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At the Limit:
on Realism, Materialism and International Theory

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University of Sussex

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Doctor of Philosophy in International Relations

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Summary

Central to Realism's framing of the international are its conception of the inside/outside structure of political form and the idea of a state of nature. This thesis provides a materialist critique of these conceptions. Its starting point is that the Marxist criticism of Realism has fallen short because Marxism in IR has constructed no theory of the political and as a result it has been unable to answer Realism's perception of the 'tragic' and unchanging nature of international political existence. To remedy this deficiency, the thesis both establishes an alternative understanding of Marx for IR and draws upon Adorno's extension and deepening of Marxian critical theory. The argument next elaborates a reading of Marx's theory of capital that reveals a considerable degree of hitherto unappreciated thematic congruence with Realism's understanding of the international as a timeless scene of entrapment. It then mobilises Adorno's philosophical anthropology to explain this similarity, focusing on the critical accounts of abstraction in both Marx and Adorno. Finally, it uses these theoretical elements to address the question of political form directly, taking up specific aspects of Carl Schmitt's, Giorgio Agamben's and Walter Benjamin's thinking concerning sovereignty and the exception and reading them through the frame of Adorno's critique of the concept. The result is a critical theory of political form that: (i) can explain, without conceding to, the Realist conceptions both of the necessary inside/outside structure of the political and of the international as a timeless state of nature; and (ii) can demonstrate an intrinsic theoretical connection between the global nature of capital and the bounded and delimited form of the political in a way that has not been achieved before in IR.

Statement

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be submitted in whole or in part to another university for the award of any other degree.

Signature:

Contents

Introduction	1 – 13
Chapter 1 – Marxism and Realism	14 – 49
<i>Marxism and the International</i>	14 – 19
<i>The Challenge of Realism</i>	19 – 24
<i>Marxism and the Political</i>	24 – 38
<i>World-Systems Theory</i>	24 – 27
<i>Neo-Gramscian Theory</i>	27 – 31
<i>Political Marxism</i>	31 – 34
<i>Uneven and Combined Development</i>	35 – 38
<i>Revenge of the Political</i>	38 – 41
<i>Materialist Theory</i>	41 – 48
Chapter 2 – History and Prehistory	50 – 89
<i>Realism and History</i>	50 – 53
<i>Marxism and History</i>	53 – 58
<i>Realism and Myth</i>	58 – 68
<i>Marx and Myth</i>	68 – 84
<i>Metaphor</i>	69 – 71
<i>Fetish, Vampire, Metamorphosis</i>	71 – 75
<i>System</i>	76 – 78
<i>Equilibrium</i>	78 – 79
<i>Cyclicity</i>	79 – 81
<i>Timelessness</i>	81 – 84
<i>Static and Dynamic</i>	84 – 88
Chapter 3 – Ideality and Myth	90 – 129
<i>The Rule of Abstraction</i>	90 – 94
<i>The Ideal and the Real</i>	94 – 101
<i>Critique of the Economic</i>	101 – 107
<i>Progress and Regression</i>	108 – 111
<i>Ur-history of the Concept</i>	111 – 128
<i>Fear</i>	111 – 113
<i>Equivalence</i>	113 – 115
<i>Law</i>	115 – 117
<i>Renunciation</i>	118 – 119
<i>Sacrifice</i>	119 – 122
<i>Identity</i>	122 – 125
<i>Domination</i>	125 – 128

Chapter 4 – Sovereignty and the Exception	130 – 174
<i>Schmitt and the Exception</i>	132 – 135
<i>Agamben and the State of Exception</i>	135 – 141
<i>Adorno and the Non-Identical</i>	141 – 150
<i>Sovereignty and Idealism</i>	150 – 153
<i>The Schmitt-Benjamin Debate</i>	154 – 160
‘Critique of Violence’	155 – 157
<i>Response and Counter Response</i>	157 – 159
<i>The Eighth Thesis</i>	159 – 160
<i>Adorno and the Exception</i>	160 – 165
<i>State of Nature</i>	165 – 170
<i>The Turn to Non-Identity</i>	170 – 173
 Conclusion	 175 – 189
 Bibliography	 190 – 204

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Epigraph

The frontier between Baden and Bavaria ran between Ottorsfszell and Ernstthal. It was marked by posts on the highway with imposing coats of arms in the provincial colors spiraling round the posts, blue and white on the one side, if I remember right, and red and yellow on the other. There was a generous space between the two. That was where I liked to walk on the pretext, which I did not actually believe, that this empty space belonged to neither of the two states, that it was free, and that I could hold sway there as I wished. I did not mean this seriously, but that did not diminish my pleasure. In reality, what I probably liked were the state colors whose limits I felt I had escaped. I had a similar feeling in exhibitions like the ILA [the International Aerospace Exhibition] at the sight of the countless flags that fluttered in harmony next to one another. The feeling of the International was familiar to me from home and also from my parents' guests, from whom I heard names like Firino and Sidney Clifton Hall. That International was no centralized state. The peace it promised was brought about by the festive assemblage of different things, the colorfulness of the flags and the innocent frontier markings which, as I was not a little astonished to discover, brought about no change in the landscape. The land they enclosed, however, and which I myself occupied, was a no-man's-land. Later, during the war, this word came to be used for the devastated space between the two fronts. But it is the faithful translation of the Greek—Aristophanic—word that I understood at the time all the better, the less I knew of it: utopia.

Adorno, 'Amorbach'
(quoted in Claussen 2008, p.50)

Introduction

The idea of this thesis developed from two linked perceptions concerning the situation of Marx's thought in International Relations. The first was provoked by recent debates with IR Marxism,¹ debates whose inconclusive nature suggests that Marxist thinking in the discipline has now reached an impasse, arriving at a point where it is posing itself theoretical problems that its long-established modes of intellectual procedure are unable to resolve, or even to formulate in a way that captures the full extent of the issues. So, setting aside the specifics and considering the controversy from a wider perspective, these intra-Marxist discussions over the status of the states system within global capitalism can be seen to have a significance in themselves in relation to the present situation of Marxist theory in IR quite beyond the merits of any of the individual contributions: on the one hand IR Marxism has at last come to realise that it must focus theoretical attention in a concerted way on the central problematic of the discipline – the existence of the international itself; but on the other, it has been unable to provide any really convincing explanations. Such a situation of theoretical deficit may frustrate, but it also provides an opportunity for reflection, both on what should be the objects of enquiry for thinking that claims a Marxian inheritance and on Marx's own theory – what type of theorising it is and what its contemporary import is, what it means to 'do Marx' at this distance and in this historical juncture. That the current debates are happening only now, after several decades of Marxist thought in IR, serves to make clear in retrospect that IR Marxism has, to an important degree, continually fallen short of its own proper ambition as radical theory. For, while other approaches may be able to content themselves with examining how the world works, assuming many determinations as simply given, thinking that draws upon Marx should ask the deeper question of what it *is*, try to rend the veil of appearances. The point of theory in the spirit of Marx is to denaturalise the forms of the social world, to reveal the rigidified objective structures of social being as semblance, the estranged products of the subject's own activity that it does not recognise as such. Thus, in the tradition of critique inherited from German Idealism, Marx's theory of capital does not simply provide a description of the functioning of the capitalist economy as one historical economic form

¹ See *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 2007 and 2009 and Anievas 2010 for the main contributions.

among others; rather, it seeks to grasp why there is an ‘economy’ as an apparently objective sphere of human existence in the first place, how the object becomes an economic thing and what that means. Correlatively, in the field of IR, it would be necessary not merely to develop a distinctively Marxist account of the workings of geopolitics, specifically in its contemporary capitalist form,² but to show why there is geopolitics at all, why there is such a thing as ‘the international’ as a mode of human existence. Only through this critical enquiry might it then be possible to address the associated question, the focus of current interest, of the connection between the international and global capital: within an increasingly integrated world, an integration driven by the myriad exchanges of the world market but taking place in numerous other spheres, there continue to be many separate political entities – so why do all the other forms of integration not produce political integration? The recent discussions have had the great merit of opening up enquiry into these questions that are fundamental to the discipline, while at the same time making it clear that if Marxian theory is to provide any answers, then the meaning of Marx in IR has to be reconsidered. In that sense, the current impasse is freighted with possibility.

The second perception, also derived from the recent debates, concerns the relation of Marxian thought to Realism. For E.H. Carr, Marx was, at least in his most effective thoughts, a kind of Realist, exposing the (economically) interested nature of all pretensions to universality, and their basis in brute power.³ Such undermining of liberal eirenism has always been a significant element within Marxist thinking in IR, and continues to provide a point of association with Realism. However, despite a shared hostility to liberalism (albeit hostilities that live off different centres), it has been much more usual in recent times for Marxism in IR, like most radical theory in the discipline, to regard Realism as the enemy. This is not simply because Realism defines the mainstream. Rather, it results from the seemingly unbreachable limits that Realism places upon the meaningfulness of social change. The deepest thing that Realism in IR says – although says by implication rather than in a theoretically self-conscious way – is that there is something inescapably irrational about the form of the political. The latter may be the medium of human freedom, self-determination and universality, but, so

² Still the ambition of the most recent Marxist contribution, Colás and Pozo 2011.

³ Carr 2001, pp.64–8.

Realism argues, any political space is always delimited and particularistic,⁴ creating a division of inside and outside such that there is a persistent and antagonistic contradiction between the whole and the parts, the individual political ‘unit’ and the system of which it forms an element (to use Kenneth Waltz’s terminology). For Realism, the political, seen from the perspective of the international, is really just a modality of human self-preservation. Given these assumptions about political space, the international is necessarily imagined by Realism as an intractable problem: the domestic scene, the inside space, is the place of order, intentionality and the pursuit of the good life; but the international, the outside, lacking any superordinate authority, remains ungoverned, anarchic and conflict-ridden.⁵ Within the political space, humans may hope to achieve control over their own lives and some measure of progress; the international, by contrast, knows no progress and no qualitative change, remaining always dominated by the imperatives of survival and the perennial problems of war and peace. The history that takes place within the scene of the political thus has an unreality about it, a semblance quality, remaining forever trapped within the timeless state of nature of the international. It is perhaps Realism’s most profound insight that through the political humans are both free and unfree: free because political being separates them from enthrallment to nature, unfree because it ensnares them within the anarchic space of the international. At the level of the whole, the totality, humanity remains unaware of itself and not in control of its own existence – there is not and never has been a global social subject.⁶ In IR, Realism is thus a doctrine of the necessary limits of human reason: if the political is badly particularistic in its very form, then no change in the organisation of the inner space *qua* political space is possible that would remove human society from the fateful condition of the international. We are trapped.

All radical theory in IR struggles, in one way or another, against the boundaries imposed by Realism. But for none is the issue so important as for Marxist thought, which, as the inheritor of the leading motif of German Idealism – freedom –, has as its

⁴ Or, as Carl Schmitt puts it: ‘All law is “situational law”’ (Schmitt 2005, p.13).

⁵ As classically expressed by Martin Wight (Wight 1966b).

⁶ Raymond Aron expresses a similar idea: ‘As long as each collectivity must think of its own safety at the same time as of that of the diplomatic system or of the human race, diplomatic-strategic behavior will never be rationally determined, even in theory’ (Aron 2003, p.17). From this perspective, the many arguments that neo-Realism, in particular, is misguided in its emphasis on anarchy, which is deemed a limited heuristic, are, at best, of only subsidiary relevance because they miss the important point: that for as long as the political has existed, so has the international, and that the latter severely constrains the freedom of the former.

deepest impulse liberation from ‘all the muck of ages’.⁷ Realism’s necessary limits violently and directly cut across the telos of Marxian thought: freedom, in an emphatic sense, cannot be reconciled with Realism’s vision of the political and the international. A dawning awareness of the meaning of this tension between Realism and Marxism is again perceptible in the themes of the recent debates in IR Marxism: in attempting to understand international relations, should Marxists incorporate a necessary ‘realist moment’⁸ into their theoretical constructions or would to do so be to introduce into the body of historical materialism a sort of poison, an element that it cannot assimilate and that would ultimately corrode it from within? Can Marxism take up Realist thematics and make use of them, and, if so, how, without endangering its own innermost being? Ultimately, what should Marxist thinking make of the actuality of Realism? Something of the unresolved ambivalences at work here, in truth the continued disarray and confusion of IR Marxism in relation to Realism, is evident in the fact that the same Marxist who argues for the inclusion of the ‘realist moment’ in Marxist IR elsewhere scorns Realism as nothing but ‘a theoretical articulation of the spontaneous ideology of state managers’⁹ and its expression of the intractable contradictions of political action as just hypocritical ‘Statesman’s Lament’.¹⁰ High-handed dismissal of Realism as mere ideology is of long tradition in IR Marxism: years ago, Robert Cox proclaimed neo-Realism to be just ‘the ideological form abstracted from the real historical framework imposed by the Cold War’,¹¹ a historical period in which the ‘apparent stability or fixity in power relations favor[ed] the problem-solving approach’;¹² in his early work, Justin Rosenberg suggested that ‘realism *sounds plausible* because it articulates commonly held common-sense assumptions about world politics’¹³ and that in IR, as a predominantly US discipline, Realism is the natural expression of the ingrained characteristics of American social science: positivistic, problem-solving, funded by influential private or state-connected bodies, and subject to a demand for policy-relevant studies; and Benno Teschke is vehement in his denunciation: ‘The reasons for

⁷ Marx and Engels 1968, p.87.

⁸ Callinicos 2007, p.542.

⁹ Callinicos in Callinicos and Rosenberg 2008, p.83.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p.108.

¹¹ Cox 1986, p.211.

¹² *ibid.*, p.210. Aside from its skewed chronology – *Theory of International Politics* was published in 1979 and neo-Realism rose to pre-eminence during the 1980s and 1990s, as the Cold War ended –, this argument is just too crude in its unmediated reading off of theoretical developments from the surface of contemporary history.

¹³ Rosenberg 1994, p.29 (emphasis in original). It should be noted that Rosenberg’s view of the importance of Realism has changed substantially in the meanwhile.

