

Athina, Sept 22, 2007

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THE CONCEPT OF SUBSUMPTION

Introduction

We meet today 150 years after Marx began work on his famous *Grundrisse*. There are many reasons to study it anew. One is that it destroys the Althusserian periodisation of Marx's development. So far from having left Hegel behind in the 1840s, Marx was clearly influenced by his re-reading of Hegel's logic towards the end of 1857. But the story of Marx's relation to Hegel is more complicated than it first appears. Having abandoned Hegel for Feuerbach in 1843, Marx returned to Hegel in the 1844 manuscripts, abandoned him again in 1845 and returned once more in 1857. The first return to Hegel was to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*; the second was to the *Science of Logic*. This is a significant difference, because the *Logic* has not to do with the adventures of historical spirit but with the science of system. Likewise, the dialectic of *Capital* is not *historical* but *systematic*. Marx's method of presentation (his *Darstellung*) parallels that of Hegel's Logic. However, in my opinion it follows that this method is relevant only because capital has a certain 'ideality' to it; like Hegel's idealist ontology it is characterised by inversion; it is a 'topsy-turvy' reality.

The present paper addresses this relation between ideality and reality in the light of the category of 'subsumption'. In the working manuscripts Marx wrote prior to the appearance of his masterwork, *Capital*, the category of 'subsumption' is much more prominent than it is in the published edition, which contains only a single reference to the distinction between 'formal' and 'real' subsumption. The first section of the present paper examines the evidence found in these manuscripts for the thesis that 'subsumption' is a category of Marx's thought that should be given more attention than heretofore. An important aspect of this issue, treated in the subsequent sections of the paper, is the light it throws on the relation of Marx's system to Hegel's logic. Implicit in the concept of capital is a drive to posit its presuppositions, as with Hegel's self-positing Spirit. The term 'subsumption' marks an aporia in this ambition.

Marx on Subsumption

At the most general level the concept of subsumption appears in the distinction drawn between the real labour process, considered as that which gives rise to a definite product, and the valorisation process, directed towards production of new value. The labour process as such is 'subsumed', says Marx, under the valorization process. As thus subsumed labour is not regarded under its specific useful form but 'it is reduced to a certain quantity of ... abstract labour.' Thus, even though all real labour is particular in its action, here 'indifference towards the specific content of labour is not merely an abstraction made by us, it is also made by capital, and it belongs to its essential character', he says.

'Labour, as the expenditure of [his] vital forces, is the personal activity of the worker. But as *value-creating* ... the labour of the worker becomes a *mode of existence* of... capital.' says Marx. 'This power of *preserving value* and creating *new value* is therefore capital's power and the process appears as one of capital's *self-valorisation* while the worker who creates the value - *value alien to him* - is on the contrary impoverished.'

Capital 'becomes *productive* capital in so far as it has subsumed the production process'; and that of which it is productive is itself.

Such subsumption requires in the first place simply that capital is in command: 'labour and the worker himself come under the control of capital, under its command. I call this the formal subsumption of the labour process.' says Marx. We see what *real* subsumption involves when Marx discusses co-operation. He points out that capital organises this *prior* to the hiring of individuals so that it 'confronts them as a relation of capital, not as their own relation'. The mode of production specific to capital as a system of 'command' requires 'a new kind of labour, labour of superintendence'; this is the first sign that there has been 'a real alteration of the mode of production itself'..

Initially the subsumption of labour is brought about on the basis of existing technology. 'Only in the course of its development does capital not only formally subsume the labour process but transform it, give the very mode of production a new shape and thus first create the mode of production peculiar to it.' This is the 'real subsumption' of labour under capital.

The imposition of a technical division of labour reduces all workers to a 'one-sided, abstract, partial' function; the 'totality' of their labours is not subsumed under them, rather 'the workers form the building blocks of this combination' of labours. Under the division of labour new skills are required that can be exercised only on the basis of real subsumption. 'Thus he is now subsumed under capitalist production ... no longer just because he lacks the means of labour, but because of ... the nature and manner of his labour.' When the workers are subsumed under capital their labour capacity is so modified by this that it becomes useless when standing alone, *outside* this context of capitalism, thus their 'capacity for independent production is destroyed.'

