



# Subsumption

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## INTRODUCTION

Subsumption counts amongst those concepts of philosophical provenance that are taken up by Marx and recoded as critical social concepts. Originating as a logical category, subsumption nonetheless describes for Marx something fundamental about both the basic structure and the developmental tendencies of capitalist societies. Subsumption is, in a sense, the crucial logical figure of capitalist relations, insofar as these relations are founded on the systematically perpetuated subordination of labour to capital. Without this subsumption there can be no exploitation of surplus-value, and so no accumulation and expanded reproduction of capital. The concept of subsumption, however, has a somewhat ambiguous status within Marx's thought. The term appears repeatedly from Marx's early to late writings, yet nowhere is it subject by Marx to a rigorous treatment, and so no explicit 'theory' of subsumption is presented in his writings. What the reader of Marx appears to be confronted with is little more than scattered fragments and indications, allusions to a more substantial position that never appears, or that, in *Capital*, is structurally repressed by the systematising impulse that governs the movement of Marx's discourse. The ambiguities and apparent ambivalence expressed in Marx's use of the term has been the cause of wide ranging debates over the uses and misuses of the concept and its relevance for a critical engagement with contemporary reality, spanning assertions of its irrelevance (or even

theoretical counterproductivity) to readings that elevate it as the primary concept characterising the configuration of contemporary (or 'late') capitalism.

In this chapter, I consider three aspects of subsumption as a Marxist concept: its philosophical pre-history, especially in the work of Kant and Hegel (an appreciation of which, I argue, is crucial to grasping the depth of its significance within Marxist theory); Marx's conceptualisation of subsumption (both at a 'general' level, in relation to his materialist methodology, and as capitalist subsumption, in his critique of political economy); and, finally, key interpretations and debates pertaining to subsumption within the Marxist tradition.

## CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Whether named as such or not, subsumption has been a figure of thought employed since antiquity, describing both a relation and an act. In its classical conception, subsumption denotes a hierarchical *relation* of classification in which one element is designated as a particular, subordinate of a more general category than encompasses it (e.g. 'the human' subsumed under the genus of 'animal'). Equally, subsumption refers to the *act* of judgement that produces (or at least describes) this relation, that of *subsuming* a particular under a universal or, in a legal/medical context, the case under a rule. In this way, subsumption is basic to the construction of any systematically ordered body of knowledge or scientific discourse. Yet in modern philosophy, subsumption begins to take on a new significance, referring not simply to the hierarchical arrangement of ideas, or even things, but to the process by which objective entities come to be constituted as such. It is this shift from subsumption as logical organisation to subsumption as form-determination (or from recognition to production) that prepares the way for Marx's use of the term.

### ***Kant***

It was Immanuel Kant who first broke with the received understanding of subsumption as a purely logical or formal relation, by according it a central role in his critical philosophy. For Kant, our experience of the external world is not a direct sensible apprehension of things 'in themselves' (as naïve empiricism would have it), neither is it the effect of a purely mental activity of construction (as dogmatic rationalism asserts), but rather results from a cognitive 'synthesis' of sensible and conceptual elements. For experience of objects to be possible, Kant argues, the 'matter' of sensation must be given a conceptually ordered 'form' by being subsumed under the 'pure concepts of the understanding' (Kant, 1998). The pure concepts supply rules for the organisation of experience, such that what is grasped spontaneously and arbitrarily by the senses can be reorganised in a systematically ordered, stable and communicable form, enabling this

‘matter’ to be known (rather than simply ‘felt’); that is, appropriated cognitively by a rational consciousness.

Unlike the classical notion of subsumption, where specific concepts are categorised under more general concepts (a relation of concept to concept), this cognitive synthesis involves the articulation of heterogeneous elements: discursive concepts and sensible intuitions. The radicality of Kant’s proposition was that concepts (of a certain fundamental or ‘pure’ type) did not simply map relations between empirical objects, but actively intervened in the process of their formation. The Kantian project of developing a ‘transcendental logic’ along with the ‘transcendental synthesis’ that is its core, thus involved recoding cognitive relations and procedures that were previously understood to have validity only in relation to *thought* objects, rendering them essential aspects of the process by which the form of *empirical* objects (the objects of concrete experience) is determined.

Subsumption, from the time of Kant’s philosophy onwards, thus takes on the character of an *object-forming*, rather than simply taxonomising act. It does not only imply the ordering or relating of given objects but is a basic precondition of their constitution *as* objects, a moment of their ‘production’. Importantly, the productivity of subsumption within Kantian philosophy is not limited to the *objects* of experience alone but also reciprocally enables the actualisation of subjectivity, as the medium, or *compositional totality* within which the representation of each and every object is unified (a conscious continuum consisting in a multiplicity of distinguished and related objects). In binding together the various moments of sensation in a conceptually coherent manner, transcendental subjectivity also binds each moment to itself, as the totality within which all objects are composed. This effects a reciprocal movement whereby the form-determination of objects by consciousness also turns out to be the precise activity by which consciousness actualises itself as self-consciousness, in the ‘transcendental unity of apperception’. This reciprocity is crucial, because it signifies that the existence of a totalising structure is not independent of or indifferent to those entities that it determines and totalises, but rather both the total structure and individual objects equally depend on the active processes of determination by which they are related to one another (this will be important for Marx, insofar as the production of a certain type of objectivity, e.g. commodities, reciprocally actualises and sustains the existence of the compositional totality that necessitates this production: capitalism).

## **Hegel**

Subsumption does not play a central role in Hegel’s philosophy and appears only infrequently in his writings. Nevertheless, there is an important thread of continuity relating the core aspects of the Kantian discourse of subsumption with Hegel’s thought, as well as the development of novel features of subsumption

crucial for Marx's adoption of the concept. The importance of Hegel's treatment of subsumption is twofold. Hegel recognised the centrality of subsumptive form-determination to the constitution of objectivity whilst at the same time decoupling such acts of determination from their source in the ahistorical structure of the individual ego on which Kant's 'transcendental logic' was based. This enabled Hegel to formulate a dynamic and developmental account of the reciprocity between discrete forms and the compositional totality that encompassed them. Rather than reflexively reinforcing one another in a closed loop that would always return to the same point of departure (the Kantian unity of apperception), for Hegel the movement of determination and comprehension, or externalisation and appropriation, traced what Marx described as 'a spiral, an expanding curve, not a simple circle' (Marx, 1993: 266). On this account, acts of subsumption form objects, which in turn transform the system or structure of determination itself, compelling it in turn to generate new forms for new objects, thereby unleashing a restless developmental dynamic.