Neorealism's continuing dominance are manifold. Academic socialization into an Americanized discipline ... reinforces a vocabulary and a collective disciplinary mind-set that narrows the options for free thought. The lure of consultancies and the prospects of involvement in the political establishment – advice for the prince – short-circuit critical thought.¹⁴ However, such criticism is only ever external to the matter at hand, abstract negation, and is unable to grasp whatever of truth there might be in Realism. So Realism keeps returning, unscathed, and Marxism remains perplexed by what to do with the seemingly inescapable 'realist moment'. In fact, the Marxists do protest too much: insistence that Realism's centrality to the discipline is due only to circumstantial reasons, serviceability to power interests, and denial that it has grasped fundamental determinations with a force and clarity that Marxism has never managed serve only to mask the depth of the wound Realism inflicts. This has been the characteristic split personality, a sort of theoretical schizophrenia, of Marxist IR in relation to Realism: on the one hand confident dismissal of the latter as empty appearance, a phantasmagoria of reified ideological illusions easily seen through; and on the other, the continual and inadequately mediated recurrence of the structures and determinations Realism insists upon within the analyses produced by IR Marxism. In assuring themselves that they are already free from Realism, the Marxists have remained under its spell.

These two motivating perceptions are linked because, in IR, Realism *is* the theory of the international.¹⁵ No other theoretical position has consistently focused with such clear-headedness on the central fact of the discipline: the existence of a fragmented global political space composed of a plurality of political entities. That is why Realism has for so long constituted the theoretical centre of IR; and what it means is that the critique of Realism is also the critique of the international, and vice versa. That Marxism in IR has been unable convincingly to comprehend either Realism or the international brings the Marxist theorising that goes on in the discipline itself into question. The recent discussions of the so-called many-states problem were brought to a close with a typically Marxist gesture of setting aside abstract theory and debate, rolling up one's sleeves and getting on with what actually matters, intellectual work that is relevant to the real world, thought devoted to practice: 'Yet perhaps the time for

¹⁴ Teschke 2003, p.274.

¹⁵ Justin Rosenberg formulates the problem thus posed to radical theory: that Realism 'is the only international theory we have, but it is nevertheless the wrong one' (Callinicos and Rosenberg 2008, p.99).

methodological clarification is past. What is needed now is substantive analysis that can test the rival theoretical constructions and—more importantly—help us better understand the confusing and dangerous world in which we find ourselves.¹⁶ But this is just an evasion, really a confession of theoretical failure. For it is precisely the point that, for all its complaints about reification, Marxism in IR has never managed to understand the abstractness of Realism (especially neo-Realism) or the form problem of the political¹⁷ and hence the condition of the international – its notorious ‘timelessness’. The innumerable substantive analyses of processes of power, imperialism, hegemony, resistance and struggle, the seemingly tangible stuff of history, instead simply remain blind to the problem posed by Realism and always fall short of the thing that most urgently calls for critique. Such realism leaves Realism untouched. Rather, the inconclusive nature of the recent debates demonstrates the necessity of rethinking the use of Marx in IR. If Marxian thought is to be brought to bear in a compelling way on the central problems of the discipline, then a different Marx will have to be discerned. Such a Marx cannot remain, as it were, a pre-Realist one. Instead, in thinking through the possible meaning of Marx in IR, it would be necessary to reflect on what history, the experience of the 20th century as expressed through Realism, has done to Marx and Marxism.¹⁸ There is here a paradox: on the one hand the world is more overwhelmingly capitalistic than ever, and so to that extent, despite all of the enormous process of development in the meanwhile, the fundamental categories of Marx’s critique, as *the* thinking of capital, remain indispensable;¹⁹ but on the other, politically the world looks more like neo-Realism than it does anything envisaged in the *Communist Manifesto*. World-spanning capital does not generate its own supersession from within itself but produces an ungoverned international political space comprising a multitude of sharply delimited nation-states, identical ‘units’ iterated across the globe. In that sense, neo-

¹⁶ Callinicos 2009, p.103.

¹⁷ Norberto Bobbio describes it as ‘the ABC of the theory of the state’ that it has ‘two faces’, one turned in towards its citizens, the other turned out towards other political entities (Bobbio 1987, p.197). What is meant by ‘form problem of the political’ in this thesis is this inside/outside structure, the bounded, delimited and particularistic form of the political; ultimately, why the political produces what Realism conceives of as the ‘ontology of danger’ (Odysseos 2002) in the anarchic condition of the international state of nature.

¹⁸ The intention here has nothing in common with, for instance, Andrew Linklater’s attempt to synthesise Marxism and Realism with the hope of producing a sensible middle way ‘beyond’ them both, the excesses of each tempered by the insights of the other (Linklater 1990). The aim is the reverse: to mediate the two through their extremes.

¹⁹ See Adorno 2003a, his 1968 speech as outgoing chair of the German Sociological Society, in which he argues that, despite the immense historical changes since Marx’s time, and despite aspects of his theorising having been disproved by history, nevertheless the basic categories of Marx’s critique of capital remain constitutive of modern society, which is incomprehensible without them.

Realism is the political expression of advanced capital on the international scale. That Marx's expectations for human social and political development with the transcendence of capital and class society have been so thoroughly confuted through the development of the very societal process of which he remains the seminal theorist affects profoundly the meaning of his theoretical corpus. The evaporation, as a mere phantasm, of the future once confidently foreseen beyond capital produces a crisis of the latter's intelligibility; and so Marxian theory becomes a historical enigma, at once more obscure and more urgent.

In an essay from 1929, 'Night Music', written amid the prolonged death throes of the liberal epoch, Theodor Adorno reflected for perhaps the first time on a subject that would always preoccupy him: the historical fate of works of culture,²⁰ the ageing of the great products of the bourgeois Spirit. Characteristically, it is the objectivity of the process that he strives to articulate: 'It is vital to remain mindful of the fact that changes take place within the works, not simply in the people who interpret them. The state of truth in works corresponds to the state of truth in history.'²¹ There is no finished, sealed-off object that remains always self-identical through time and is simply regarded in different ways at different moments, in an external manner. Nor is the interpreter, in nominalist fashion, radically separate from the work. Rather, both participate in history, which acts on the essence of the work itself, its interior. 'History has unlocked the works and revealed the original essences within them, has made them evident; they become visible only through the disintegration of their morphological unity in the form of the work.'²² Through this process of corrosion, the immediate self-evidence of the work, its speaking quality, is irretrievably lost, while its stored-up significance is released: 'the truth character of the works is tied precisely to their disintegration. ... In reality, those essences separate from the work, layer by layer, when their hour has come, and none can be restored to the work once gone. There is no choosing between them, and all that our power of insight can do is ensure the realization of those essences which form part of the full currentness of the work.'²³ This is the experience that Marx's oeuvre has undergone, many of its constitutive layers that formed the phenomenon of 'Marxism' stripped away by history, gone forever. For Adorno, in 1929, it was apparent

²⁰ In this case, as often with Adorno, musical works.

²¹ Adorno 2009, p.86.

²² *ibid.*, p.82.

²³ *ibid.*, pp.88–9.

that what had been lost from bourgeois music was its substantiality as the expression of subjective freedom; the tense, precarious unity of subjective intention and objective form – the subject’s realisation of itself *as* form, achieved with the greatest force by Beethoven – had finally dissolved. In much the same way, it may be said that what has gone from Marx’s work are the layers of its conscious intentionality, that whole aspect, ranging across the entire corpus and charged with such rhetorical pathos, that speaks of his confidence in the immanent movement of history: that, through the class struggle and the dialectic of the forces and relations of production, the human subject, in the figure of the revolutionary proletariat, was historically on the point of reclaiming for itself alienated objectivity in a society of unfettered, limitless productivity. This vanished side of Marx, his conviction that his own version of the immanent dialectic of history was the rightful inheritor of the bourgeois-idealist Hegelian one, and that the constructive power of Labour would actually fulfil what idealism could only deceptively promise, shaped subsequent Marxist thought right into its innermost forms. But it is not all of Marx. ‘With the departure of the transcendental substance, critique also leaves the realm of subjective immanence: its position becomes transcendental. Certainly it cannot undo the muteness of the remaining work; by viewing the work and its substance as separated through time, however, it looks upon the muteness of the work itself, and the contours of the mute work are of a very different nature from those of the speaking work.’²⁴ History has passed the positive Marxist vision by, dissolving it in the process, but it has also revealed the contours of the ‘mute’ Marx, the negative, critical element of Marx’s thinking, more clearly; a Marx whose themes – critique of ideality, of capital, of domination, and of society as second nature – have a depth and resonance beyond his own subjective understanding of them. It is this element that thinks the objectivity of society and history most deeply, and that still demands interpretation. After Marxism, Marx becomes more, not less, radical.²⁵

²⁴ *ibid.*, p.92.

²⁵ An instance of this is the eclipse of so-called Marxist economics by the burgeoning field of value theory studies, an altogether deeper – indeed, ontologically totally different – exploration of the meaning of Marx’s theory of capital as a *critique* of political economy. It is probable that such a development could not have occurred while the traditional Marxist political vision still held sway: so long as Labour was unproblematically assumed to be the solution to the exploitative system of capital, the critical scope of the theory was obscured. (Rubin 1972 and Rosdolsky 1989 are classic statements in value studies, and Elston 1979, Backhaus 1980, 1992 and 2005, Postone 2003, Arthur 2004 and Reichelt 2007 provide representative more recent contributions; see also the journals *Capital & Class* and, in particular, *Historical Materialism*, which have carried much of the English-language value theory debate. Not coincidentally, some of the pioneers of the value theory revival, including Hans-Georg Backhaus and Helmut Reichelt, were students of Adorno’s.)

Adorno, the other major theoretical inspiration for this project, grasped the problem of the historical meaning of Marxian theory very precisely. Much of his thinking aims at opening out the critical thematics broached but often left in an only fragmentary or embryonic state in Marx's thought, in particular the critique of idealism. In doing so, Adorno would go substantially beyond Marx,²⁶ but his differences from Marx are, in a sense, the truest form of loyalty to the latter's legacy:

Though [Adorno's] materialism vies with Marx's own, it is distinctly a form of Marxism, and most of all in the sense that the restoration of the content [i.e. the primacy of the material] relies on an insight that can be followed from antiquity's critique of *lex talionis*, to Rousseau, to Kant, to Fichte's critique of capital punishment, and most of all to Marx: that there is nothing that can be traded for life that is its equal. Wage does not compensate either in maximums or minimums; the internal structure of the wage relation is necessarily life robbed and sacrificed. This insight was a given for Adorno; pushed, it could be called the meaning of his thought. And while he was completely aware that Marx's theory of class struggle did not begin to comprehend the whole structure of domination and failed to carry through the critique of life as labor, still Adorno could not have imagined that anything could be hoped for socially that would not somehow make good on this fundamental insight into the inequality of exchange.²⁷

Adorno was, of course, notoriously distanced from practical Marxism, espousing no form of political involvement or theory, and it might appear eccentric that so apolitical a figure should be a central theorist for a work in IR.²⁸ Yet, long after the extinction of Marxism as a political force, and amidst the contemporary crisis of any political action that is not simply the maintenance of the liberal-capitalist status quo, Adorno's thinking itself perhaps reveals layers that were once obscure, a kind of political content and significance that far transcends the horizon of even radical politics. As with Marx and the Idealists, the Idea of freedom informs every word Adorno wrote, and his thinking

²⁶ Where Adorno dissents from Marx, either explicitly or, more often, by implication, it is where he perceives unreflected idealist elements within Marx's would-be materialist thought.

²⁷ Hullot-Kentor 2006, pp.161–2.

²⁸ In Perry Anderson's judgement from the mid-1970s, Adorno took the most extreme position of any of the figures of 'Western Marxism': 'A final alternative was to abandon both enrolment and any discourse within politics altogether: Adorno's stance in post-war Germany' (Anderson 1977, p.44). For Anderson, whatever the other merits of Adorno's thought, to which he is not insensible, this is disastrous because it is an article of dogma for the orthodox Marxist that really meaningful theory is only possible through active unity with the Labour movement. Adorno's thinking, by contrast, hostile to collectivism in any form, consciously lives off its isolation, the individual subject's capacity for experience (see Adorno 2005a, 'Dedication'; Adorno 2001b, 'Quality and The Individuated'; and Hullot-Kentor 2006, pp.162–3).

was deeply and consciously shaped by the movement of history, society's developmental process of which freedom would have to be the determinate negation.²⁹ So, just as in the 1930s and 40s Realism came to dominate IR as global political catastrophe exploded the illusory nature of liberal convictions concerning historical progress, the same events caused Adorno to rethink the philosophy of history and the meaning of materialism,³⁰ pushing them further than Marx. And in the mid-1960s, *Negative Dialectics* is explicit at the outset that it takes up the burden of theory again after the failure of Marxism as practice: it opens with the declaration, 'philosophy, which once seemed outmoded, remains alive because the moment of its realization was missed,'³¹ and goes on, with incomparable gentleness, almost in an undertone, 'perhaps the interpretation that promised the transition did not suffice'.³² Adorno's continual concern with the concept and with abstract epistemological issues has, at root, the most practical intention: critical theory is to come to self-understanding through self-reflection for the sake of a better practice, one that will not remain trapped within determinations it does not understand and that destroy it.³³ This was to be achieved through unrelenting engagement with the heights of identity philosophy, taking up what Marx had broken off and left unfinished. For if, as Adorno argued, philosophy as idealism has never managed to be more than just the reflection-form of the actual, exploitative, practice of antagonistic society, then, conversely, the constitutive categories of the philosophical tradition tell the deepest truths about the false condition. Only through materialist theory, a negative dialectics, that comprehends the formal

²⁹ For reflections on the ageing of some of the categories of Adorno's own thought, see Hullot-Kentor 2008.

³⁰ Indeed, reading a classic Realist text from the period such as John Herz's *Political Realism and Political Idealism* alongside the more or less contemporaneous *Dialectic of Enlightenment* reveals many similarities of theme, although treated to quite different effect. Perhaps this is to be expected; William Scheuerman comments on the origins of mid-century American Realism: 'The so-called "German tradition" out of which early Realism emerged was hardly that of Bismark or conservative *Realpolitik* but instead arguably that of the interwar Weimar left. Some – most prominently Wolfers – were directly linked to an influential group of self-described (non-Marxist) "religious socialists," Protestant and Jewish Weimar leftists ... others like Herz were the intellectual offspring of social democratic jurists like Hans Kelsen, and active in socialist emigré politics in the 1930s; yet others – Carr is the obvious example – sought inspiration from left-leaning social theorists like Mannheim' (Scheuerman 2009, p.197). According to Scheuermann (2008 and 2009), Morgenthau's intellectual roots were also in the social-democratic left, in Frankfurt in the late 1920s and early 30s. Shilliam (2007) applies this perspective, situating Morgenthau in the international context of German late-development.

³¹ Adorno 2001b, 'On the Possibility of Philosophy'.