In sum 'With the real subsumption of labour under capital there takes place a complete revolution in the mode of production itself, in the productivity of labour and in the relation between capitalist and worker.'

The culmination of real subsumption is the rule of machinery. Here is a key passage from the section on machinery in Marx's *Grundrisse*.

'The appropriation of living labour by objectified labour - an appropriation inherent in the concept of capital, is posited in production based on machinery as the character of the production process itself.... The production process has ceased to be a labour process in the sense that it is no longer embraced by labour as the unity which dominates it. Now, on the contrary, labour ... is subsumed under the overall process of the machinery itself, whose unity exists *not* in living workers but in [the life of] the *machinery*. The latter confronts the isolated, insignificant activity of the worker as a mighty organism.... In machinery, objectified labour physically confronts living labour as the power which dominates it and actively *subsumes* it under itself - not merely by appropriating living labour, but in the actual production process itself.'

But the machinery too is subsumed under capital. Marx writes in his *Grundrisse*: 'Once included into the production process of capital, the means of labour ... ends up as ... an *automatic system of machinery*... and the form in which it was [originally] included, as immediate means of labour, into the production process of capital is superseded by a form posited by capital itself and corresponding to it.' It now has a form 'adequate to capital'.

Whatever changes fixed capital undergoes it must accord with this requirement. While no content may be considered final, the material inscribed within the capital form must be shaped into a content adequate to it, at least insofar as the recalcitrance of labour is minimised through the very design of the factory, with its concomitant division of labour. With the real subsumption of the human and material elements of the production process capital takes them into its *possession* in a more than legal sense; having them within its power its spirit is present there. The productive power of labour and machinery is now capital's own power.

Capital is 'productive' in two different senses Marx says:

First, as the *compulsion to do surplus labour*....

Second, as the personification, the reified shape of the "social productive powers of labour" or the productive powers of social labour.

If the factory is 'the body of capital' its 'soul' is the living labour process as it is appropriated by capital as a valorisation process. In short capital is a relation of production. Yet capital presents itself as the prime mover in the economy. There is here a double subsumption..

First. Capital as self-valorising appropriates the productive labour of '*isolated workers*' because this has to do with the social positing of labour as belonging to capital, through the wage contract, not to do with the development of its natural powers in the 'real labour process'. Because capital employs legally each worker *individually*, surplus labour is likewise expropriated from each singly. Since the labour process is subsumed under the valorisation process their productive labour *belongs* to capital, hence it is 'justly' exploited for the purpose of capital's self-valorisation. The concretely universal character of living labour, when subsumed under the value form, counts only as an abstraction of itself.

Second. Capital as a material productive power is incarnate in the *collective labourer*.

Despite the use made of their individual skills this collectivity is plausibly represented, not as that of the associated individuals, but as capital's own productive power insofar as its principle of organisation flows from capital, which subsumes the individuals under the hierarchical division of labour imposed on them. :Capital embodied in means of production (its inorganic body) employs every worker as a labour-power machine (its organic body);

they are its ‘hands’, subjugated to the discipline of the factory regime. It is *collectively* that concrete labours are *really* subsumed under capital when it imposes material shapes of co-operation, division of labour, and machinery. In addition to serving as exploited source of surplus labour, the immediate producers are alienated from their *own universality* as *socially* productive, since the labour process is not that of freely associated producers but subsumed under the despotism of the capitalist factory. Living labour expresses its individuality only when correlative labours are united in a universal enterprise such that the category of ‘social labour’ is posited for itself. In a sense, this universal determination must be present here too, but the hegemony of capital redetermines it as an estranged universality *opposed* to the single labourers.

The following Table articulates these determinants in two dimensions, the subsumption of use value under value with the subsumption of labour under capital.