The reflexive closure operative in Kantian philosophy is thus transformed by Hegel into a processual account of development that passes through successive, interlinked stages, where each stage emerges as a result of the previous stage. This implies a new conception of how acts of relational determination (such as subsumption) interact with the structures of unity, or compositional totalities, in which their basic elements are situated. The subsumption of the particular under the universal is no longer an infinitely self-same act realised within an unchanging totality, but rather takes on a fundamentally different character depending on the stage of development of the totality, whilst at the same time driving that development onwards. Therefore, whilst retaining its Kantian characterisation as an object constituting process, Hegel relativises and multiplies the nature of subsumptive form-determination, specifying its nature and effects according to the stage or moment of development in which it is operative. This opens the path to conceptualising subsumption as both a social and historical process.

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, this processual concept of development leads to the 'sublation' (*Aufhebung*) of the finite standpoint of an isolated consciousness and the development of a social concept of subjectivity that emerges with the transition from subject-object relations through subject-subject, and then subject-substance relations in the various forms of ethical life (Hegel, 1977). In the first place, Hegel's exposition attempts to demonstrate that interpersonal relations are an implicit condition for the existence of the individual self-consciousness that characterises the standpoint of Kant's philosophy. The subsumption of intuitions under concepts thus comes to be associated with a partial form of knowledge belonging to a limited stage in the developmental series, opening the path to further, diverse processes of subsumption of an intersubjective nature (the subsumption of one subject by another and the emergence of hierarchical relations, as in the section on

'lordship and bondage'). Subsequently, Hegel traces the development of social relations into enduring *objective* structures, rather than contingent and unstable relations between isolated individuals. Here, with the emergence of what he terms 'spirit', subsumptive relations obtain between particular individuals and the universality of the *social form* they exist within and are constituted by (as opposed to simply the domination of one self-consciousness by another). This is a vital precursor to Marx's use of subsumption, as it lays the foundation for an analysis of processes through which individuals are subsumed under objective structures of sociality. Hegel's intervention into the discourse of subsumptive form-determination thus clearly takes him far beyond the analysis of *synthetic judgement acts* proper to an individual consciousness and onto the theorisation of *relational forms* that determine the identity and practical action of individuals in a collective context.

Hegel's analysis of the development through successive configurations of an all-encompassing social totality also establishes the basis for conceptualising subsumption in historical terms, although how exactly to characterise the historical dimension of Hegel's philosophy has been contested since its earliest reception. More important than any putative correspondence between the successive 'shapes' of spirit described by Hegel and real historical epochs or events is Hegel's commitment to the idea that different social and ethical orders give rise to different kinds of individuals, practices and institutions (as well as, by implication, different forms of unfreedom and domination). Yet the controversial aspect of this insight was the philosophy of history underpinning Hegel's account, which equated the development through successive social stages as the necessary progression towards ever more rational and ethically perfected orders, culminating in an 'absolute' moment that both completed the developmental movement and unified all the preceding stages (thus totalling the multiple configurations of totality). On a certain reading of this view, history is driven by a rational necessity towards the realisation of universal freedom and unity between individuals, nature and the divine that would effectively complete the historical process, given that no 'higher' order could subsequently be realised. This gave rise not only to the problem of how to identify and validate the historical moment at which such a state of completion had or will have been attained but also of whether history could indeed end in this way.

Despite its apparent abstractness, Hegel's most sustained explicit engagement with the concept of subsumption, in his *Science of Logic* (1999), bears directly on these problems. Here, Hegel criticises the logical form of subsumption *as such* (that is, independently of any concrete moment of subsumption) as a limited and contradictory relation that cannot produce genuine unity between the elements it relates. Hegel's critique centres on the assertion that subsumptive form-determination always involves a kind of imposition or violence, as a particular 'content' is determined by a 'form' that remains in some sense abstract or indifferent to its specific qualities and so violates its singular

identity. Insofar as it is constrained by the abstractness of the form, the content cannot fully actualise or 'be' itself in its particularity and thus remains unfree. It is the guiding motive of the Hegelian dialectic to overcome all such abstractness and indifference in the relation between form and content, or universal and particular, in order to attain true freedom. The absolute and final unity that is the horizon of Hegel's system and the point of completion for the schema of historical development it entails therefore demands an overcoming of the limitations of subsumptive relations.

In spite of all the shortcomings that Marx identified in Hegel's thought, the motif of overcoming the imposition of alien and dominating forms indifferent to the qualitative singularity of the living content they shape figures as a powerful influence on his critique of capitalist societies. The logical and abstract character of subsumption, as highlighted by Hegel, is a perfectly apt figure for the oppressive character of capital, as an alienating and one-sided form of social relatedness.

On the basis of a reading of the structural function played by subsumption within the philosophy of Kant and Hegel, it becomes clear that the transformations it undergoes in their respective systems are crucial for the development of Marx's deployment of subsumption as a critical social concept. Far from simply indicating a hierarchical relation, as in its classical sense, subsumption in this tradition becomes inexorably bound to the problems of form-determination and systemic development. With Kant, we see that all objectivity must be produced (rather than simply apprehended) and that synthetic acts of form-determining subsumption are central to this production. With Hegel, we see that the production of objectivity takes place according not to a fixed but rather a developing 'historical' totality whose transformations alter the nature and effects of that production (and so too the nature and effects of the subsumptive relations operative within it). At the same time, Hegel recognises in subsumption an inherently alienating or oppressive character, insisting that, by definition, subsumption implies the unfreedom or constraint of whatever is subsumed. These interventions are significant for the development of Marx's thought and the critical tradition it birthed in three principal senses: firstly, the 'productivity' of subsumption informs the Marxist notion of labour and the labour process, as the ontological locus of object-formation with corresponding subject-forming effects; secondly, the abstract character of subsumptive relations informs the discourse of alienation, reification, ideology and 'real abstraction' (Wendling, Chapter 28, Rehmann, Chapter 31, and Lange, Chapter 32, this *Handbook*); thirdly, the situation of subsumption within a developing compositional totality that enables its comprehension as a historical process (both in the sense of being determined by historical conditions and determining of historical change). In establishing these new problematics and giving rise to new conceptual resources, this philosophical history of subsumption is an essential precondition for the invention of a Marxist theory of subsumption.