³² *ibid.*

³³ On the fate of Marxism-as-practice, Adorno commented: 'In the famed unity of theory-praxis, the former was vanquished and the latter became non-conceptual, a piece of the politics which it was supposed to lead beyond; delivered over to power' (Adorno 2001b, 'Relationship to Left Hegelianism'). And Giorgio Agamben echoes this view, in relation to the insufficiencies of Marxist theories of the state: 'one ends up identifying with an enemy whose structure one does not understand' (Agamben 1998, p.12).

categories in their highest degree of abstraction would a true practice be able to liberate itself.

The thesis, then, is an attempt to formulate a materialist critique of Realism.³⁴ It tries to grasp what Adorno would call the truth content of Realism, without in any way conceding to Realist essentialising. In doing so, the movement of the chapters as a whole is from Marx to Adorno. Marx's oeuvre, in struggling to free itself from idealism, is shot through with cross-cutting and contradictory theoretical tendencies; part of the argument of the thesis is that the historical developments that gave rise to Realism in IR in the 20th century destroyed the idealist elements of Marx's thought, and that Adorno realised this more clearly than anyone else, making that historical experience central to his own thinking about idealism and materialism. Adorno's materialism, unthinkable without Marx, is nevertheless more rigorously thought through than Marx's. However, Marxism in IR, especially in relation to Realism, has usually relied, consciously or not, on those traditional Marxist assumptions and forms of theorising that are, at this historical distance, at best of doubtful validity, at worst defunct; thus, as argued here, it has struggled to understand Realism. Chapter 1 therefore attempts in a more extensive way to situate the current impasse of Marxism in IR and to identify the question that the debate appears to be revolving around without being able to resolve. It argues that Realism poses a much more serious challenge to Marxist thought than Marxist IR has been willing to admit, and that the central issue is Realism's conception of the nature of the political, and therewith of the international. Surveying the major trends in IR Marxism, it is shown that none has developed any critical theory of the political, indeed that most remain completely blind to the problem and that this theoretical deficiency goes back to Marx's own thinking. Hence, in the field of international politics, they are always vulnerable to Realism. The chapter

³⁴ On the German Idealist prehistory of Realism, see Palan and Blair 1993. Schooled in Kant and Hegel, Adorno was acutely aware that any philosophically plausible materialism was only possible by way of the critique of idealism, pushing the latter beyond its limits through its own logic. As will become further apparent, materialism is therefore really an aporetic term, referring to the concept's constitutive reliance upon the non-conceptual: 'Adorno's materialism starts from the painful awareness that it is much more difficult really to think as a materialist than it is to lay claim to that label ... whether thinking is really materialist is not decided by how often the word "materialism" is repeated, but by what happens in that thinking. Materialist thinking would need to ask how thinking about that which appears to escape conceptuality is even imaginable' (Jarvis 1997, p.7–8). Robert Hullot-Kentor puts it precisely: 'For Adorno, materialism meant restoring to the material—nature, even as second nature—the comprehension of its content' (Hullot-Kentor 2006, p.161); that is, materialism would be a thinking that does justice to the object.

concludes by suggesting that the currently dominant form of Marxist research in IR, causal-historical studies, is inadequate for the critique of Realism and that a different kind of theory needs to be developed, focusing on the theme of materialism.

The substantive argument thereafter is essentially constructed in three stages. Chapter 2 addresses the question of history, demonstrating that there is a whole side of Marx's thinking that is thematically closely related to Realism. It shows that the major strategy of the established Marxist attack on Realism is to counterpose historical dynamics and change (driven by class struggle, revolution, and so on) to Realist stasis and repetition. Again, it is suggested that such a critique can only remain external to Realism: first, because Realism can allow for, and is perfectly aware of, any amount of historical change *within* the form of the international but insists, in a way unanswered by IR Marxism, that the condition of the international itself does not change; and secondly, because it fails to grasp why Realism empties out history as it does, what the meaning of that evacuation is. The chapter goes on to argue that the Realist discourse can be understood as, in an emphatic sense, mythic; that all its major themes are drawn from the realm of myth and that it imagines the international as a mythic domain, an objective structure of unfreedom, endless repetition and entrapment. It then goes on to show that this conception, so far from being alien to Marx's understanding of the rule of capital, is deeply congruent with it. Marx's entire analysis of capital is pervaded at every level with the themes of myth: capital is itself myth. This suggests a very different understanding of the relation between Realism and Marxian theory, and the meaning of history in both, from that put forward by IR Marxism.

Having established this thematic correlation between Marx's theory of capital and Realism, Chapter 3 concentrates on explaining why capital should be understood as mythic. The central theme is the critique of abstraction, or the ideal. From its beginnings, in the texts on Hegel, Marx's thinking deals in a satirico-critical way with questions of ideality, which he continually denounces as producing an inverted reality in which the ideal dominates the real and which holds back the movement of history. In the critique of political economy, ideality is the structuring principle, as, through the development of the categories of the commodity form, money and capital, the entire system is shown to be a gigantic, compulsive labyrinth constructed by the self-moving abstraction, value. The chapter then shows how, after the failure of Marxism-as-politics

and in the shadow of fascism, the critique of idealism was taken up and pushed substantially further by Adorno, notably in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in his speculative construction of the philosophy of history: the identity of myth and modernity.

In light of the elements of the critique of idealism thus developed, Chapter 4 then finally turns to the decisive question of the political and the problem of its form. It takes up specific themes from Giorgio Agamben and Carl Schmitt concerning sovereignty and the state of exception and reads these through Adorno's critique of the structure of the concept, the instrument of ideality. The argument is that the forms of generality and universality of the concept and of the political are the same and that that generality, rooted as it is in domination, is necessarily delimited and particular. The chapter goes on to explore what Agamben sets up as the 'debate' between Schmitt and Walter Benjamin over sovereignty and the exception and shows how the themes of that debate are taken up by Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as part of the critique of constitutive subjectivity, which can thus be read also as a critique of the political. This sheds light on fundamental issues of IR concerning political form and the international as state of nature.

The Conclusion tries to draw these various threads together, setting out the answers to the research aims, and elaborates some of the implications of the overall argument for thinking about IR theory and the meaning of Realism.

Chapter 1

Marxism and Realism

Introduction: This chapter establishes the research aims of the thesis. After situating the current debates in Marxist IR, it identifies the question that they revolve around as being Marxism's relation to Realism. This has two aspects: 1) how to understand political multiplicity, and its relation to capitalism, without conceding to Realist essentialising; and 2) more importantly, how to respond to Realism's conception of the 'tragic' nature of the international, what is termed here 'the challenge of Realism'. The key issue that links these is Realism's idea of the intrinsically delimited and particularistic nature of political form. A survey of the major schools of IR Marxism shows that none has developed a substantial and coherent theory of the political and so none has been able to get beyond the Realist idea of the international. The chapter then shows that this flaw can be traced back to Marx's own thinking about social transformation and its lack of a critical account of political being. It concludes by arguing that if the challenge of Realism is to be met, a different sort of theory from the causal-historical kind currently prevalent in IR Marxism needs to be developed, and that this might be achieved through pursuing the philosophical thematic of materialism in Marx.

Marxism and the International

In one sense, the international, as the totality, has always been the proper scale of Marx's theory. The intrinsically expansionary, globalising dynamics of capital, identified by Marx as early as the *Communist Manifesto*, lent to the tradition of Marxist thought from the beginning a perspective beyond that of the single society, and led to socialist and communist political agitation and activity being self-consciously 'international' in their intentions even in the 19th century. As such, 'Marxist thought on international relations pre-dates its [i.e. IR's] formal establishment as an

institutionalized field of study'.¹ Yet, for all its affinity with the global view, Marxism in IR has had great difficulty grasping the central problematic of the discipline: the international. While Marx and Engels wrote extensively on contemporaneous world events, their interest was largely one of analysing the tendency of those developments in order to assess the possibilities of revolutionary political action. International relations presented a practical problem rather than a theoretical one: the fragmentation of global political space was registered empirically but not penetrated by theory.² This deficiency was not made good in the Classical Marxist theories of imperialism developed in the early 20th century.³ Certainly, as the 19th-century expectation of socialist revolution in Western Europe was confounded and capitalist accumulation reached further into the periphery and the non-capitalist world, imperialism theory, in comparison with the international thought of the founders of historical materialism, represented a concerted attempt to derive epochal global political dynamics from the development of capital. The expansion and intensification of colonial and imperialist activity by the core and aspiring capitalist powers of Europe, and with it the inter-imperialist rivalry that culminated in the First World War, were linked both to the world economic crisis of 1873–98 and, more deeply, to a transformation in the process of accumulation and the social instantiation of capital: the transition to the era of monopoly capitalism. The theory of imperialism, in its various articulations, deeply shaped subsequent Marxist thought, both rhetorically and at the more far-reaching level of the conception of theory construction, pioneering within Marxism 'two kinds of intermediary analysis that, while of a higher resolution than general theorizing about the capitalist mode, operate at different levels; respectively, that of a specific phase of capitalist development and that of a determinate historical moment – in other words, of epoch and conjuncture.'⁴ The

¹ Teschke 2008, p.163.

² Marx's inaugural address to the International Working Men's Association, from 1864, is characteristic. It concludes with the rallying cry that the European ruling classes' foreign policies 'in pursuit of criminal designs, playing upon national prejudices, and squandering in piratical wars the people's blood and treasure ... have taught the working classes the duty to master themselves the mysteries of international politics; to watch the diplomatic acts of their respective governments; to counteract them, if necessary, by all means in their power; when unable to prevent, to combine in simultaneous denunciations, and to vindicate the simple laws of morals and justice, which ought to govern the relations of private individuals, as the rules paramount to the intercourse of nations.

The fight for such a foreign policy forms part of the general struggle for the emancipation of the working classes.

Proletarians of all countries unite!' (Marx 1992c, p.81).

Rhetorical exhortations aside, the simple laws of morals and justice, whatever they may be, have proved insufficient to solve 'the mysteries of international politics'.

³ The classic collection on theories of imperialism is Owen and Sutcliffe 1983.

⁴ Callinicos 2005, p.355.

epoch would be the overarching phase (the Age of Imperialism, for instance); the conjuncture, the particular event or confluence of circumstances (at its most specific, say, August 1914). Analysis and theorisation in terms of epoch and conjuncture became and remain staple within Marxist thought, and Marxist theorising as it has developed within International Relations from the 1970s is no exception, although the inherently global nature of the discipline encourages such analysis at a notably high level of generality. This mode of historical thinking, eliding with historical sociology, has been the trade mark of Marxist thought generally within IR, from periodisations of the development of the capitalist world system, through debates on the transition from feudalism to capitalism and the emergence of the modern states system, down to conjunctural analyses of the trajectories of particular instances of national development and the numerous critical accounts of Western, in particular US, imperialism. However, for all its achievements, the whole of this tradition remains immanent to the problematic of IR: the context of political multiplicity is assumed and the focus of interest is tracing the dynamics of geopolitics and, more broadly, social development, read through the lens of the growth of the capitalist world market. The international itself is not made the object of critique.

The onset of globalisation at the beginning of the 1990s, followed by the turn to a self-declaredly militarised foreign policy by the leading capitalist power, have sometimes been held to vindicate the continued relevance of Marxist thought after the polarisations of the Cold War and its eclipse as radical theory especially in the 1980s⁵ – the *Communist Manifesto* hailed as announcing globalisation *avant la lettre* and the foreign policy stance of the Bush administration evidencing, once again, the perennial necessity of imperialist rivalry to the dynamics of capitalism. But Marxism's engagement with other theoretical positions in IR during the same period has revealed that the matter is more complex than a straightforward reaffirmation of orthodox Marxist manners allows. The Marxist critique of globalisation theory was to the effect that, far from announcing a new dawn of global integration, overcoming inter-state rivalry through the networks of civil society, promoting human rights and liberal governance, the phenomenon was best explained as the latest round of the intrinsically

⁵ See, for instance, the editor's introduction to the collection *Marxism and World Politics*, in which it is declared that economic crisis and US-led war mean that 'neoliberalism may be reaching its limits, and the categories of "Marxism" and "socialism" are being recovered' (Anievas 2010, p.1).

expansionary dynamics of the capitalist accumulation process, with all the unevenness and contradictions that that necessarily entailed, and that, conjuncturally, the precipitate end of the Cold War unleashed in the early 1990s forces of integration on a global scale that had been accumulating for at least twenty years.⁶ To a significant extent, the Marxist account was aligned with the narrower Realist critique of liberal internationalism in the 1990s, which doubted whether the new era had surpassed inter-state rivalry, that is, had radically transformed the nature of international politics.⁷ With the turn of the millennium, the stridently aggressive foreign policy posture of the US government provoked on the Marxist left a revival of the old theories of imperialism (never absent from the mainstream of Marxist discourse but here given a shot in the arm), updated to apply to the latest global situation but recognisably indebted to the Classical Marxist legacy. However, where the critique of globalisation had indicated common ground with Realism and its ‘sometimes splendid demolitions of liberal ideology’,⁸ the arguments of the thinkers of the so-called New Imperialism make plain the cost of any such accommodation. For, where Lenin and the other early 20th-century theorists of imperialism had needed geopolitical conflict as an integral part of the theory because such competition between the major capitalist powers provided the opportunity, the space, for revolution in the semi-periphery, a century later the inevitability of geopolitical rivalry had been definitively subsumed to the Realist tradition in international thought. If the economic reductionism of the old Leninism could not be maintained, what was to be the status of geopolitics within any updated concept of imperialism? This issue has coalesced with the investigation within Marxist historical sociology of the specifically international dimension of the process of capitalist development, the causal importance within the expansionary dynamic of capitalism of the fractured, multiple nature of global political space, to form the question formulated by Alex Callinicos: ‘Does capitalism need the state system?’⁹

Cleaving to the theory of imperialism yet desirous of avoiding its hard economism, Callinicos proposes¹⁰ a conception of ‘capitalist imperialism as constituted by the intersection of, respectively, capitalist and territorial logics of power and

⁶ For the fullest setting out of this argument see Rosenberg 2000 and 2005.

⁷ See, for example, Waltz 2000 and Mearsheimer 1994–5 and 1995.

⁸ Rosenberg in Callinicos and Rosenberg 2008, p.96.

⁹ Callinicos 2007.

