the idea of a dominant mode of accumulation (or in some cases, reproduction) that allows us to think the consistency of the present, by contrast I want to suggest that the putative present (and indeed accumulation itself) can only be grasped through an analytic of its specific *inconsistency* – that is, of its constitutively disjunctive temporal structure. At the level of the mode of production this structure is characterised by a series of formal disjunctions: between valorisation and reproduction; between production and circulation; between living and dead labour; necessary and surplus labour time; etc... But these disjunctions must be further qualified according to *inter alia*: national and regional differences, political cultures and organisational strategies, geo-political configurations of power and so on. Crucially, capital is constituted through the co-existence of multiple heterogeneous but interconnected temporalities that cannot be totalized from any single subject-position<sup>14</sup>. The dynamic of subsumption, however, allows us to grasp the hierarchical and antagonistic relationship between these disjointed times from a materialist standpoint.

With first the formal and then subsequently the material transformation of labour processes, the temporal rhythms and dynamics of past practices and struggles are supplanted by novel forms isomorphic with the interminable transformations in production. These transformations are determined and synchronised according to what Max Tomba has called the ‘world-rhythm of necessary labour’. This world-rhythm informs the processes of subsumption in so far as it posits the productivity level that individual capitals must ‘meet or beat’. But whilst the coercive function of the world-rhythm is singular, the material forms and disciplinary effects it can take – as well as the modalities of resistance that emerge in response to these – are radically heterogeneous; and so if anything, real subsumption produces a proliferation of temporal forms rather than a homogenising inclination. Whilst the rhythm is worldly (and increasingly global) in its *scope*, it remains local in its *actualisation*, because necessary labour time is an expression of concrete productive powers, and thus only ever specific to the production of certain commodities, or branches of industry. Highly liquid capital movements, credit markets and the primacy of the ‘rate of return’ are indicative of capital’s desire to transgress this specificity, but its internal contradiction is that it cannot, and such calculations always have to be schematised – sometimes violently – against the limits of concrete labour processes. So despite the ever-increasing penetration of the ‘world-rhythm’ of necessary labour, it is not clear that it can be thought of as a substantive temporality – or even meta-temporality – in any straightforward sense, because it is ultimately only a dynamical principle – that is, is constituted in the relations *between* times as a regulatory mechanism.

In addition to this, as Tomba and others like Enrique Dussel also point out, modes of exploitation found in the so-called underdeveloped parts of the world cannot be dismissed as historically residual or regressive, but ‘must be understood as the forms most adequate to the current complex of capitalist relations of production’<sup>15</sup> Not only do formal and real subsumption exist alongside and in combination

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<sup>14</sup> Without here engaging with the question of whether capital is a ‘subject’, we can at least say that if it were it would not be one capable of temporal totalisation.

<sup>15</sup> Massimiliano Tomba, ‘Historical Temporalities of Capital: An Anti-historicist perspective’, *Historical Materialism* 17, pp.44-45

with one another, but added to this matrix are hybrid forms of subsumption and the permanent presence of 'primitive accumulation' accomplished through the use of extra-economic violence. Each of these modes has their own temporal dynamics that interact with, but are not reducible to, the others; together, these are the primary power forms through which the disjunctive-synthesis of global capital is effected.

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I am aware that this short paper asks many more questions than it can answer, and only intimates towards what might constitute a materialist theory of time under the condition of capital. Indeed, there are many possible options for pursuing such an inquiry; but if we are to take a genuinely materialist approach that has some tangible relation to ongoing struggles, then this demands moving beyond the model of a singular, or totalized 'time of capital' and an engagement with the explosive multiplicity of temporalities that compose its actuality. To this end, subsumption provides one of the central categories with which to bring these times to concretion in thought, in so far as it discloses the structuring principle of the disjunctive synthesis.

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