## SUBSUMPTION IN MARX'S WRITINGS

### ***Materialism and the Critique of Philosophy: Marx's Reaction to the Philosophical Discourse of Subsumption***

In his early writings, Marx identifies the limitations of previous accounts of subsumption, and of philosophy more generally, in the way they conceive of the relation between thought and reality. For Marx, idealist philosophy subscribes to an upside-down account of actuality in which the causal relation between thinking and being is inverted, such that ideas and the logical relations between ideas have primacy over real individuals and material relations. Nowhere, for Marx, is this inversion more evident than in Hegel's philosophy and theory of modern society, where 'he simply holds fast to the one category and contents himself with searching for something corresponding to it in actual existence' (Marx, 1975: 109). Marx charges Hegel with providing 'his logic with a political body; he does not provide us with the logic of the body politic' (1975: 109). Despite its claim to begin from the most immediate and presuppositionless point of departure, Hegel's thought, simply by virtue of being philosophy, already presupposes the priority of conceptuality over material being.

Recognising this congenital dogmatism of the ideal, Marx turns philosophy's own methods – in particular Hegel's dialectic – against itself, disarticulating the practice of critique from the context and problematics in which it originates in order to redeploy it in the service of a new project of materialist social criticism. For Marx, *critique* of given social reality – with its constitutive relations, practices, forms and institutions – is synonymous with the construction of an adequate systematic *exposition* of that reality: providing the 'logic of the body politic'. Such a 'logic' can only be the eventual (and continuously revised) result, rather than the dogmatic starting point, of critical social research that aims to retrace real existence in thought with a view to the transformation of that existence.

Grasping and criticising the logics of social and historical existence in this way becomes the central objective of Marx's project, driving him to invent a constellation of new categories and a singular theoretical methodology that defies traditional (yet still enduring) disciplinary boundaries. This movement of invention engendered a radical reconsideration of the status of conceptual relations, both within theoretical discourse as well as in the social reality it describes and seeks to undo. If the concept of subsumption is taken over from philosophy by Marx, it is not in order to subject it to critique in abstraction from any concrete social context in which subsumptive relations obtain. It is, rather, because it adequately expresses a 'determinate function' within a historically specific configuration of human relations and practices (modern, bourgeois society). From this materialist perspective, subsumption serves as the theoretical expression, or logical figure, of some real (i.e. material, practical) subordination of individuals or objects to a dominant social form or function. The 'categories' under which individuals and objects are subsumed in

Marx's discourse are not therefore reducible to thought-determinations (although they may still retain a conceptual dimension) but are more broadly conceived as categories of historical being or social forms of existence that determine and are constituted through the collective practice of social individuals.

Subsumption in Marx's evolving critical vocabulary thus comes to imply subsumption under historical forms of existence, or more specifically, as Marx says in the *Grundrisse*, 'subsumption of ... individuals under specific relations of production' (1993: 96). Such specific relations of production, unified in various configurations as 'modes of production' (Haldon, Chapter 2, this *Handbook*), come to act as the determining forms of action and identity under which individuals are subsumed and thereby constituted in their historical peculiarity (the 'universal' under which various 'particulars' are subsumed, in logical terms). If Hegel had already identified the inherently constraining and abstractive dimension of subsumption, where the unfreedom of the individual is presupposed in its subsumption *as such*, Marx appropriates and qualifies this contention by filling it with historical colour and content. Rejecting all but the most basic transhistorical determinations of production and reproduction as a metabolic process (Marx, 1976: 290), Marx demands an attentiveness to the specific ensembles of social relations and forms in which concrete subsumptive relations obtain. It follows that if indeed subsumptive relations are concomitant with unfreedom, such unfreedom has to be grasped in its historical particularity, in distinction from forms of unfreedom proper to other epochs (for example, feudalism or ancient slave-owning societies).

### **Capitalist Subsumption**

Having developed a general theorisation of social form-determination as subsumption under relations of production, Marx's account of capitalist subsumption can be grasped as a historically specific configuration of this process of form-determination. In the context of the critique of political economy – Marx's *exposé* of the system of bourgeois categories (itself the idealised expression of bourgeois reality) – subsumption is used to describe the relation that obtains between capital and labour, such that labour can be said to be subsumed under capital insofar as it is form-determined as a *particular instance of capital*. This 'subsumption of labour under capital' has a dual significance, referring both to the above-mentioned notion of determination, where labour is constituted as a moment of capital both economically and materially, as well as simultaneously designating the unfreedom which this form-determination implies, as the repression of alternative modes of representation and action for labour.

This use of subsumption in Marx's writings is guided by the critical conception of subsumption set out by Kant, indicating a problem concerning not simply the hierarchical arrangement of preformed elements (as in the 'classical' concept of subsumption) but the deeper problem of how particulars are formed or constituted in accordance with the universal that subsumes them. For Marx, there is no natural or



eternal relation of belonging between labour and capital; their articulation is instead the effect of a particular conjunction of historical conditions and forces that determine productive activity as wage labour through the formation of a 'working' class (that is, a class of individuals with no other means of survival other than the sale of their labour capacity). This particularity is precisely what is at stake in Marx's discussion of capitalist subsumption: the historically specific mechanisms by which labour is form-determined (as an exploitable commodity) and dominated by capital. Marx analyses several different forms of subsumption under capital (formal, real, hybrid) each corresponding to a specific modality of command and coercion employed to extract surplus-value from the production process. Not only are these forms diverse, involving both social and material aspects, they also express capital's tendency progressively to deepen its control of production in order to remove all barriers to exploitation and accumulation. Subsumption is thus key, not only in specifying the historical particularity of capitalist social relations but also in conceptualising the internal dynamism and developmental tendencies those relations exhibit.