¹⁰ Together with other theorists, notably David Harvey (see Harvey 2005, esp. pp.26–30).

economic and geopolitical competition'.¹¹ In this way, the state system, geopolitics, is to be incorporated non-deductively into the broader theory of capital, as an independent determination to be introduced as one moves from Marx's abstract theorisation by degrees closer to reality. The relation between the two logics is apparently to be conceived of as contradictory and dialectical rather than functionally one-sided.¹² 'One implication of this', as Callinicos admits, 'is that there is, necessarily, a realist moment in any Marxist analysis of international relations and conjunctures'.¹³ At a simple analytical level this is, perhaps, reasonable enough: geopolitical considerations do indeed form part of international politics and ought therefore to find a place within any causal account. Beyond that, however, all the important questions remain unanswered. For Callinicos purports simultaneously to incorporate geopolitics into a theory of capitalism and to leave it as an autonomous element. Gonzalo Pozo-Martin is quick to see the problem: 'if the territorial logic of competition is autonomous, does it follow that we must relinquish an attempt to explain its determinations from the perspective of historical materialism?'¹⁴ Allowing a 'realist moment' immediately reopens the painful theoretical gap that Callinicos was otherwise trying to close, for it leaves the 'territorial logic', geopolitics, as itself something simply posited and underived: the theory of capital is supposed to explain why there is a capitalist logic of competition, but what is to explain why there is a territorial, political logic? In truth, the 'New Imperialism' has done little to remedy the deficiencies of the older imperialism theory regarding the relation between capitalism and the states system. Where the earlier theory, along with its economic reductionism, 'took the nation state as a social relation in its plural manifestations—the states system—as given, failing to problematize, much less theorize, the fact that nation states were "relevant units" in the world economy',¹⁵ the new one, in flight from economism, replaces this failure with a hypostatisation of the

¹¹ Callinicos 2007, p.539.

¹² Exactly why and how they are dialectical is not explained.

¹³ *ibid.*, p.542.

¹⁴ Pozo-Martin 2007, p.554. Pozo-Martin is the only Marxist contributor to the 2007 *CRIA* debate to grasp the significance of the issue; the others by and large brush over the difficulty and importance of the relation of Marxism to Realism and use the occasion to rehearse preferred theories of capitalist development set out at length elsewhere. In his contribution, the non-Marxist John Hobson (2007) correctly observes that in some ways the present debate constitutes a re-run of the 'one logic or two?' argument between World-Systems theorists and Weberian historical sociologists in the early 1980s (see, for instance, Chase-Dunn 1981). However, the significance of the question goes deeper than he allows because it concerns more than simply the relative priority and interrelation of causal factors.

¹⁵ Teschke 2008, p.169.

territorial logic that the state system is said to articulate.¹⁶ Nonetheless, the debate over the New Imperialism has served to suggest the specific tension between Marxism and Realism: Pozo-Martin's doubt about Callinicos's Realist moment, about whether Marxism can in any way afford an accommodation with Realism, senses without developing the fact that Realism, pre-eminent theory of the geopolitical, presents a specific problem for Marxist thought, a problem that is more far-reaching than the latter has been willing to admit.

The Challenge of Realism

What is it that underlies the meditations on the intransigence of international conflict in Realist thought in International Relations? What is it that makes Realism the central theory of the discipline? Justin Rosenberg observes with regard to the relative philosophical resources of liberalism and Realism in IR: 'in International Theory, I think it would be truer to say that it is liberalism which is intrinsically shallow, and Realism which, for all its problems, is connected to a circumstance of profound significance.'¹⁷ That circumstance is the fact of 'inter-societal coexistence', the 'political fragmentation' of humanity.¹⁸ This kernel of Realist thought has been set out axiomatically by Robert Gilpin.¹⁹ Three assumptions underlie the Realist view of international political life:

The first is the essentially conflictual nature of international affairs. ... The second ... is that the essence of social reality is the group ... in a world of scarce resources and conflict over the distribution of those resources, human beings confront one another ultimately as members of groups, and not as isolated individuals. *Homo sapiens* is a tribal species, and loyalty to the tribe for most of us ranks above all loyalties other than that of the family. In the modern world, we have given the name "nation-state" to these competing tribes and the name "nationalism" to this form of loyalty. True, the name, size, and organization of the competing groups into which our species subdivides itself

¹⁶ The inadequacies of the Marxist theories of imperialism as theories of international politics were pointed out long ago by Norberto Bobbio in his essay 'Marxism and international relations' (collected in Bobbio 1987). Surprisingly, this important text by a major political thinker seems entirely to have escaped notice within IR.

¹⁷ Rosenberg in Callinicos and Rosenberg 2008, p.96.

¹⁸ Both *ibid*.

¹⁹ Axiomatically because, as Rosenberg again observes, in IR Realism itself in fact has no theory of the political (and thus no theory, in the emphatic sense, of the international): 'This question of why "the international" exists in the first place – why there are multiple societies – seems not to have formed a prominent part of either realist or non-realist theory. Perhaps that is not surprising. Realism, after all, works by reasoning *from* this fact, not towards it' (Rosenberg 2008, p.15. Emphasis in original).

do alter over time—tribes, city-states, kingdoms, empires, and nation-states—due to economic, demographic and technological changes. Regrettably, however, the essential nature of intergroup conflict does not. The third assumption that I believe characterizes realist thinking is the primacy in all political life of power and security in human motivation.²⁰

Realism in IR is based upon a strong claim about the nature of political existence: that mankind, as πολιτικόν ζῶον, has always been divided into, or organised itself into, political communities, of one sort or another, that are inherently limited and particularistic, creating group identities – insiders and outsiders, friends and enemies, countrymen and foreigners. Whatever the multitude of economic, cultural and other interactions between societies, of incalculable number in the present but doubtless existent in some measure as far back as ethnology and archaeology can trace, the boundary, what in the course of development hardened into the political boundary, has not been effaced. The inside, the space of politics, may be the arena in which the pursuit of the good life is made possible, but the character of its constitution is such that externally it always remains within the state of nature, the domain of sheer survival. What Realism thus perceives with unequalled clarity is that the form of the political simultaneously creates internal unity and external division. So, as the Realists can easily concede, the configurations of the political, the modes of organisation of the inner space, may undergo immense historical change, from at least the ancient *polis* through to the modern nation state, as do, with them, the dynamics of international relations in particular eras, but the *condition* of the international, the global political being of humanity, does not essentially change, remaining always fractured and prone to conflict. It is from this circumstance of fragmentation, of multiple particularist political communities, with borders (whether formally defined or not) creating divisions of inside and outside, always interacting but always potentially hostile, that Realism deduces the inevitable periodic recurrence of war and derives the invariant abstraction of geopolitics.

The implications of the circumstance of inter-societal coexistence for Marxist theorising, especially in IR, are substantial, and have been most extensively, if idiosyncratically, set out in a too little noted article by R.N. Berki from 1971. Berki opens with the assertion that ‘the very existence of international relations poses a

²⁰ Gilpin 1986, pp.304–5.

serious, and perhaps intractable, *problem* for Marxism’,²¹ because ‘international relations presuppose the horizontal division of mankind into nations or states, and since Marxian thought postulates the absolute unity of mankind as its ideal, problems relating to horizontal group diversity are much more centrally relevant to the Marxian doctrine than it is usually thought.’²² In a summary overview, Berki observes that in ‘conventional Marxism’²³ classes rather than nations or states are the decisive actors in history, and it is the struggle between classes, not inter-state conflict, that occupies the centre of attention. In this view, the state, an apparatus of political domination, is a product of class conflict, organised to maintain the system of exploitation internally, and externally to facilitate the overseas expansion of the bourgeois class. Competition for markets among a globally self-divided bourgeoisie generates recurrent (though not constant) inter-state war. The result is that, ‘nations themselves, in Marxian theory, are not absolute, but historical, and hence ephemeral, units’,²⁴ and the proletariat, having a unity of interest in overthrowing bourgeois society, is essentially a nationless class. However, Berki then turns to Kenneth Waltz’s *Man, the State and War* to expose a problem with this line of thinking. In his explication of the second image, Waltz had surveyed the development of socialist and Marxist thinking on international issues up to the outbreak of the First World War and drawn the conclusion that the argument that peace can be achieved through the internal perfection of states is faulty. Berki comments, ‘Waltz’s question is legitimate: “Is it capitalism or states that must be destroyed in order to get peace, or must both be abolished?”’ The distinction between these two phases, or tasks, is certainly warranted in point of theory.’²⁵ Elaborating, he observes that:

The problem ... is whether the disappearance of the “state” after the overthrow of capitalism refers only to its internal character as an agency maintaining oppression and exploitation of one class by another ... or also to its external function, which can be defined as organizing and promoting the interests of a group of people distinguished by their permanent occupation of a certain

²¹ Berki 1971, p.80 (emphasis in original).

²² *ibid.* Whether Marxian thought really does posit ‘the absolute unity of mankind as its ideal’ is questionable; Marx both hailed capitalism’s tendency to do away with ‘the idiocy of rural life’ (Marx and Engels 2002, p.224), promoting the development of the forces of production and ‘the universal interdependence of nations’ (*ibid.*, p.223), and deplored the anarchy and false universality of the commodity economy. What an authentic or true universality would be remains a central question for any thinking indebted to Marx; to that extent Berki’s provocation retains its relevance.

²³ Berki 1971, p.81.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p.82.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p.84.

geographical area. It does not matter, of course, whether now one calls it “state”, “nation,” or “community,” or the “administration of things” ... as long as what is meant is a plurality of these units.²⁶

Berki notes that Marx and Engels in their practical political thinking were sometimes enthusiastic in their support of national independence and separateness (as, for example, in relation to Ireland and Poland) and he traces the historical phases (or traumas) in the 20th century through which Marxist theorists and political figures professing an adherence to Marxism not only came to terms with political diversity, the separateness of nations, but embraced it – the fracturing of the European working class parties along national lines around the First World War, the establishment of ‘socialism in one country’ in the USSR in the 1920s, the use of Great Russian nationalism by Stalin in the 1930s, the Soviet-Yugoslav split in 1948, and so forth. The observable tendency ‘is to afford more and more implicit recognition to the ideal of a non-antagonistic world community consisting of separate national units.’²⁷ Such an accommodation with political Realism, with the seeming givenness of national diversities, might appear simply to be a normal development as the doctrine grapples with recalcitrant reality. However, Berki goes further and asks: ‘can Marxism afford this compromise? Does it make any sense in terms of Marxian thought, to talk about non-antagonistic diversity? Can Marxism at all entertain the idea of liberated but separate nations living peacefully side by side, without thereby losing its coherence?’²⁸ It is not necessary to concur with all aspects of Berki’s reading of Marx’s early works to see the force of the argument, which is that it is not possible to reconcile Marx’s idea of a condition of universal human freedom with nations, understood not simply as the modern nation state but, more broadly, as particularist political communities that form divisions of inside and outside, and claim a right over a territorial area and the resources contained therein. For, it inevitably produces a disabling fragmentation of any possible universalism when each ‘nation’ appears as, in a sense, an ‘owner of property which, in the context of a community of nations, appears as “private property” pure and simple.’²⁹ It is difficult to know what non-antagonistic diversity might mean in a developed world of all-round interconnection because ‘the point is that nations *cannot help but be* self-regarding, as

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ *ibid.*, p.92.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p.86.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p.102.

long as their position is that of owners of property in a wider community characterized by economic interdependence.’³⁰

Berki’s argument suggests the profound difficulty that Waltz’s second image argument poses for Marxism: that the particularist, inside/outside character of political communities means that they are always unreconciled, at least potentially antagonistic, and that among those communities internal politics may be hierarchic and ordered in a great variety of ways, but international politics is always essentially anarchic. It is here that the real and continuing power of Realism lies, as Justin Rosenberg has recently argued at some length. Piqued by Alex Callinicos’s dismissal of Realism as impoverished in comparison with the richness of the tradition of liberal thought, Rosenberg, in a sense *malgré lui-même*, rises to a defence of the profundity of Realism in its grasp of the seemingly intractable dilemmas of international coexistence. While ‘the substantive political analyses of neo-Realist writers [are] disabblingly thin’, the relationship between Realism and liberalism ‘is somehow more complex – and more paradoxical – than any simple contrast of “rich” and “thin” implies.’³¹ The status of Realism within IR arises from the fact that ‘there is a real sense in which liberalism (and actually most Marxist thought) is not, and does not possess, an international theory’;³² that is, it is only Realism that has attended with the necessary seriousness to the central premise of IR as a discipline: geopolitical fragmentation and its consequences. From this fact of fragmentation Realism derives its normative resources and its ethical stance: ‘an ontological critique of easy, self-serving universalisms; a highly developed moral and practical sense of the tension between ends and means; and a genuinely tragic appreciation of the anarchically inscribed conflict of particularist (national) and common (international) interests.’³³ Problems of political life that are in some degree resolved in the inner space of domestic political community, are re-opened in the international domain: internally ‘legitimate’ violence appearing externally as threatening military potential and the instability endemic to managing the relations of sovereign entities in an anarchic field unmediated by superordinate authority. What Realism grasps is that these problems of the ‘ethical irrationality’³⁴ of the world assume

³⁰ *ibid.*, p.103 (emphasis in original).

³¹ Callinicos and Rosenberg 2008, p.96.

³² *ibid.*

³³ *ibid.*, p.97.

³⁴ *ibid.*

their most intractable form in international relations because there is no higher level at which they can be resolved: the nature of the political is such that the rationality and order of the delimited political space continually issue in the irrationality and disorder of the international. Realism's insistent emphasis on anarchy, the balance of power, and the tragic, fallen nature of international politics simply says, again and again, that at the level of the whole, the totality, humanity remains blind, stumbling in the dark. The political, the modality of human self-determination, is, at the level of the international, perennial unfreedom. 'This fatality ... is the deeper issue to which Realism is connected.'³⁵

Marxism and the Political

It is from its conception of the essential nature of political form that Realism develops its bleak vision of the unchanging, anarchic character of international politics, and the question of the political is the ground on which any radical challenge to Realism must take place. How have the major schools of Marxist thought within IR approached this issue? What conceptions of the political can be found in their work?³⁶

World-Systems Theory

Immanuel Wallerstein, progenitor of the world-systems approach, took as his preferred object of study not the history and development of individual states, but 'world-systems', integrated production networks within which those individual states' trajectories of development are placed: 'a world-system is a social system, one that has boundaries, structures, member groups, rules of legitimation and coherence.'³⁷ The peculiarity of the capitalist world-system, the primary object of study, is that it is a uniquely long-lasting world economy, containing within itself a multiplicity of political units. There is a fit between economic and political forms: because capital operates beyond the bounds of any one unit, the multiple units give it a structural freedom of manoeuvre. What, then, are these political units and what role do they play within Wallerstein's theorising? While deploring the application of the word 'state' to pre-

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ This section is not intended as an assessment of the overall merits of these various approaches but only to focus on how the political appears in them.