Table: Formal and Real Subsumption

	Capital (subsumes)	Labour
Value Form	Self-valorising value	'Productive' labour
	(i)	(ii)
(subsumes)	Self-acting machinery	Collective labourer
(alienated social labour)	Use-value 'content'	(iii)
	(iii)	(iv)

Let us first ‘read’ the Table from capital’s point of view. Capital defines itself as self-valorising value; it is true this requires mediation in productive labour; but, having been

appropriated through the wage, labour power is possessed by capital, and labour is formally subsumed under it, hence productive labour is *its own* activity. Valorisation cannot occur without the production of use values; however, capital claims to produce these through its embodiment in the factory, capital is ideally posited as self-acting machinery; concomitant with this is the organisation of the 'collective labourer' *by capital*. With real subsumption the machinery now 'employs' the workers! So capital both is and is not its opposites. But, on this reading, capital is the *identity* of identity and difference, and comprehends all four moments of the Table.

Let us now consider the same thing from the point of view of materialist demystification of capital. Then the dialectical structure is reversed, and the capital relation refigured as the *difference* of identity and difference. While capital's self-constitution pulls the structure toward Box (i), the critique of it claims Box (iv) is not reducible to it. Apparently absorbed by capital, social labour yet has a ground from which to lever up the dead weight of its oppressor. Although this logic of difference is suppressed it remains an immanent source of critique.

Nevertheless capital is now a '*Subjekt*' embodied in the factory regime. Given this, Marx concludes: 'Thus *capital* has created *capital*.'

The Question of Hegel

The issue to be addressed next is how far this 'result' conforms to the logic of Hegel's self-positing 'Idea'. I find in capital's *self-production* a logic which is the same as that of Hegel. It is important to distinguish this *homology* thesis from the *application* of Hegel's logic to a substantive domain of reality. I do not say: 'Hegel's logic is good, let's apply it properly'. I ask: 'where do we find out there a system of self-moving abstraction which then *applies itself* to material reality?'

Hegel's logic springs from the shedding of contingent empirical instances to leave pure categories. In parallel fashion exchange issues in a *practical* abstraction from the natural features of a commodity which are the basis of its use value. As a consequence of this displacement of use value the commodities acquire a new determination: the social character

of exchange-value (which contains 'not an atom of matter'). The different goods concerned play the role of *bearers* of this social determination. They become subject to the *value form*. The reason why I term this social form of the product of labour 'ideal' is that the mediation of social labours here is of an abstract 'logical' character.

In my view a significant homology obtains between the movement of *exchange* and the movement of *thought*. Both impose a formal unity on the real material they address. But the value forms, although they have a 'logical' character, are *out there*. As embedded in the *practical* activity of exchange they require material bearers. Thus value as universal is not produced when we *think* the identity of commodities, it is produced when gold is excluded from other commodities to constitute *practically* their identity as value bodies.

My view is that we have in the 'Concept' of capital a self-moving system of abstract forms, predicated on the *inversion* consequent on the material practice of exchange, which *subsumes* material production. However, it is precisely because capital cannot fully incorporate its material foundation that there must be a limit to such ideality.

Nonetheless, the form of capital has something of the character of an *Absolute*; it takes up into itself the real world of material production, and subordinates it to the spirit of capitalism. All the relevant conditions of its existence it reproduces in its own movement.

I suggest that the parallel to the sphere of Hegel's *logic*, in which thought moves freely in its own element, that of pure form, is the realm of *circulation*. Here values exchange, but the use value side has no specific determinacy, albeit commodities must have use value of some sort. However, capital must confront the problem of its lack of self-subsistence as mere *concept* of self-valorisation; the logical form of capital is by no means absolute but insufficient to maintain itself; it requires a domain of reality regulated by the form but by no means inessential to it. This transition is logically necessary because the simple movement of circulation does not contain within itself the principle of self-renewal. New commodities must be thrown into it again and again as fuel into the fire. Thus if capital is to posit its presuppositions it must *produce* the values that are its premise. Only if capital brings production within its circuits does it constitute itself as an autonomous power. Moreover, if capital is to be properly grounded on itself, surplus value cannot arise *contingently*, from

temporary market conditions allowing capital to buy cheap and sell dear. Capital can guarantee a surplus only by sinking into production and mediating itself in productive labour. Capital makes that activity its own insofar as it thoroughly subsumes labour, not merely formally but 'really'.