For Marx, the subsumptive relation between capital and labour is mediated through the unity of two processes: *the valorisation process* and *the labour process*. In this unity, 'the labour process is as it were incorporated in [the valorisation process], subsumed under it' (Marx and Engels, 1988: 67). At a general level, the essence of the subsumption of labour lies in the ways in which capital takes hold of the labour process and makes it also function as a valorisation process, an engine for the production of surplus-value. This happens, in its most basic form, through the conjunction of two different acts.

Firstly, capital and labour take the form of commodities in the process of circulation: money wages and labour-power. The owner of labour-power and the owner of wages meet on the market and exchange their goods, which are commensurated as sums of value, that is, expressions of abstract human labour. In doing so, the owner of wages, the capitalist, *buys* the right to command a certain amount of labour time. The generalised commodification of labour-power, underpinned by the processes of 'so-called original accumulation' which gives rise to a proletarian class, is the first moment of labour's 'particularisation' under capital. From the perspective of circulation, Marx calls this a simple sale and purchase 'like any other', in the sense that both parties are formally free, and enter willingly into the exchange (even though this situation is conditioned for the proletarian by another sense of freedom: that of *the freedom from owning any property*). Nonetheless, at the same time, this quantitatively 'equal' exchange is 'coloured' by its peculiar content:

With his money, the money owner has ... bought disposition over labour capacity so that he can use up, consume, this labour capacity as such, i.e. have it operate as actual labour, in short, so that he can have the worker really work. (Marx and Engels, 1988: 64)

This actual using up of the labour-power commodity, Marx goes on to say, 'is a process qualitatively distinct from the exchange. It is an essentially different category' (1988: 54).

Secondly, in the analysis of production, Marx demonstrates that with this command over the labour process, the capitalist is able to compel the worker to perform surplus labour, to produce an excess of value over and above what they receive in the form of wages in order to reproduce themselves. In this way:

[a] relation of domination and subordination enters the relation of production itself; this derives from capital's ownership of the labour it has incorporated and from the nature of the labour process itself. (Marx and Engels, 1994: 102)

These two moments – exchange *and* production, the *formal* and *material* aspects of capitalist economic life – together determine the labour process as a valorisation process, and so establish the basis for capitalist subsumption; *neither is sufficient without the other*. The exchange relationship is necessary for labour to take the form of value, to fall under the ownership and command of the capitalist and thus *become variable capital* (that is, a formal instantiation of the universality of capital). Equally, the process of production is necessary for the value-creating capacity of labour to be exploited, so that the original capital generates a surplus and has expanded. It is only in this way that labour has acted *as* a moment of capital, subsumed under it.

Crucially, however, there is no inherent connection between these two processes; Marx says that ‘the labour process as such has nothing to do with the act of purchasing the labour capacity on the part of the capitalist’ (Marx and Engels, 1988: 65–66) whilst ‘on the other hand, the concept of the commodity in and for itself excludes labour as process’ (Marx and Engels, 1994: 71). Yet the two movements presuppose one another and come to appear as linked ‘naturally’ in their capitalist articulation. Their relationship must be constantly renewed in order to sustain the reciprocal movement between circulation and production that is the basis for the accumulation of capital. It is therefore the unity of these two acts – exchange and production – that constitutes the distinctive synthesis of the capitalist social form or ‘mode of production’: the mode by which labour is form-determined practically as ‘for capital’. In expressing the logic of this basic conjunction (as the articulation of a particular concrete content with an abstract social form of universality) it is ‘subsumption’ above all other concepts in Marx’s work that describes most directly what the specificity of *capitalist* domination consists in. In other words, it points to what is most essential in the capitalist power relation so as to distinguish it, both in its end and means, from hitherto existing forms of social domination.

### **Forms of Subsumption**

Marx distinguishes between several forms of subsumption under capital, elaborating different modalities in which capital exercises its command over the labour process. Yet Marx insists that these form-determinations and processes of command function as *transformations* of existing configurations of production

and cannot be comprehended in abstraction from the concrete historical conditions in which they emerge and develop. What is indicated by the distinction between formal, real and hybrid subsumption are different mechanisms of transforming production on a capitalist basis, which in turn have transformative repercussions throughout the whole of society.

### ***Formal Subsumption***

With the ‘formal subsumption’ of labour under capital, Marx explains that capitalists take over existing production processes without altering the ‘specific technological character’ of the labour process in any way (Marx and Engels, 1988: 92). The means and methods of labour, as much as the final product, remain identical to the form they took when production was carried out in its pre-capitalist configuration. What does change is that now the worker works for a wage, under the command and supervision of a capitalist, using materials provided by the capitalist, and leaves the production process without ownership of any of the products they have toiled to realise. The worker’s labour has thus been subsumed under capital, appropriated and exploited to generate surplus-value, but only ‘formally’, that is, at the level of the economic relationship of exchange between the worker and capitalist. The worker’s actual activity is carried out exactly as it was before the capitalist commanded it and so is ‘materially’ untouched by the introduction of this new manner of exploitation. Insofar as formal subsumption functions as a mechanism of domination, it is thus purely at the level of the interpersonal power relationship by which the worker, dependant on their wage to survive, is compelled to cede command over their productive capacities to the capitalist who can profit from them. Given the purely formal character of this domination, when capitalists seek to increase their exploitation of formally subsumed labour (as they by definition must) the only means at their disposal involve the imposition of a longer working day or an intensified rhythm of labour, both of which run up against natural limits and social barriers.