³⁷ Wallerstein 1974, p.347.

capitalist political entities because it spuriously implies historical continuity, it seems that nevertheless all such units can be categorised under a general rubric: ‘any political structure which ha[s] some authority network (a leading person or group or groups, with intermediate cadres enforcing the will of this leading entity).’³⁸ In this view, the state is a structure of power projection and is a site of continual contestation between interest groups seeking to use the means of such state power to ‘improve the particular group’s ability to profit, directly or indirectly, from the operations of the world market. The state is the most convenient institutional intermediary in the establishment of market constraints ... in favor of particular groups.’³⁹ World-systems theory’s interest in the state is thus in how it functions as a possible lever of accumulation on the world market. The state is viewed as a mechanism that social classes, and fractions of classes, seek to capture and, through using its power apparatus, secure for themselves a larger share of the total global surplus product. In the core part of the world economy, the construction of a strong state machinery and of a national culture are means by which to protect disparities generated by the world-system and form ‘an ideological mask and justification for the maintenance of those disparities.’⁴⁰ Further, ‘emphasis on local culture serves well to deflect local internal conflict, creating instead local solidarity against the outside. If ... local dominant strata feel themselves oppressed by higher strata of the world-system, they are doubly motivated to pursue the creation of a local “identity”.’⁴¹ Everything is thus to be explained in terms of hard material interests: the state is an instrument of domination and power projection, and particularist political identity is a sort of ideological illusion conjured up by dominant groups to further their interests.

The long-standing critique of this conception of political community, one first voiced by Theda Skocpol, is that it is one-sided – politics is functionally derived from accumulation strategies on the world market. A two-stage reduction is involved: ‘first, a reduction of socio-economic structure to determination by world market opportunities and technological production possibilities; and second, a reduction of state structures

³⁸ Wallerstein 1984, pp.28–9. Characteristic of Marxist thought generally within IR is Wallerstein’s focus on the state, the apparatus of power and class domination, rather than on the political space as a whole. The two, of course, cannot be radically split apart but the distinction is nevertheless important and the Marxist neglect of the political in favour of the state significant.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p.30.

⁴⁰ Wallerstein 1974, p.349.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p.353.

and policies to determination by dominant class relations.⁴² Although Wallerstein's work had ground-breaking importance in that it decisively broke with the conception that capitalism develops in a series of discrete national economies and treated it rather as a global system, nevertheless, as Simon Bromley observes, not only did it involve 'an illicit form of economic reductionism, but perhaps more important was the simple inversion of the Realist problematic effected. For if Realists derive the properties of the structure from the characteristics of the component parts, Wallerstein simply reverses the procedure; the actions of the parts ... are derived from the functional needs of the whole.'⁴³ Thus in Wallerstein's approach not only is the problem of the form of the state not given due recognition, but the anterior question of the particularist, bounded nature of the political is simply avoided or not recognised, given that, in familiar Marxist fashion, classes and class fractions are the exclusive centre of attention, the privileged actors within the dynamic of the world-system.

Other leading world-systems theorists, such as Christopher Chase-Dunn and Giovanni Arrighi, take a similar approach. Responding to Skocpol's criticisms of Wallerstein, Chase-Dunn asserts that 'the interstate system itself is the fundamental basis of the competitive commodity economy at the system level. Thus the interaction of world market and state system is fundamental to an understanding of capitalist development.'⁴⁴ State system and world economy reinforce and reproduce each other: political fragmentation facilitates the mobility of capital and the uneven development of capitalist production means that dominant classes in core powers export capital to other areas, which process restrains those core powers from attempting to impose political dominance through conquest. Nevertheless, as with Wallerstein, states are still seen as essentially functional to the interests of class fractions on the world market: 'States are the organizations which are often utilized by the classes that control them to help appropriate shares of the world surplus value. Market forces are either reinforced or regulated depending on the world market position of the classes controlling a particular state.'⁴⁵ Whether or not these arguments successfully answer the charges made by Skocpol of reductionism, what can be said is that the question of the form of the political is wholly beyond the purview of this theoretical perspective. Much the same is

⁴² Skocpol 1977, pp.1078–9.

⁴³ Bromley 1991, pp.37–8.

⁴⁴ Chase-Dunn 1981, p.24.

⁴⁵ Chase-Dunn 1989, p.137.

true of Giovanni Arrighi. In his major work, *The Long Twentieth Century*, he blends together concepts drawn from Braudel, Weber and Gramsci to produce a theoretical framework of capitalism as the ‘top layer’ of the economy, *haute finance*, which is highly mobile and is competed for by multiple state structures, which, in turn, require a world hegemon to define the rules of international order and conduct. The story is one of a spiral sequence of hegemons, each larger and more global in scope than the last, that shape the development of the capitalist world economy – the Italian city states, the Dutch Republic, England, then the USA (and then, possibly, China⁴⁶). As with Wallerstein and Chase-Dunn, this is an international theory to the extent that it recognises and attempts to theorise the dynamic, interactive nature of development among a multiplicity of political units (with a heavy emphasis on the overdetermining nature of the world economy), but that fact of multiplicity is not itself problematised. Indeed, all three of these theorists regard the transcendence of capitalism as being a single world state that would politically regulate distribution, suggesting not only that the basic problem posed by capitalism is simply a question of the distribution of the output of the production process, but also that political multiplicity has no deep significance in itself and poses no special theoretical problems in terms of thinking about a world beyond capital.

Neo-Gramscian Theory

Where the world-systems theorists have been criticised for a reductionist view of the state, neo-Gramscian theory has been concerned to crack open Realism’s ‘billiard ball’ conception of the closed national territorial totality and demonstrate how the state, and by extension the states system, is a site of contestation for a range of conflicting social forces of production. The singular, homogenous state is replaced by the idea of ‘state-society complex’ and thereby the internal structure and development of states through various class alliances and modernisation programmes can be traced, using the Gramscian conceptual terminology of ‘historic blocs’, ‘passive revolution’, ‘hegemony’ and so forth. The international dimension impinges on this conception of the domestic in that it is recognised that ‘complexes of production relations, classes, and historic blocs do not exist in isolated national compartments. They are linked to a world order

⁴⁶ See Arrighi 2005a and 2005b.

that bears directly on them, as well as influencing them through their national states.⁴⁷ The novelty of the neo-Gramscian approach is the extension of the Gramscian concepts to the international sphere, especially the concept of ‘hegemony’, by which, in the original Gramscian context, a dominant class co-opts subaltern classes to its project of national development and maintains their support more by consent than coercion, and, in its new international sense, the dominant class of the leading state, through alliances with like-minded classes or class fractions in other states, constructs a particular world order. The focus of much neo-Gramscian theorising is the periods of transition between historical world orders – how one breaks down and a new one is constructed – with a view to determining whether the current conjuncture constitutes a historical moment of transition and, if so, what the possibilities are for a broadly anti-capitalist/anti-imperialist hegemonic project. Accordingly, most of, for instance, Robert Cox’s major work is taken up with what is effectively a narrative of the constitution and dissolution of first British 19th-century and then American 20th-century hegemonies.⁴⁸

The problematic of the states system has been attended to from a neo-Gramscian perspective by Mark Rupert.⁴⁹ Central to the argument is a reading of the concept of ‘alienation’ as found in Marx’s early writings. Under capitalist relations of production, by which the worker is freed from personal relations of domination but is also divorced from direct access to the means of production, alienation works on multiple levels: the worker is alienated from the product of his own labour, which under the regime of private property belongs to the capitalist; he is alienated from his own life-activity, the process of self-objectification through labour, because his labour is always for an (antagonistic) other; and ‘estranged labour involves the alienation of human beings from one another, and of the individual from the species’⁵⁰ (this final alienation producing *homo economicus*, hero of traditional liberal theory). These multiple alienations are said to generate, at the general societal level, the separation of economics and politics, and the abstraction of the purely political state characteristic of capitalist societies; thus, ‘the very existence of the kind of states portrayed by neo-realist theory presupposes relations of alienation in which “politics” assumes an identity distinct from

⁴⁷ Cox 1987, pp.6–7.

⁴⁸ Cox 1987, pp.111–273. For the argument that Gramscian concepts can be used effectively to construct historical-sociological accounts of trajectories of national development, see Morton 2007a and 2007b.

⁴⁹ Rupert 1993.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p.71.

“economics” and attains its own institutional form of expression.⁵¹ The result of this bringing together of Marx’s early writings and IR theory is that ‘international politics may then be critically understood as a kind of second-order alienation. That is, international politics concerns itself with the mutual estrangement of political communities which are themselves constructed within relations of alienation.’⁵²

To the extent that Rupert’s approach limits itself to a theorisation of the constitution and nature of capitalist geopolitics, it cannot fully go behind its target, neo-Realism, because the Realist claim about the multiplicity of political communities extends well beyond the capitalist epoch: to explain the nature of one historical form of geopolitics is not to explain geopolitics itself. Further, to speak of the separation of economics and politics simply assumes the validity of the two determinations rather than making them the object of critique. But, more specifically, Rupert’s argument exposes the question of the applicability of Gramsci’s concepts to the study of IR. The solution Rupert poses to the problem of international alienation is a political practice that ‘overturns the hegemony of state-based conceptions of politics [and] mediates between various “national” groups whose political practices had been contained within such conceptions, and enables their active participation in the construction of a global political community.’⁵³ This appears to envisage a political strategy that self-consciously aims to transcend national boundaries. By contrast, Robert Cox, in his seminal article introducing the Gramscian conceptual apparatus into IR, insisted that an anti-capitalist hegemonic strategy must be based at the national level: ‘A significant structural change in world order is, accordingly, likely to be traceable to some fundamental change in social relations and in the national political orders which correspond to national structures of social relations’ and so, consequently, ‘the national context remains the only place where an historic bloc can be founded, although world-economy and world-political conditions materially influence the prospects for such an enterprise.’⁵⁴ What Cox’s stipulation reflects is that Gramsci’s theoretical thinking about political praxis was centred on the national context and thereby assumed the political

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p.84.

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ *ibid.*, p.87.

⁵⁴ Both Cox 1983, pp.173–4. Robbie Shilliam (2004) has tellingly exposed the slippage here regarding the concept of hegemony. In Gramsci’s thinking, he argues, this is primarily concerned with a national programme of passage *into* modernity, centred on the problematic of primitive accumulation; in neo-Gramscian IR, however, it is concerned with the passage *out of* fully developed capitalist modernity, a conceptual extension that Shilliam suggests is by no means unproblematic.

space. As Randall Germain and Michael Kenny put it: ‘Throughout the *Prison Notebooks* [Gramsci] is clear that socialists have to embed their arguments within the soil of national political and popular cultures; hence the power of his understanding of the concept of the “national-popular”.’⁵⁵ In discussing the extension of the concept ‘historic bloc’ from the national to the international sphere, Stephen Gill and David Law contend that, as an international idea, it means more than simply an alliance of capitalist interests across national boundaries: ‘It implies that elements of more than one class were involved, its basis was more organic and rooted in material and normative structures of society.’⁵⁶ But can such concepts be smoothly transferred ‘across national boundaries’ from the domestic to the international? Germain and Kenny argue that Gramsci’s understanding of the state-civil society complex assumed the national context and that, ‘to speak of a specifically *Gramscian* reading of civil society divorced from its necessary relationship to the state is therefore to obscure the way in which the relationship of the two *analytical* categories comprises for Gramsci a single *social* entity.’⁵⁷ In the international domain, despite all talk of a developing ‘international state’, no such state structure exists; rather, ‘national states remain the only political authorities capable of taking public decisions and acting with governmental authority in world politics today.’⁵⁸ This surely makes problematic the use of Gramscian concepts in the discussion and analysis of ‘international civil society’ and global social forces.⁵⁹ Those concepts are specifically predicated on the national context and thus presuppose the particular characteristics of the political and the national/international distinction central to Realist thinking.⁶⁰ To deploy them in analysis of international relations serves largely to obscure, rather than to expose and explicate, the problematic of political form and of the multiplicity of particularist political units that Realists insist upon. To this extent, neo-Gramscianism in IR reiterates rather than critically explores the familiar national/international contradiction. To echo a prominent neo-Gramscian’s own injunction concerning the necessity of historicisation of Gramsci’s thought, it might be said that the challenge of Realism serves to reveal ‘what might be historically *limited* in

⁵⁵ Germain and Kenny 1998, p.12.

⁵⁶ Gill and Law 1993, p.97.

⁵⁷ Germain and Kenny 1998, p.13 (emphases in original).

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p.14.

⁵⁹ This tension is recognised but not convincingly resolved in Rupert 1998.

⁶⁰ And, further, are deeply tied to the distinctive historical context in which Gramsci was situated and the problems of state formation and modernisation in the semi-periphery he was concerned with, as both Shilliam and Germain and Kenny argue.

a Gramscian way of thinking about alternative historical and contemporary circumstances.’⁶¹

Political Marxism

The work of Political Marxists in IR in many respects served to focus the problem of the international and its relation to the development of capitalism. Marx and Engels, Benno Teschke observes, did not ‘develop an integrated theory that incorporates the historical efficacy of international relations into their conception of the overall course of world history’⁶² and ‘this relative absence of the geopolitical has left a problematic legacy within Marxism’.⁶³ Hannes Lacher suggests that a result of the increasing interest of Marxists in the question of how international relations and capitalism are to be understood together is that the main issue to be studied has developed: where the theorists of classical imperialism were concerned to explain the changing behaviour of states whose existence was assumed, ‘the question that has emerged as central in recent years is how the existence of an interstate system in the capitalist epoch can be explained in the first place.’⁶⁴ Surveying the Marxist IR literature that took inspiration from the so-called State Debate within Marxism in 1970s,⁶⁵ Lacher suggests that while that approach can explain the necessity of the state (in the singular) to capitalist society, it cannot answer the question posed by Fred Halliday: ‘why, if there is a world economy in which class interests operate transnationally, there is a need for states at all. What, in other words, is the specificity and effectivity of distinct states within a single economic totality?’⁶⁶ Although, after the State Debate, Marxism came to recognise that ‘the state’ exists only in the plural, as system of states,⁶⁷ Political Marxists have pushed the issue further, making the emergence of the modern form of political multiplicity, the capitalist international, a central focus of their research.⁶⁸ The

⁶¹ Morton 2003, p.139 (emphasis in original).

⁶² Teschke 2006, p.332.

⁶³ *ibid.*, p.330–1.