Thus the turn to production from the general formula of capital has the same significance as the going over of Hegel's logic to the real. The pure forms must prove themselves to be the truth of material reality. However, while Hegel's 'Idea' is presumed to identify itself in the reality its logic informs, in the case of capital there is no metaphysical 'guarantee' that its forms fit smoothly the material reality inscribed within them. Capital has to *shape* the material given to it into its substance, it has to forge for itself a content adequate to its form. It is in this context that I situate the turn to production. The dialectic of capitalist production is one in which the form seeks to secure and stabilise itself through subsuming material production and turning it into a bearer of self-valorization. But the logic of capital accumulation would run down pretty quickly were it not for the *material* fact that workers produce more than they themselves consume.

While capital *claims* to create 'wealth', I argue that it merely *subsumes* the material content of the economy under the forms of value. Hegel's speculation about an Absolute seeking to actualise its entire conditions of existence has a parallel in capital, which has such a drive implicit in its form. However, in truth it subsumes, but does not create, its internal other, the worker, and its external other, Nature. Marx summarises in his *Grundrisse*: 'Capital did not create the world afresh, but found production and products already in existence before it subsumed them under its own process. Once in motion, setting out from itself, it continuously presupposes itself in its different forms as consumable product, raw material and instruments of labour, in order to continuously reproduce itself in these forms. They appear first as conditions presupposed by capital itself, and then as its result. In reproducing itself it produces its own conditions.'

In order to produce efficiently capital must combine definite complementary factors of production in the relevant proportions. To quote Marx's *Grundrisse*: 'The nature of the use value, wherein value exists, which appears now as the body of capital, appears here as itself

determinant of the *form* and the action of capital; as giving one capital a particular characteristic as against another; as concretising it'. But the determinate potential of use value is materially *given* to capital in the first instance. I suggest that the category of 'subsumption' is required in order to construe this relation between value and use value, more specifically between the general form of capital and the material production processes it subsumes.

Both Hegel's Absolute, and capital, claim that subsumption of reality under the ideality of their form means they created the wealth of the world, rather than merely re-viewing it under their peculiar form of validation. In answer to the regime of truth imposed by the *form* of capital as *self*-valorising, the deconstruction of capital's repression of what is truly other than itself is in order. But full weight has to be given to the real subsumption of land and labour capital has achieved.

There is a parallel between the *claims* of Hegel's Idea and of the Idea of capital. As absolute form, both claim to be the whole reality, because all content is posited as itself in another shape. The *criticism* of these claims is also parallel. In Hegel the philosophical mistake lies at the juncture of logic and reality, where he takes up 'positive' material empirically and *subsumes* it under his logical schemes (although he does not *say* he does of course) as if in some occult manner the latter accounts for the nature of the former. As for the claim of capital to be the creator of all 'wealth', the mistake here springs from the subsumption of the material metabolism under the forms of value; in reality the material specificity of use value, especially that of labour power, has economic *determinacy*.

Conclusion

According to Hegel, the Idea is 'the Subject-Object, as the unity of the ideal and the real'. Such a unity of the ideal and the real I suggest is projected in the Idea of Capital. If it succeeds then it is the result of its own movement, the production of capital by means of capital. Capital produces capital through *subsuming* human and natural powers, formally (through wages and rent) but also 'really' to a great extent. However, despite the thoroughgoing transformation of the production process as it is *really* subsumed by capital, it remains the case that capital cannot properly claim to produce all its conditions of existence.

In particular the appropriation of labour is problematic because the labourers potentially have ends of their own to realise. They cannot be considered as 'human resources' no different in principle from other 'natural resources' exploited by capital.

Epochally the Idea of capital has made itself real. Whether that which is in excess of its concept *remains* forever marginal is for the future to determine.

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