### ***Real Subsumption***

Marx goes on to describe a deeper form of subsumption which builds upon the economic mode of control operative with formal subsumption. The ‘real subsumption’ of labour under capital involves not only the formal command over the worker enjoyed by the wage-owning capitalist, but also a further, *material* form of command resulting from the fact that the capitalist also owns and configures the means of production involved in the labour process. Dependant on these means to realise the labour activity they sold to the capitalist, workers must adapt to the means along with the methods of labour they technologically presuppose. If the capitalist alters the technical configuration of the labour process, so too will the worker’s labour be altered. The capitalist thus discovers another method

through which to increase the exploitation of labour, because if the production process can be made more efficient (that is, generate more use-values with an equal or diminished amount of labour-power, producing 'relative' surplus-value), or enable a greater power of coercion over the worker's activity, then the capitalist stands to gain, even without having 'formally' forced the labourer to work longer or harder. This is the 'real subsumption' of labour, which Marx's considers corresponds with the 'properly capitalist mode of production' (1975: 1019 ff.).

Marx subdivides real subsumption into three distinct moments: (1) co-operation, (2) division of labour and manufacture, and (3) machinery and large-scale industry:

- 1 Co-operation is the simple re-organisation of production by capitalists to enable the 'direct collective labour' of multiple workers. In effect, this merely means gathering workers in one location without changing the nature of their working process, so the difference it introduces with respect to formal subsumption (where workers may be employed by the same capitalist but carry out their work in different locations) is 'purely quantitative'. The capitalist gains here by a concentration that enables the sharing of resources and co-ordination of individual powers, as well as a heightened capacity for surveillance and supervision.
- 2 Division of labour and manufacture involves much greater interference by capitalists into the labour process, which is broken down into discrete moments that then become the specialised task of individual workers. The collective labour is 'divided' between these tasks; rather than one worker assembling an entire commodity from start to finish, each worker repeatedly performs a single moment of the overall process. Labour thus becomes increasingly specialised and perfected with respect to these 'partial operations', with each individual worker's input representing just a fragment of the final product. In terms of the experience of work, Marx argues that this gives rise to monotony of labour, with the incessant repetition of minute tasks, and a dissociation from the final product, which the worker may never see, understand or enjoy. Significant here for the theorisation of subsumption as the mechanism of capitalist domination is that the labour process is now designed and unified by the capitalist, not the worker, who, as a result, finds their activity inserted into a process alien to them.
- 3 The tendency towards inverting the worker's control over the labour process and placing it on the side of the capitalist is consummated with large-scale industry based on the use of machinery. Here, it is not just the division and specialisation of tasks that guarantees the efficiency of exploitation, but the development of machinery as the objective apparatus through which the labour process is realised:

The increase of the productive force of labour and the greatest possible negation of necessary labour is the necessary tendency of capital, as we have seen. The transformation of the means of labour into machinery is the realization of this tendency. (Marx, 1993: 693)

Unlike tools, machinery is not constrained by the limits of the individual human body (or even multiple bodies acting in concert) and so enables a huge increase in the productivity of the labour process. Large-scale industry turns the workshop into a factory, an 'articulated system' of processes and machines whose 'regulating principle' is an ever-perfected continuity of production, aiming to minimise all interruptions to the labour process (Marx, 1993: 693). Rather than cultivating specialist technical skill in the worker as manufacture does, industry inculcates the labourer into a 'specialisation in passivity', reducing their activity

to the simple operation of technically complex machinery overseeing its operation as ‘watchman and regulator’ rather than ‘chief actor’ (1993: 693). The activity of the workforce thus becomes ‘determined and regulated on all sides by the movement of the machinery, and not the opposite’ (1993: 693). In this way, capitalist command comes to be *objectively* posited in the material composition of the labour process, so that the worker confronts the necessity of their exploitation not just in the personal authority of the capitalist employer or in the bureaucratic organisation of tasks, but as a ‘technological fact’ built into the concrete reality of the means of production.

### **Hybrid Subsumption**

Alongside the discussions of formal and real subsumption Marx also mentions the existence of various ‘hybrid forms’ (*Zwitterformen*) through which surplus-value is ‘extorted’ by capitalists without the labour process being formally subsumed (Marx, 1976: 645; cf. also Banaji, 2011: 63; Das, 2012; Murray, 2004: 265; Skillman, 2012). Like formal and real subsumption, an economic relationship underpins such exploitation, but without the mediation of a direct wage and without the ownership and control of the labour process by the capitalist (Marx, 1976: 645). Instead, either by monopolising the market for the purchase of the producer’s goods, or through advances of money, materials or land needed for production, the capitalist is effectively able to extract a surplus from the producer without purchasing and commanding their labour-power. Jairus Banaji has thus described the economic relationship implied by hybrid subsumption as effectively constituting a ‘concealed wage’ (Banaji 2011: 98). The capitalist here functions formally as ‘middleman, as merchant’, (Marx and Engels, 1988: 270) or alternatively, as a usurer, feeding ‘on [the producer] like a parasite’ (Marx, 1976: 645), though ultimately the result is the same as with other modes of subsumption: exploitation and accumulation (Marx and Engels, 1994: 118–119).

Hybrid subsumption presupposes that formally independent producers are willing to enter into exploitative relationships, even in the absence of ‘political restraints’ obliging them to do so, in order to gain access to the money or means of production needed to secure their means of subsistence. The existence of such ‘hybrid forms’ must therefore be associated with, on the one hand, processes of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey 2003) and the concentration of wealth and means of production by a capitalist class alongside, and on the other, the propagation of money-mediated market relations.

Marx refers to hybrid subsumption in two primary senses (although a vast diversity of concrete scenarios, both historical and contemporary, is covered by the concept). Hybrid forms can be ‘transitional’ (*Übergangsformen*), serving as the basis for the historical emergence of formal subsumption at the dawn of capitalist production. But they also endure or emerge anew as ‘accompanying forms’ (*Nebenformen*) alongside properly capitalist production relations based on formal

or real subsumption. In this sense, hybrid forms are not restricted to residual or anachronistic forms of exploitation, but rather constitute a permanently present strategy of exclusion and outsourcing which capitalists can employ as a strategic response to both competitive pressures and the resistance of workers (Das, 2012).