⁶⁴ Lacher 2002, p.148.

⁶⁵ On the State Debate, see Holloway and Picciotto 1978.

⁶⁶ Cited in Lacher 2002, p.151.

⁶⁷ See Barker 1978 and Holloway 1994.

⁶⁸ The characteristic position of Political Marxism on this question is concisely set out in Lacher 2005: bounded territoriality does not inhere in capitalist social relations, the nation-state form was absolutist in origins (and for Political Marxism that means non-capitalist) and capital has gradually subsumed and rearticulated this political form during the course of its development. For a thoughtful critique, from a fairly orthodox Marxist position, of this Political Marxist approach (specifically, as set out in Lacher 2006), see Burns 2010.

theoretical apparatus deployed is derived from Robert Brenner, his purported reconstruction of Marx as a ‘theory of social property relations’. Teschke sets out the basic theoretical position thus: ‘the constitution, operation, and transformation of geopolitical orders are predicated on the changing identities of their constitutive units. Social property relations, mediating the relations between the major classes, primarily define the *constitution* and identity of these political units.’⁶⁹ For this framework, in traditional fashion, ‘class conflict remains the *primum mobile* of history’⁷⁰: a dominant class of exploiters extracts surplus from a subordinate class of producers, and analysis focuses on tracing the outcomes of the various class strategies of reproduction pursued and on the struggles between classes over property in the output of the production process. In line with this theoretical focus, Teschke calls for a conceptual shift from the orthodox Marxist problematic of ‘relations of production’ to a revised problematic of ‘relations of exploitation’, especially so in regard to pre-capitalist societies (in this instance, feudal Europe), because ‘a focus on the logic of exploitation overcomes the danger of conceiving the pre-capitalist “state” and “economy” as two separate institutional spheres and foregrounds the class-mediated nexus between political force and economic appropriation.’⁷¹ This is because, schematically, in pre-capitalist societies, the economic and the political were organically connected: the producers had direct access to the means of production and therefore the ruling class’ reproduction was secured through direct domination, through relations of lordship, what Brenner calls ‘political accumulation’; whereas, in capitalist society, where the worker is freed both from immediate relations of domination and direct access to the means of production, the economic and the political are separated, a regime of absolute private property comes into being, the purely political state is abstracted from society, and individual capitalists and workers are compelled to pursue ‘economic’ strategies of reproduction through the market (the capitalists having the advantage of ownership of the means of production).

But Brenner’s theoretical construction, Marx bowdlerised, is wholly inadequate to the depth of the problem of the political. Examining Brenner’s conception of social conflict, Simon Bromley observes that on Brenner’s account of the pre-capitalist world

⁶⁹ Teschke 2003, p.7 (emphasis in original).

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p.56.

⁷¹ *ibid.*

of settled agriculture political power essentially means the organisation of a ruling lordly class in order to wield authority over the direct producers and that the structure of property rights was such as to make possible the reproduction of this group of exploiters at the expense of the dominated class. This means that, as Brenner conceives it, ‘rule was always *ipso facto* a form of coercive domination over peasants and other subordinate groups’,⁷² economic exploitation coercively enforced by the threat or use of violence. Bromley is surely correct that this could only constitute an outer boundary of political life,⁷³ ‘rather than an adequate characterisation of the pre-industrial historical record’,⁷⁴ the reason being that political *community* cannot be explained in terms of a simple opposition between exploiters and exploited. He cites the Marxist anthropologist Maurice Godelier to the effect that ‘*for relations of domination and exploitation to be formed and reproduced in a lasting fashion, they must be presented as an exchange, and as exchange of services*’ and that such exchange is not mere ideology and is not reducible to brute domination, ‘otherwise the movement which engendered estates, castes, classes and the state ... would not have forged ahead’.⁷⁵ And Bromley also notes the argument of the Marxist historian John Haldon that crucial for state-formation is ‘a degree of acceptance of that state as normatively desirable, especially by elites, but even by the broader populace from which it draws its resources.’⁷⁶ The central point is that ‘politics is always about much more than class domination and exploitation’.⁷⁷ Indeed, Bromley argues that it is the case that ‘at the root of all organised – that is, social – power there is an element of more or less conventional co-ordination ... however limited the co-operating sub-group and however much domination is involved in its relationship with others.’⁷⁸ In order to have any plausible conception of political form, it is essential to see that the class division does not in any way straightforwardly negate the coherence and unity of the political body.⁷⁹ The crudity of Brenner’s conception leaves its mark on the work of the IR scholars who draw on him for theoretical

⁷² Bromley 2010, p.238

⁷³ In fact, not really *political* existence at all.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p.239.

⁷⁵ Both *ibid.*, p.238 (emphasis in original).

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p.239. The inadequacy of Brenner’s thinking here reflects a deeper obtuseness to conceptual questions: analogously, in his ‘reconstruction’ of Marx he excises the entire substance of Marx’s theory of exchange; as a consequence, he can only see straightforward domination and exploitation where Marx’s analysis shows how capitalist society is the latest, and most ideologically subtle, form in which exchange is both equal and unequal.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p.233.

⁷⁹ Indeed, for reasons that will be developed later, in Chapter 3, it would be truer to say that the coherence is created through the antagonism, the class division being constitutive of the unity.

inspiration. In Benno Teschke's more than 300-page book on the origins of the modern states system, there is a mere one paragraph⁸⁰ that obliquely touches upon the issue of the political, only to pass over it immediately. A work devoted to debunking the 'myth of 1648' as the seminal moment of the co-genesis of capitalism and the modern form of political community, the nation state, and that attempts instead to demonstrate the absolutist (and, it is asserted, non-capitalist) origins of the latter, contains no substantive theoretical discussion of the concept and meaning of the political – a startling omission. For all the emphasis on 'attentiveness to historical specificity and the agency of historically situated actors'⁸¹ and rejection of structuralist rigidity, the historical sociology of Political Marxism clings to a notably simplistic version of the traditional Marxist mono-causal reading of history, class conflict (rebranded as 'struggles over social property relations' or 'strategies of reproduction'), and as a result much else falls outside its reach. While class conflict, strategies of reproduction and the contestation of property rights may in part explain, at some level, the dynamics of social formations, processes of change over time, and thereby the characteristics of particular eras of international relations, they surely do not grasp what is involved in the constitution of political community; rather, they already tacitly presuppose the existence of a structured social space in which those conflicts take place, and thus cannot reach as far back as to explain what the political *is*, and therewith what the international is. Further, there is nothing in the 'theory of social property relations' that is capable of explaining how political space could come into being or of grasping its form problem. The ironic truth is that the Political Marxists have no theory of the political.⁸²

⁸⁰ Teschke 2003, p.31.

⁸¹ Teschke 2008, p.184.

⁸² If it were accepted, Teschke's and Lacher's argument – that the nation state, indeed particularist political community as such, is entirely extrinsic to the logic of capital and is rather a (curiously long-lasting) relic of the supposedly non-capitalist absolutist era – would *a priori* eliminate the possibility of theoretically grasping geopolitics and Realism from a perspective informed by the critique of capital. Where Teschke and Lacher, following the logic of Brenner's understanding of capital, take the extreme position, Ellen Wood (2002) attempts to occupy a middle ground, arguing that capitalism needs and sustains the states system because of the practical and logistical difficulties of enforcing market relations across the geographical space of the globe. However, because she shares the Brennerite framework, this can only result in a 'soft functionalism' (Chibber 2005, p.157) in which the states system is asserted to be essential to capital, but for only contingent, practical reasons.

Uneven and Combined Development

In his recent work, Justin Rosenberg⁸³ has arguably gone further than any other Marxist IR theorist in trying to explicate just what lies behind Realism's dominance of the discipline of IR, attempting to develop 'an alternative theoretical framework—one which has the same intuitive simplicity as the balance of power, but which enables us finally to recover the lost history of international relations, breaking with the old theory which has shown us only an empty, meaningless struggle for power'.⁸⁴ To recover this history, he has been centrally concerned with elaborating Trotsky's theory of 'uneven and combined development', how developmental processes are refracted through the varying configurations of different social formations, creating specific and frequently unstable hybrids of combined development. From the beginning, Rosenberg has been concerned to push Trotsky's idea as far as possible, to generate a 'general *abstraction*',⁸⁵ one that would capture a fundamental characteristic of the historical process as a whole. This evolving theoretical perspective is designed to incorporate precisely the issue central to Realism, the multiplicity of political units. Thus, in the course of a critique of Rob Walker's argument that the international, and its attendant dilemmas of inside and outside, is the product of the peculiarly modern resolution of the spatial dimension of politics by means of the concept of sovereignty, Rosenberg proposes a more far-reaching grounding of the 'problematic of the international'.⁸⁶ Arguing that Walker's reduction of the international to one of its distinct historical forms constitutes 'an illicit collapsing of the general into the particular',⁸⁷ Rosenberg, instead, drawing on Marx's mooted procedure of concept formation in the 1857 'General Introduction' in the *Grundrisse*, argues for a clear conceptual distinguishing of the two, and for a general abstraction of 'the international' (akin to a general abstraction of 'production' or 'labour'). However, at this point, a curious discrepancy enters the argument. Rosenberg notes that the idea of the international rests on the anterior concept of the political, and

⁸³ The focus here is on Justin Rosenberg's work because he has done by far the most to explore the theoretical possibilities of uneven and combined development. Recently others (for example, Matin 2007 and Shilliam 2009) have sought to make use of, and inflect, this approach in the exploration of specific historical subjects, and there continues to be a debate about the legitimate range of the idea (see, for example, Allinson and Anievas 2009). However, none of these contributions addresses the problem of the political and its status within the theory, and, as such, the observations made here concerning the major statement of this theoretical approach apply *a fortiori* to them.

⁸⁴ Rosenberg 1996, p.6.

⁸⁵ Rosenberg in Callinicos and Rosenberg 2008, p.81 (emphasis in original).

⁸⁶ Rosenberg 2000, pp.65–85.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, p.73.

therefore for a general abstraction of the international to be generated, this prior concept must first be explicated; so, ‘a successful general abstraction of the “the international” presupposes a prior general abstraction of the “the political”’.⁸⁸ But the general definition of ‘the political’ then given turns out already to presume what it is supposed to define: ‘the political dimension of any social order comprises the means which it has developed (whatever they may be) for arriving at, and giving effect to, collectively binding decisions and rules.’⁸⁹ This is a definition of an aspect internal to political community (‘of any social order’), not of the political itself; it assumes the constituted political space rather than enquiring into how that space comes into being. Nor is there anything in this definition to suggest why political communities exist in the multiple. Indeed, in Rosenberg’s argument that fact is simply empirically derived – ‘given that no social order has ever yet been coextensive with humanity as a whole’⁹⁰ and ‘we need only the empirical assumption itself: in the known field of human history, social orders have always *co-existed*’.⁹¹ Thus, at this crucial point in the argument, the explication of the central problem of Realist thinking is sidestepped.

The critique of Rob Walker stands at the beginning of Rosenberg’s investigation of uneven and combined development, and he has since unfolded the implications of the term in a series of articles. But the issue of the political remains problematic. In a recent contribution,⁹² Rosenberg attempts to derive political multiplicity from uneven and combined development via an appropriation of Barry Buzan and Richard Little’s account of the emergence of the political, and therewith the international, in the long pre-historical transition from hunter-gatherer groups to settled and ultimately state societies. Despite the evident significance of the historical account, it is clear that what is actually provided is a series of sociological factors, centred on the development of social hierarchy, and internal differentiation and complexification, which are then said to give rise, in a way that is unspecified, to something designated ‘the political’. There is again a disjuncture in the argument, which can only be awkwardly leapt over, not properly bridged: what ‘the political’ actually *is*, what its conceptual specificity is,

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, p.77.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, p.78.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, p.79.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, p.80 (emphasis in original).

⁹² Rosenberg 2010.

remains undetermined and obscure.⁹³ The causal sociological factors are of great importance, but they do not suffice of themselves to explicate the political. For that, it would be necessary to interrogate such categories as sovereignty, autonomy, law and juridical order, but it is doubtful whether historical sociology is capable of that register of conceptual inquiry.⁹⁴ As a result of this deficit, the reasons Rosenberg provides for the existence of political multiplicity can again only be functional rather than properly conceptual, contingent rather than intrinsic: ‘since the level of development of early states does not enable any one of them to engross the whole of the human world, their hardening inside/outside division necessarily congeals into finite entities’ and ‘because the causal range of social relations and interactions within which they congeal far outruns ... the reach of any centralized political power, the existence of these early states is likely to stimulate reactive developments of social differentiation and proto-state formation beyond themselves, leading to the emergence of further “political” entities.’⁹⁵ In the absence of a theorization of the concept of the political, this approach risks conceding too much to Realism. For all that Rosenberg’s account, importantly, shows the political and the international to be historically emergent, the causal, sociological manner of analysis, focused on processes of development, renders it incapable of grasping the political qualitatively. It thus remains caught in the Realist trap: for, if it is not possible to specify what something is, it is impossible to think what might be different from it. The investigation of the explanatory potential of the idea of uneven and combined development may well solve the problem of the Realist (especially neo-Realist) reification of geopolitics as a domain separable from the wider compass of ‘the social’, reconnecting the international to the domestic and thereby generating a more adequate analytic of social development *per se*; but it does so at the

⁹³ As if in admission that the concepts remain empty, mere terminological placeholders, ‘the political’ and ‘politics’ are placed in inverted commas almost throughout the article.

⁹⁴ Rosenberg’s earlier work, *The Empire of Civil Society*, contains an account, drawing on Ellen Wood, of sovereignty as ‘the social form of the state in a society where political power is divided between public and private spheres’ (1994, p.129). This is an argument about the form of social power in capitalist society. What was said above about Mark Rupert’s neo-Gramscian argument applies here also, that to think about capitalist society in terms of the differentiation of the economic and the political presupposes the validity of those determinations and is limited to observing that in capitalist society the political element is precipitated out in a distinctive way. As such, the constituted political space is already assumed. Further, to say that sovereignty designates the modern ‘purely political’ state form leaves the substance of the term itself still obscure: no light is shed on what it means or how it is possible for humans to constitute themselves as ‘sovereign’.

⁹⁵ Rosenberg 2010, p.185. Here, at a crucial point, Rosenberg’s theoretical argument comes to rest on the happenstance of the merely empirical, in a way not dissimilar to the ‘soft functionalism’ of Ellen Wood: political multiplicity, it seems, continues to exist because no single state is or has been powerful enough to conquer or subsume all the others.

expense of effectively naturalizing the Realist concept of political community, its necessarily ‘closed’ nature and the potential for conflict produced thereby. The historical-sociological mode of research into uneven and combined development can only ever ground Realism in social theory rather than surpass it critically. In truth, the Realist problematic squats at the root of uneven and combined development, rather than being exposed and explicated by it.

Revenge of the Political

The concept of the political exists as something repressed within Marxist theorising, something thought to be long since overcome that yet persists in making its presence painfully felt. None of the various Marxist approaches extant within IR has sought to subject the political itself to theory.⁹⁶ Rather, it appears as an element that is simply given and immediate. The problem of political form remains a blind-spot, although it is hard to see how the many-states problem, let alone the challenge of Realism, can be resolved without a theory of the political. As a result, Marxism in IR remains vulnerable to Waltz’s ‘second image’ critique and Berki’s argument. The consequences of this theoretical absence can be read in the entanglement of Marxism, both as theory and practice, in the historical fate prescribed by Realism, the continuing fragmentation and anarchy of international politics. This failure to inquire into the meaning and significance of the political is traceable back to the ambivalence of Marx’s own thinking. On the one hand, ‘Marx consigned the whole sphere of politics to ideology.’⁹⁷ There is a moment of world-historical freedom, not to be discarded, in this brusquely achieved rupture. The hardened surface of the social is broken through: no longer is society to be entranced and deluded in its self-understanding by forms of appearance: politics, law, religion and philosophy. Politics is not, any more than those

⁹⁶ This is as true of the latest theoretical contribution, Alex Callinicos’s, as of all the preceding ones examined above. Callinicos recognises the force of the question of why there are multiple political entities within a single global mode of production. His answer: ‘the centrifugal pulls generated by the inherently geographically uneven distribution of resources under capitalism play an irreducible role in keeping the state system plural’ (Callinicos 2007, p.545). Once again, the specificity of the political is completely occluded and recourse is had to an economic reason without any real explanation of why the unevenness of *economic* development should result in *political* multiplicity. After all, the USA, China, Brazil, indeed all countries, are highly unevenly developed economically, but they remain single political entities, a point also made by Neil Davidson (Davidson 2010), although his own solution to the many states problem – that capitalists want their own state in order to be protected from the ravages of competition on an open global market – is every bit as functionalist as Callinicos’s.

⁹⁷ Adorno 2002, p.143.

others, to be hypostatized into something existing in-itself, something autonomous and self-sufficient.⁹⁸ ‘The exponents of [the fetishistic] conception of history have ... only been able to see in history the political actions of princes and States, religious and all sorts of theoretical struggles’,⁹⁹ but the Marxian approach is to show that politics receives all its substance and contents from elsewhere, from the societally mediated process of the interaction of humans with nature. Marx’s historical materialism had in the mid-19th century and continues to have a decisively progressive aspect: he and Engels ‘wished for the revolution as one of the economic relationships in society as a whole, in the fundament of its self-preservation, not as the changing of the ground-rules of domination, its political form.’¹⁰⁰ Only such a change in the basis of society’s very existence could bring about the world-historical transformation that they hoped for, the break from prehistory, and the purpose of the decades-researched, never completed, study of political economy was to enable that break by laying bare how it is that society actually reproduces itself, what form the interaction with nature takes in capitalist society, what it means that the object is a commodity.

Yet, at the same time that the ideological appearance of politics is stripped away by devastating criticism, the political itself is left standing; the content of politics is revealed as arising out of the antagonistic nature of society’s mode of reproduction, the organisation of the exploitation of nature, but the form of the political, the space in which politics occurs,¹⁰¹ is not subjected to critique. If politics is seen through as appearance, it is nevertheless not explained how the societal process of the productive interaction with nature generates the distinctive form of the political. The critique of political economy can be considered a quasi-transcendental account of economics – what are the conditions of possibility for such a thing as an ‘economy’ to exist at all? – but no such radical questioning is brought to bear on the political element: it is not explained why economics is *political* economy. So the political itself remains obscure, unilluminated by the light of critique, with the result that the relationship between the political existence of humans and the categories derived from the critique of the societal

⁹⁸ As Adorno puts it, ‘politics as the expression of existing power relationships is ideological in that it behaves as if it were a kind of technique or procedure independent of the social power relationships’ (ibid., p.143).

⁹⁹ Marx and Engels 1968, p.51.

¹⁰⁰ Adorno 2001b, ‘Antagonism contingent?’.

¹⁰¹ And the space in which the class struggle and the dialectic of the forces and relations of production take place.

production process remains unexplained. Paradigmatically, in the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels write both that ‘the working men have no country’¹⁰² and that ‘the struggle of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie is at first a national struggle. The proletariat of each country must, of course, first of all settle matters with its own bourgeoisie’.¹⁰³ The proletariat both transcends the national context and yet is bound to it in a dialectic that is never properly explicated. ‘Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself *the* nation, it is, so far, itself national, though not in the bourgeois sense of the word.’¹⁰⁴ But in what sense of the word? The nation, the modern political community, remains in Marx’s thought the scene of the drama even despite the sublation of the class struggle. The form of the political is to be filled with a radically different content, but it is never made clear whether or how this revolutionary change of content itself changes the nature of the form, or whether the form as such can receive so different a content.¹⁰⁵ Consequently, despite being brusquely negated (at least as high politics), the political continually recurs throughout Marx’s *oeuvre* in a theoretically undigested way as marking out the space within which revolutionary activity is to occur, from the early critical works in expectation of revolution, through the texts on the failure of emancipatory struggles in France, to the late *Critique of the Gotha Programme* and documents for the First International. The contradiction of internationalism and national revolution remains latent and unaddressed.¹⁰⁶ This ambivalence towards the political, its simultaneous negation and retention, is preserved within the Marxist tradition right through to the various strands of Marxism within contemporary IR. The World-Systems theorists and Political Marxists, for instance, are at an extreme in their refusal to grant any theoretical substance to the specificity of the political,¹⁰⁷ to how and why a bounded political space is created, and yet the political is continually and massively present within their work, at least at a brute empirical level – how could it not be, when their studies are entirely devoted to analysing the differential

¹⁰² Marx and Engels 2002, p.241.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, p.232.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p.241 (emphasis in original).

¹⁰⁵ The argument about the withering away of the state with the progress from socialism to communism does not suffice because the state is not, strictly, coterminous with the political community.

¹⁰⁶ It was probably not until decisions over allegiance at the outbreak of the First World War that this contradiction was first acutely felt by, and immediately shattered, national/international proletarian movements.

¹⁰⁷ Along with, as a further example, William Robinson’s theory of the Transnational State (Robinson 2004). For pointed comments on Robinson’s blindness to the specificity of the political, see Block 2001 and McMichael 2001.

development of political communities within the growth of capitalism? The same is true generally of Marxism within IR: the political is always there (necessarily so, given that much of Marxism within IR takes the form of historical-sociological studies) but always as an unacknowledged element, something regarded as unproblematic, something not worked through theoretically. Yet it is precisely the very form of the political that Realism says creates the anarchic, unchanging and essentially conflictual arena of the international, and that forces each community into the fatality of the unending struggle for survival that constitutes international politics.¹⁰⁸ This is the problem that has returned, still unresolved, in the recent *CRIA* debates.

Materialist Theory

Thus far, this chapter has argued that IR Marxism has not met the challenge of Realism because, following Marx, it has not developed any theory of political form. This final section takes the critique a stage further, linking this failure to the kind of theorising characteristic of Marxism in IR and thereby suggesting the necessity for a different approach if Realism is finally to be comprehended.

The ambivalence of Marx's thinking about the political is part of the wider ambiguity that runs through his conceptualisation of social transformation, which in turn derives from the unfinished nature of his critique of idealism. Communism was supposed to grow out of capitalism as the proletariat supplants the bourgeoisie: capital produces its own gravediggers and class society sublates itself. The revolution thus takes place within the same political space that the bourgeois class has established. It both transforms history and is, equally, within it, of a piece with it: the decisive change evolves out of history by the latter's own momentum, the logical final step as the irresistibly developing forces of production at last throw off the restrictions of class society. This peculiar structure of the revolutionary vision – simultaneously inside and outside its historical setting – is bound up with the complex question of Marx's so-

¹⁰⁸ The underdeveloped nature, at worst disingenuousness, of Marxist or socialist political thinking is an established theme of even sympathetic critics (see, for example, Dunn 1984 and Bobbio 1987). However, the perspective afforded by IR and Berki's argument reveals that the issue reaches further than the intractable contradictions of any Marxist political practice: it is the form of the political *per se* that poses the problem.

called ‘farewell to philosophy’.¹⁰⁹ In the 1840s German society, so Marx thought, was trapped in the past by its infatuation with idealist ‘mysticism’ and it was to dispel such intoxicating reveries that he turned to the analysis of actual social categories, ultimately those of political economy. Yet even in doing so, Marx stayed true to the Hegelian dialectic, which was to be wrested from the camp of reaction and won over to the revolutionary cause.¹¹⁰ Hegel would be stood back on his feet: the rational kernel of the dialectic of absolute idealism made evident through explication of the workings of the societal process of production. This materialist dialectic may set the idealist one the right way up, bringing out explicitly the historical process of objectification through social labour that is cloaked in the movement of Spirit in Hegel’s philosophy, but in important respects it does not break more radically with the structure of the Hegelian philosophy of history, and to that extent stays within the horizon of bourgeois thought. The motor of the dialectic is revealed to be the movement of antagonistic society rather than the self-actualisation of the Concept, the Absolute Idea to be the latest form of class exploitation, but there remains a trust in the efficacy of the historical process, that the movement of the dialectic will itself produce its sublation. The culmination of the immanent movement of history is to be not bourgeois society but the communist one.¹¹¹ In essence, then, the Marxian conception remains within the logic of the historical process, which the proletarian revolution is to crown.

In the same way that Marx attacked idealism but retained the dialectic, Marxism rejected bourgeois politics as mystificatory but yet espoused a revolutionary politics

¹⁰⁹ Jarvis 2004a, p.81

¹¹⁰ Thus Marx’s famous comment in the Preface to the second edition of volume 1 of *Capital* that ‘in its mystified form, the dialectic ... seemed to transfigure and glorify what exists’ but ‘in its rational form it is a scandal ... because it regards every historically developed form as being in a fluid state, in motion, and therefore grasps its transient aspect as well; and because it does not let itself be impressed by anything, being in its very essence critical and revolutionary’ (Marx 1990, p.103). Where Marx attempts to take over the dialectic for materialism, Adorno has a more subtle perception. In *Negative Dialectics*, itself a prolonged reflection on the meaning of dialectical thought after the historical eclipse of both the idealist-Hegelian and the materialist-Marxian versions, he states that dialectics is ‘the ontology of the false condition’, both true and untrue (Adorno 2001b, ‘The Antagonistic Whole’).

¹¹¹ In this aspect of his thinking Marx affirms, in idealist fashion, the linear, developmental process of the universal: history has a necessary cumulative momentum and the world-historical transformation is itself immanent to that movement. Adorno comments of this retention of the Hegelian schema at the origins of historical materialism: ‘It was a question of the deification of history, even in the atheistic Hegelians Marx and Engels. The primacy of the economy is supposed to ground the happy end with historical stringency as immanent to it; the economic process would produce the political relationships of domination and would overturn them until the mandatory emancipation from the coercion of the economy’ (Adorno 2001b, ‘Antagonism Contingent?’). On the idealism of Marx’s optimistic view of history, see Adorno 2006a, pp.49–54.

that was to take place in the same political scene. Politics, like the dialectic, was to be won for the revolution, but it was never asked whether the political can actually admit of 'revolutionary politics' (or, for that matter, whether the dialectic can be anything other than idealist).¹¹² The history of Marxism emphatically suggests otherwise. This problem profoundly affects a main current of Marxist thinking. For, confident in the possibility of revolutionary political action, the characteristic idea of Marxist political thought was that analysis should identify the various (class) forces and trends active in the social field at any particular time and, if it was acute enough, specify the opportunity that opens for concerted intervention: to recognise both the tendency and the critical moment, and to strike.¹¹³ It was to be theory devoted to practice: by an act of spontaneity, the revolutionary movement inserts itself at the decisive moment into the societal sequence of cause and effect and seizes power. The immanent historical process was thus assumed to be susceptible of transformation. This may indeed have seemed plausible in Marx's mid-19th century context, when society was much more fluid, open and transparent in its structure and relations than it was to become:¹¹⁴ when the proletariat was still not integrated into society proper; when, even in an advanced country such as France, the structure of bourgeois society was sufficiently pliable that it still made sense, in fact was at the forefront of critical insight, to analyse politics, in the manner of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in terms of Bonapartism, class fractions and so on; when it seemed a reality to be able to change the world by taking to the streets and erecting barricades;¹¹⁵ and, above all, when the revolution appeared imminent and all theory and practice were to be devoted to that tremendous prospect. But history gave the lie to Marx's confidence in the historical process and the

¹¹² This looks at Berki's argument from the other side. Where he asked whether accommodating political multiplicity does not in fact violate the meaning of Marx's thought, here the question is whether political form, as such, can allow of a 'Marxist politics'.

¹¹³ It could be argued that there was always a profound disjuncture between Marx's political writings, premised as they are on analysis in terms of class, class fractions, political parties representing different class-based interests and so on, and the more strictly theoretical writings (*Capital*, *Theories of Surplus Value* and the *Grundrisse*) in which class is only a moment in the wider analysis of the meaning of the commodity and the movement of value. These sides of Marx's *oeuvre* in many respects always pointed in different directions and they have historically split completely asunder, exposing the gaping theoretical chasm between them.

¹¹⁴ It was precisely at this historical moment that it became possible for a Marx to write the theory of capital, the moment in which society appeared to possess a combination of objectivity and clarity that could make it a rationally comprehensible whole, the economic 'base' having a degree of separation from the semblance character of the 'superstructure' such as to make the truth about society visible.