## HISTORICAL RECEPTION AND DEBATES

### ***Periodisation and 'Total' Subsumption***

Within the Marxist canon, the concept of subsumption remains a relatively undertheorised term, having received far less scholarly and political engagement than concepts such as alienation, exploitation, reification or abstraction. This neglect derives at least in part from its limited textual presence in Marx's writings and an apparent ambivalence on Marx's behalf with regard to its theoretical status (Murray, 2009: 173; Saenz de Sicilia, forthcoming; Skillman, 2013). The most sustained accounts of capitalist subsumption are developed by Marx in early drafts of his critique of political economy – *The Results of the Immediate Production Process* and the *1861–63 Manuscripts* – yet the term 'subsumption' was almost entirely omitted from the published volumes of *Capital*, with the earlier drafts in question becoming available relatively late on in the formation of both the 'orthodox' and 'critical' Marxist traditions. Nonetheless, amongst the various attempts to revitalise and reinvent the critique of capitalist society in the wake of the failures of historical communisms of various stripes, a number of significant contributions invoke subsumption as a central critical category. In particular, the writings of Theodor W. Adorno, Jacques Camatte and Antonio Negri all draw on subsumption as a category with which to theorise the developmental dynamics of capitalist power. Despite their emergence against the backdrop of diverse political and cultural contexts, common to these approaches is an understanding of subsumption as a category concerned primarily with the historical transformation of capitalist relations, either through the periodisation of distinct phases of capitalism mapped to the formal/real subsumption distinction and corresponding to differing modes of exploitation and resistance (as with Negri), or in the progressive extension and expansion of capitalist relations such that they begin to encompass all hitherto non-commodified realms of life such as culture and leisure (what Adorno and Horkheimer identified as 'the development toward total integration' 2002: xii).

The work of Adorno established the first serious attempt, after Marx, to deploy the concept of subsumption in the tradition of Marxian social criticism. However, rather than building upon Marx's analysis of different forms of subsumption, Adorno's use of the category is more directly grounded in its prior philosophical conceptualisations and critique, particularly Kantian epistemology and its Hegelian metacritique.

In the first place, this philosophical legacy provided Adorno with a model for the fate of social individuals in modern societies, based on the formative schematising processes specified by German idealism in which the particular is adequated to the universal in a manner that abstracts away any excessive individuality (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 65). This template of ‘identifying judgement’ is manifested concretely for Adorno in the reduction of ‘the overwhelming mass of the population ... to mere objects of administration’ (2002: 30) which forms them as passive and powerless (‘nullified’) individuals via, in the most extreme case, the ‘complete abstraction of subsumed human beings under arbitrary concepts’ to which they are made to fit (Adorno, 1973: 236). As Adorno’s correspondent Alfred Sohn-Rethel emphasised, the connection with subsumption here is not mere analogy given the practical (rather than merely theoretical) character of the abstraction involved in commodity exchange (Sohn-Rethel, 1978). In relating commodities quantitatively on the basis of their exchange-value whilst bracketing the qualitative heterogeneity of their specific properties, individuals do not just think abstractly but ‘actualize a real conceptual operation socially’ (Adorno, 2018: 155), concretising subsumption under the forms of capitalist value as a ‘real abstraction’ (Lange, Chapter 32, this *Handbook*) – with real effects at the level of the social form-determination of both objects and subjects.

In the second place, for Adorno, this procedure of social schematisation demonstrates a developmental tendency towards extensive and intensive absolutisation. Advancing along the twin vectors of ‘industrialisation’ in production and ‘mass culture’ in consumption, the dynamic of subsumption under exchange-value displays a movement towards the ‘total administration’ of social subjects. Individuals in capitalism find themselves dominated both in work and leisure, subject to a form of control that not only regulates their outward action and relation to others but comes to ‘preform’ their innermost identity, desires and personality in a manner that dissolves any real autonomy (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 30). However, Adorno is conspicuously vague about the precise mechanisms by which this tendential colonisation of the inner and outer lifeworld is driven, and it is here that the limits of his account are evident. By giving primacy to commodity relations and the exchange abstraction in his account of the functioning of capitalist power, Adorno elides the key mechanism identified in Marx’s critique of political economy through which capital progressively transforms the world in its own image whilst deepening its domination of human societies: the real subsumption of the labour process, enacted by virtue of capitalist control over production. Constrained by his ‘circulationist’ standpoint (grounding the exchange abstraction in the metanarrative of ‘enlightenment’ and instrumental reason rather than a theory of accumulation), Adorno can only allude to the processes of material domination that flow with apparent automaticity from the commodification of labour and capitalist ownership of the production process. Adorno’s critique of capitalist society thus remains ‘formal’, unable to extend its analytic framework in a manner that would also encompass the concrete

dynamics of control, coercion and technical transformation that are crucial to the 'expanded reproduction' of capitalist social relations. The effect of this formalism is that, ironically, for all Adorno's Kantianism, he fails to incorporate the key innovation introduced by Kant into the thought of subsumption: the problem of the specific mechanisms of form-determination that must be operative if universal and particular are to attain, and maintain, identity. The residual idealism of this epistemologically inflected approach leads Adorno to a reductive and one-sided theory of capitalist subsumption that can offer no substantial account of how and why capitalist power advances as it does.

By contrast, the writings of Antonio Negri developed from the 1980s onwards draw directly on Marx's concept of subsumption in order to map and differentiate distinct material configurations of capital's command over labour, extending and intensifying the implications of the transition from formal to real subsumption in the context of a historical periodisation of capitalism. Whilst Negri's approach (along with the tradition of *operaismo* from which it stems) departs from a Marxian analysis of production, exploitation and resistance, much like Adorno he identifies a progressive historical deepening of this relation of command that comes to exceed the boundaries of the traditional sites of production, eventually encompassing and internalising every sphere of human activity within the matrix of capitalist power. Transposing Marx's analysis of subsumption from the individual labour process to the social whole, Negri refers to this historical completion as the 'real and total subsumption of labour' and 'world society' under capital (Negri, 1991: 121, 1988: 95). For Negri this totalisation of subsumption marks the point at which capitalist socialisation ceases to be mediated by commodification and value-relations and there is no longer any 'outside' to capitalist authority because 'the mechanism of the production and reproduction of labour power is wholly internal to capital' (Negri, 1988: 126). Instead of capitalist power being regulated by the law of value as it is for Marx, once there is no external domain left from which to extract the differential determination of measure (and with it the possibility of a 'surplus-value') that power metamorphoses into a generalised logic of pure command akin to the military-style discipline of the factory regime. To whatever extent capitalist social relations may continue to take the appearance of economic relations, the dynamic of subsumption transforms their essence towards a purely political logic of antagonism: 'society is configured in a disciplinary way through the development of the capitalist system' (Negri, 2003: 105).

In Negri's theorisation, total capitalist subsumption is 'the situation in which we have found ourselves since the middle of the twentieth century' (2003: 105), rendering Marx's account of commodification (and its corresponding value-theoretical analysis of exploitation and fetishism) an anachronistic framework that no longer has traction on social life and its conflicts. In place, Negri constructs an ontological framework in which the creative plenitude of labour is directly subsumed under a capitalist command which absorbs and appropriates its capacities without the mediation of competitive measure. Yet Negri's theoretical



dissolution of value as the regulating principle of capitalist power gives rise to a series of theoretical contradictions and aporias (Noys, 2010; Toscano, 2009). Most importantly, Negri's absolutisation of subsumption effectively suspends the conflictual character of the subsumptive relation itself, for once subsumption has been achieved there is no longer any tension between the universal and particular – that is, between capital and labour – as they are bound together by an analytically perfect identity. If conflict is thus to appear within Negri's account of subsumption, it can only be in the transmuted form of the immanent ontological opposition of 'full' and 'empty' time, represented respectively by the creativity of labour and the abstract totalisation of capital. Here, however, a robust account of the concrete mechanisms of subsumption and the social forms taken by the antagonism between capital and labour is lacking, leading Negri, like Adorno, to a one-sided development of Marx's initial theorisation of the concept.

The coherence of a Marxist theory of subsumption depends on the integration of the formal dimension of exchange and commodification with the material configuration of production and the tendential transformations of the labour process. Without *both* of these aspects, capitalist domination cannot be comprehended in the historical specificity of its operation and developmental dynamics. Whereas Adorno tends to treat subsumption as if it were an automatic effect of exchange relations (an *epistemological* conception concerned primarily with formal determination), Negri inverts this and understands subsumption only through the material logic of capitalist control over generalised productive activity (an *ontologised* conception of subsumption grounded in the idea of an original vital and creative plenitude possessed by labour which capital 'confiscates'). Neither approach, however, thinks the two sides of capitalist domination as equally essential to its functioning: the distinctive synthesis underpinning capitalist power.

### ***Subsumption and the Critique of Political Economy***

If the exaggerations and distortions of these 'periodising' approaches run into theoretical and empirical problems that ultimately render them untenable, they nonetheless open up important questions regarding the basic structure and development of capitalist societies: is the dynamic of subsumption driven by the 'economic' logic of accumulation or by the 'political' logic of class antagonism? Or some combination of the two (in which case, how is their combination to be conceptualised)? Is the transition from formal to real subsumption an automatic, or even necessary, implication of capitalist control of production or just one of its possible modalities? How do processes of subsumption in different areas of the economy and regions of the planet interact and affect one another? Is it coherent or plausible to speak of a 'total' subsumption of society and the individuals composing it?

Some aspects of these questions were addressed directly by the so-called 'labour process' debates of the 1970–80s (Braverman, 1974; Buraway, 1978;

Gorz, 1976; Thompson, 2010). The common thread linking this variegated literature was the combination of a general theorisation of capitalist production and its immanent laws together with an attempt to grasp the shifting composition of capitalist production through a focus on strategies of capitalist control within the labour process. Importantly, significant early contributions to these debates, such as from the Brighton Labour Process Group, rejected any simple correspondence or transposition of the dynamics of subsumption between the level of the individual labour process and the configuration of the social whole, insisting that ‘the relation between capital and labour, at a general social level, cannot be derived from, or reduced to, the capital-labour relation within production’, whilst ‘the actual structure of the [labour] process is not historically determined by the abstract logic of capital accumulation, since capitalist production relations can only be reproduced as a totality of social relations’ (Brighton Labour Process Group, 1977: 23–24). This signalled the urgency of developing a research programme that would interrogate the evolving articulation of production and reproduction (understood as the totality of the social process and therefore the wider material context within which the specific struggles over subsumption in production play out). Posing the problem of the economic and political dimensions of capitalist power in other terms, these authors also examined whether the driving force of transformations in the labour process were grounded primarily in the competitive pressure to increase the efficiency of production or in the drive to consolidate control over labour (cf. Gorz, 1976). Recent contributions such as from Das (2012; see also Skillman, 2012) have continued this orientation through empirically informed analysis of patterns of transformation in contemporary capitalism’s labour processes.

Sharing some of these concerns, albeit at a higher level of theoretical abstraction, strands of Marxological scholarship referred to variously as ‘capital-logic’, ‘value-form theory’ and ‘systematic dialectics’ have sought to make important clarifications regarding the relationship between Marx’s account of subsumption and the framework of his critique of political economy. Building on Hegelian-inspired reconstructions of *Capital* which seek to consolidate the systematic coherence of its central categories, the work of Chris Arthur and Patrick Murray links the dynamic of subsumption to a dialectical exposition of the value-forms, the critique of fetishistic appearances and the distinction between absolute and relative surplus-value production. Emphasising the inner logical necessity (of accumulation) driving capitalist production and reproduction, Arthur’s account depicts capital as a ‘self-moving system of abstract forms’ that ‘must’ shape the material content it subsumes in accordance with this goal (Arthur, 2009: 155). Yet the focus on the systematic completeness of capital here tends towards an objectivism that reduces the antagonistic characteristic of capitalist class relations to a theoretical afterthought (in contrast to Negri, for whom struggle is primary at the expense of structural mediations, see Saenz de Sicilia, forthcoming). Subsumption is thus treated as a category located internally to the

quasi-autonomous ‘systematic dialectic’ of capital rather than a category articulating capital with its external foundations: nature and labour. Instead of subsumption naming the relation in which social conflicts over the exploitation of labour are concentrated, in these capital-centric accounts it becomes one further moment in the consolidation of capital’s systematic dominance. Whichever way the political stakes of capitalist subsumption are balanced within the ambit of these approaches, an exclusive focus on developing a ‘pure’ logic of capitalist accumulation elides the question of capitalism as real history and the central role played by subsumption (and its concomitant conflicts) in determining the trajectory of that history.

Finally, a significant and innovative set of engagements with Marx’s account of subsumption emerged within Latin American Marxism from the 1970s onwards. Developing a critical rereading of Marx in parallel with (and to some degree influenced by) their European contemporaries, authors such as Bolívar Echeverría, Armando Bartra and Enrique Dussel highlighted important neglected concepts and ‘esoteric’ structural aspects of Marx’s discourse in order to address the shortcomings of both orthodox Marxism and mainstream bourgeois social theory (in its incipient ‘postmodern’ inflection as much as in its traditional empiricist variants). Of these, Echeverría’s contributions are without doubt the most profound, in many respects surpassing any other attempt to situate a theory of subsumption coherently and systematically within the context of Marx’s critique of capitalist society (Saenz de Sicilia, 2018; Saenz de Sicilia and Brito Rojas, 2018). Working closely with Marx’s newly available drafts and notebooks whilst responding inventively to the lacunae in Marx’s project (for example, around the concept of use-value, cf. Echeverría, 2014), Echeverría made the case that subsumption, along with the analysis of value, fetishism and social reproduction, should be situated at the centre of Marx’s thought:

The concept of subsumption has a special importance with respect to the core of Marx’s critical discourse – that is to say, the theory of the contradiction between the socio-natural process of production/consumption and the socio-capitalist process of the valorization of value. It is the most advanced attempt made by Marx to show in general theoretical terms the way in which those two contradictory processes are articulated. (Echeverría, 1983: 2)

For Echeverría, the contradictory character of capitalist society – expressed from the most basic levels of value/use-value and abstract/concrete labour right through to the complexity of expanded capitalist reproduction/social reproduction – was in each instance articulated as a relation of subsumption, of use-value under value, concrete under abstract labour, and so on. Subsumption did not therefore figure as a discrete moment in Marx’s conceptual construction, but rather traversed the entirety of his exposition in *Capital* with increasing concreteness. Echeverría’s insights went on to be consolidated and extended systematically by Jorge Veraza (2008) in relation to the implications of real subsumption for transformations in the sphere of consumption, where the capitalist development of science

and technology leads to an inversion of means of production into means of destruction; that is, from means of securing the reproduction of human life to the means of its negation.

Enrique Dussel also places subsumption at the centre of his reinterpretation of Marx's critique of political economy (1985, 1990, 2001). Drawing on the background of subsumption in German idealism (though focused on Schelling rather than Kant and Hegel) along with Marxist liberation theology, Dussel's argument takes Marx's critique to rest on a dialectic of exteriority and totality in which living labour originally stands outside of the closed totality of capital but is then incorporated within it through its subsumption under value. Capital thus makes labour a moment of its own development, neutralising its independence and 'negating its exteriority'. For Dussel this transition, effected by the exchange of labour for a wage, is the key moment in which the *being* of capital, its social reality, is grounded. In this way he develops a broadly ontological framework for conceptualising subsumption (with some affinities to Negri) which draws on Marx's description in the *Grundrisse* of labour as a pure denuded subjectivity, as absolute poverty, or 'non-being' in contrast to the being of capital (Marx, 1993: 454). Dussel emphasises this negativity, or nothingness, of living labour, which is reduced to a pure potential until it is subsumed and actualised in production, serving as capital's mediation with itself. The subsumptive moment is therefore central to Dussel's entire conception of how capital forms a closed ontological totality (somewhat akin to Arthur's 'systematic dialectic') as well as to his insistence on the excessive character and resistant capacity of labour, which despite figuring (from the standpoint of that totality) as a non-being, can never fully or finally be internalised (given that it is the true, but denied, ontological foundation of capital). Much like Negri, the politics of this argument is mapped onto a Manichean ontological schema with the result that, rather than being able to give an account of capital's other, that which is subsumed, in concrete terms – say, in an account of the current composition of a global working class and the labour processes that function as the site of exploitation – Dussel constructs his critical discourse from the intangible standpoint of a theological negativity, a source that by definition cannot appear positively within his discourse, rather than a force grasped as already present, actively resistant and practically embedded in the material totality of social life.

## CONCLUSION

Following its 'critical' reframing in German idealist philosophy, the category of subsumption acquires a distinctive theoretical status. It simultaneously designates the specificity of a relation (of analytic identity between particular and universal) whilst demanding an account of how that relation is produced and evolves (through processes of form-determination), transforming its own conditions of possibility as a result. This reframing establishes both the productivity

and difficulty of subsumption for Marxist theory. Subsumption both captures the uniquely conceptual and ‘actually abstract’ quality of capitalist domination whilst also (in its multiple modalities) designating the diverse social and material processes through which the control and exploitation of labour as well as the reshaping of production occurs. Yet Marx’s general schema of formal, real and hybrid subsumption only enumerates the most basic contours of the concrete processes of capitalist form-determination. The true effectivity of a theory of subsumption lies in its capacity to provide a framework for further research, both of a more focused and empirically informed nature (grasping the particularities of how the subsumption of labour and nature is configured in diverse scenarios) as well as of a synthetic, generalising nature (tracing the global articulations between production and reproduction). Pursuing these two trajectories of analysis enables Marxist theory to continually reactivate itself in response to the present, binding a basic account of accumulation (with its concomitant notions of class, value, fetishism, ideology, etc.) to the novel social forms expressive of capitalism’s capacity to adapt and evolve. Yet across all these levels of enquiry subsumption remains the crucial category of mediation and antagonism, marking the point of articulation and conflict between the abstract system of capitalist forms and the material foundations which it forms and appropriates. The tendency towards absolutisation, ontologisation or historicisation of subsumption weakens this effectivity by idealistically sundering the basic schema of subordination under capital from the real conditions and struggles in which it has its actuality (and potential overcoming). Subsumption cannot provide an answer or resolution to the problems of Marxist theory, only a framework for addressing those problems in a responsive and non-dogmatic manner.

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