¹¹⁵ And an age in which society's own apparatuses of self-defence were so undeveloped that 'when the Home Office undertook an examination into the activities of refugees from the Paris Commune in 1871, it wrote to Karl Marx, who obligingly provided an account of the activities of the Workingmen's International' (Rogers 1997, pp.18–19).

movement of the universal – the belief in the revolution.¹¹⁶ From about the decade of Marx's death, the integration of society in the advanced countries accelerated such that by the early 20th century the socialist parties had succumbed to reformism as the more plausible hope for their cause and the ambition of revolution had migrated to the Russian semi-periphery where the old order was crumbling without the new having yet come into being and the opportunity of fundamental change appeared to offer itself.¹¹⁷ Revolution in this backward context required a considerably more developed awareness of the international situation than had ever seemed necessary to Marx, who expected the breakthrough to take place in the powerful metropolitan centres – hence the development of the theory of imperialism, which in important respects transfers the mode of Marx's political thought to the international sphere.¹¹⁸ Imperialism theory, with its analysis in terms of epoch and conjuncture, continued to have a transformational ambition, being intended to inform and guide revolutionary practice. Through the second half of the 20th century, however, as capitalist society became ever more deeply entrenched and consolidated, actually existing socialism a despotism confined and integrated into the world system, and the meaning of revolutionary political action vanishingly obscure, the form of this sort of traditional causal analysis was retained but its substance progressively drained away. So, the surveys of the contemporary scene to be found in Marxist journals in recent times, precise and perceptive though they often in many respects are, increasingly constitute not much more than dismal and exhausted tracings out of the inexorable advances of capitalism and its accompanying depredations. They tend towards ordinary historical narrative, but with a long-suffering,

¹¹⁶ Perry Anderson observes that Marx and Engels accorded a great deal of insightful theoretical attention to revolutionary movements up to about 1850 and almost none at all (and that notable for its failure of perception and fallibility of judgement) to the sweeping political transformations in Germany, Italy, the USA and Japan during the second half of the 19th century that properly instantiated the rule of industrial capital in those major centres. The implication is that Marx and Engels' political thinking, their conception of revolutionary transformation, was tied to a historical age that even in their lifetimes, while Marx was writing *Capital*, had passed. To this extent, the real development of capitalist society escaped their theoretical horizon (Anderson 1992, pp.105–6).

¹¹⁷ The obsession of 20th-century Marxists with the thematic of imperialism is, in its way, testimony to the historical limitations of Marx's political thought: the less actual developments in the core capitalist countries accorded with the canonical Marxist conception of political theory and practice, and the less Marxists who cleaved to orthodoxy could say anything that touched the developing actuality of those societies, the more attention was shifted to the periphery and semi-periphery, where, as in Tsarist Russia, superannuated power structures were disintegrating and social relations had a fluidity such that the Marxist analyses appeared to retain some relevance.

¹¹⁸ That is, where Marx assumed the domestic political space, so the theory of imperialism assumes the international political space. Both are concerned with how to analyse developments in order to act *within* those spaces; in neither case is the political itself problematised.

oppositional tone.¹¹⁹ The result is a crisis of the meaning of Marxist thinking as radical theory. For, the causal-historical analysis that has for so long been characteristic of Marxism ultimately drew its energy and validity from the positive Marxist vision of political action and social transformation, the possibility of revolution; to the extent that that vision waned and then became extinct, the interest and faith in causality and in tracing the immanent patterns and dynamics of the historical process have been rendered dubious. In truth, the immense intensification since Marx's time of the integration of social existence through the exchange relation means that the actuality of contemporary society cannot be reached in the old way, through the old style of causal-historical theory; society's irrationality, its absolute subsumption and domination of the individuals who both compose it and are helpless before it, escapes such thinking.¹²⁰ The real development of capitalist society has superseded the kind of theory intended to transform it, and if society no longer seems to permit any intervention, let alone fundamental change, the critical value of causal explanation becomes obscure. The theorising that it was once thought would lead beyond the condition of unfreedom that Realism is a part of has failed in its ambition, and so Realism returns unvanquished.

That causality as enlightenment has succumbed to the judgement of history necessarily affects radical theory in IR, especially the nexus between Marxist thinking and historical sociology,¹²¹ a sub-discipline whose very aim is 'the provision of an approach to global structures that allows for an understanding of change and causality.'¹²² A perception of this is what perhaps underlies the dissenting essay that Steve Smith contributes to a volume otherwise celebratory of the fruitfulness of the historical sociology/IR dialogue. Initially, historical sociology in IR was thought to be 'an approach that, by disputing both the mono-causal logic of realism, and the

¹¹⁹ The magisterial, Tacitean gloom of Perry Anderson's periodic *tours d'horizon* in *New Left Review* is the paradigm of the genre.

¹²⁰ On the eclipse of causality generally, see Adorno 2001b, 'The Crisis of Causality' and 'Causality as Bane'. From the vantage point of the mid-1960s, Adorno remarked that 'the latest doctrine in which enlightenment employed causality as a decisive political weapon, the Marxist one of superstructure and infrastructure, lags almost innocently behind a condition, in which the apparatuses of production, distribution and domination, as well as economic and social relations and ideologies are inextricably interwoven, and in which living human beings have turned into bits of ideology' ('The Crisis of Causality').

¹²¹ With its staple of analysis in terms of epoch and conjuncture, a great deal of Marxist theory has always had an affinity with historical sociology and, while some scholars are more explicit in their self-positioning within that field than others, broadly speaking all the Marxist schools in IR are in the same area to the extent that they are all primarily concerned with mapping processes of historical development and causation.

¹²² Hobden 1998, p.196.

functional undifferentiation of its core unit (the state), challenged the fundamental assumptions of realism, and thus was one of a group of approaches said to be alternatives' to the mainstream,¹²³ to be one of the so-called reflectivist challengers. Smith no longer considers that to be the case, for reasons concerning the conception of knowledge and understanding characteristic of historical sociology: while the latter would not accept all of the epistemological assumptions of the rationalist mainstream, it does at least share 'the commitment to naturalism, as revealed in an appeal to causal analysis'¹²⁴ and to what he calls its materialism. Because of these shared epistemological and methodological commitments, historical sociology and mainstream IR have more in common than the former might care to admit: 'Both historical sociology and rationalist international relations accept one model of how to analyse the social world. Both therefore, are part of the social science enterprise, in the narrow sense used in the United States. Accordingly, both deem causal analysis as appropriate to the social world.'¹²⁵ What Smith objects to in such an approach is that it remains external to the subjects of history; in seeking to explain how and why things happen, it neglects to investigate what they *are*, what they mean as modes of human existence, the complex ways in which subjectivity and social being are constituted (a formation of subjectivity that is prior to conscious self-understanding). For historical sociology, as for the mainstream, 'understanding is ultimately reducible to explanation', meaning causality.¹²⁶ The construction of theories of large-scale social change, whatever its merits, does not provide the critical insights into the changing forms of subjectivity that a radical theory should. In fact, Smith declares, not only is it not part of the reflectivist challenge, but 'contrary to the self-image of historical sociology as a radical account of human history, there are in fact few barriers to a fruitful debate between materialist historical sociology and rationalism.'¹²⁷

Smith does not reject historical study altogether, advocating a Foucauldian style of investigation into processes of power and the forms of subjectivity it creates. For him, it is self-evident that thinking that draws on Marx can contribute little to this new radical enterprise because Marx's mode of thought converges with that of the

¹²³ Smith 2002, p.223.

¹²⁴ *ibid.*, p.227.

¹²⁵ *ibid.*, p.232.

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, p.234.

¹²⁷ *ibid.*, p.230.

mainstream: ‘Marx’s holist explanatory approach, but especially his materialism, leads fairly straightforwardly into causal analysis and a social theory that fits within “the social science enterprise”’.¹²⁸ Is Marx, then, a dead dog? Is the use of Marx limited to a form of causal-historical analysis whose critical status has become doubtful? It is telling that, for someone who elsewhere¹²⁹ rightly stresses the importance of the accurate use of philosophical terms, especially epistemological ones, in the social sciences, Smith should be so careless when it comes to materialism. Evidently, what he means by materialism is the sociological usage concerned with an individual’s motivation: that the behaviour of social actors is driven by pursuit of their ‘material’ interests as they are derived from their position in the societal process of production and distribution.¹³⁰ But when Marx is described as a materialist in opposition to, say, Hegel as an idealist, something much more important and far-reaching than that is at issue. Philosophical idealism is, *in nuce*, the claim ‘that thought constitutes, shapes, or is identical with, its objects’¹³¹, that the subject, as the locus of reason, has a sort of ontological priority before the object and that the concept is the truth of the latter. Idealism and materialism are epistemological positions that concern the fundamental relationship between the subject and the object, between conceptuality – form – and the world. The various strands of post-structuralism, one of which Smith favours, may all be said to be, in their different ways, what Adorno termed *Ausbruchsversuchen* (‘outbreak attempts’) from the metaphysical and epistemological restrictions of traditional subject-centred philosophy. And if that long tradition of Western thought reached its furthest peak of self-understanding in German Idealism and Hegel, then Marx’s critique of philosophy, his materialism, although certainly underdeveloped and insufficiently worked out, should be understood as the decisive beginnings of the critique of the constitutive subject, and its conceptual achievements that philosophy has always glorified. ‘Marx had emphasized historical materialism as opposed to the vulgar-metaphysical kind. He

¹²⁸ *ibid.*, p.235. This of a piece with the broad eclipse of Marxism in the humanities and social sciences from the 1980s by the various strands of post-structuralism or post-modernism; so, within IR, ‘reflectivists do not share many assumptions with the Marxists ... post-modernist approaches largely replaced Marxism as the “extreme contender”, the radical challenge. ... Post-modernists will emphasise how their criticism of logo-centric, Western, essentialist theories punches Marxism at least as hard as it does the establishment, and therefore criticism has become more radical as they took over’ (Wæver 1996, p.166).

¹²⁹ See, for instance, Smith 1996.

¹³⁰ Corresponding to this is the equally sociological notion that idealism means that people are motivated by ideas, beliefs and other intangibles rather than just by their hard material interests. Formulated thus, the distinction is, of course, constitutive in IR theory of the opposition between an ‘idealist’ Constructivism and a ‘materialist’ Realism (Wendt 1999).

¹³¹ Jarvis 1997, p.7.

thereby drew it into the philosophical problematic ... Since then materialism is no longer a counter-position to be voluntarily taken up, but the epitome of the critique of idealism and of the reality for which idealism opts, by distorting it.’¹³² On this understanding, idealism, traditional philosophy, has always been the encoded expression of the reality of the antagonistic social world, and materialism is its most far-reaching critique.¹³³ It is through pursuing the perspective on materialism that Marx opens that the form problem of the political and the challenge of Realism’s conception of the international can be comprehended. Doing so, however, requires developing a different reading of Marx, and of the relation of Marxian theory to the thematics of Realism, from that prevalent in IR. It is to these tasks that the subsequent chapters of this thesis are devoted.

Conclusion: The purpose of this chapter was to identify the research aims of the thesis. It has argued that Marxism in IR has not resolved the question of its relation to Realism and has therefore remained unable to transcend the Realist idea of the international. It has shown that the various strands of IR Marxism have neglected to develop a theory of the political that could surpass Realism’s conception and that this is a legacy of Marx’s own thinking about social and historical change, which also failed to make the political itself an object of critique. In conclusion, it was suggested that to remedy this deficit requires establishing a different research focus, setting aside the interest in constructing casual-historical theorisations that currently defines the use of Marx in IR and developing the materialist elements of Marx’s thinking.

The research aims are therefore: to develop a materialist critique of Realism, one that would be able to meet the challenge Realism poses to any theory of freedom by comprehending, without conceding to, its vision of the international as a ‘tragic’ state of nature. In particular, this involves articulating a theory of political form that would be

¹³² Adorno 2001b, ‘Dialectics no Sociology of Knowledge’.

¹³³ This leads to a transmigration of terms: it is idealism, which glorifies the negativity of history as the positive, that is the real, crude materialism, and it is materialism, which seeks to lift the chains weighing on humanity, that is the true idealism. As Adorno put it: ‘[T]he telos, the Idea of Marxian materialism is to do away with materialism, that is to say, to bring about a situation in which the blind compulsion of material conditions over human beings is broken, and in which alone the question as to freedom could first become truly meaningful’ (from the lecture course *Philosophische Terminologie*, quoted in Jarvis 2004a, p.82).

able to explain Realism's conceptions of the political and of the international, and their connection to capital, without naturalising them.

Chapter 2

History and Prehistory

Introduction: This chapter begins the substantive rethinking of a materialist understanding of Realism. It focuses on the question of history. The opening sections survey the contrasting historical thinking of Realism and Marxism in IR: the former bewitched by continuity and repetition, the latter, in opposition, focusing on change and transformation. It is suggested that IR Marxism's emphasis on historical dynamism fails to grasp what is essential to Realism and, as critique, remains external to it. The chapter then considers the Realist historical imaginary in more detail, arguing that Realism can be understood as a mythic discourse: the principal themes of Realism come from the sphere of myth and Realism imagines international political existence as a timeless realm of unfreedom. Having established this reading of Realism, the argument turns to Marx's theory of capital, demonstrating that, at all levels of the analysis, Marx regards capitalist society as the reiteration of myth. This reading of Marx brings his theory into a configuration with Realism in a way that has not been done before and the chapter concludes by suggesting that developing this side of Marx may lead to a deeper critique of Realism.

Realism and History

Realism's command of a position of theoretical pre-eminence within IR arose through its defeat of so-called liberal utopianism during the period of the rise of fascism, the failure of the League of Nations and the global conflagration of the Second World War. The burden of Realism's decisive argument¹ was that the breakdown of the liberal international order, inherited from the 19th century, demonstrated that power politics, international conflict and the struggle for national survival had by no means

¹ Stated classically for the discipline by E.H. Carr (2001) and Hans Morgenthau (1965 and 2006). For recent appraisals of the continuing importance of Carr see the 1998 special issue of *Review of International Studies*, 'The Eighty Years' Crisis 1919–1999', and for Morgenthau, Molloy 2004 and Williams 2007.

been eclipsed by the civilising effects of the spread of market relations and political democracy, and their accompanying rational-legal norms: atavistic and immemorial antagonism and aggression continued to inhere in the global order created by the Western powers that proclaimed their commitment to freedom and equality and the rights of man. Now, as before, Realism insisted, the international domain remains unreconciled. At the heart of the Realist turn there lay, therefore, a paradoxical announcement: the meaning of contemporary history is that there has been no history, in any meaningful sense. The catastrophe of the present bespeaks its unchanging continuity with the past. This problematic from the philosophy of history has continued to shape Realist thought throughout the post-war period, right into even its most modern, ‘scientific’, neo-Realist incarnations. Notoriously, Hans Morgenthau elaborated his Realist theory of international politics on the assumption of an invariant human nature, motivated at all times and in all places by a drive for power. The philosophies of ancient China, India and Greece were the first to set out the laws of this eternal logic of power and those archaic origins retain their compelling authority: venerability in political theory is virtue, novelty is to be suspected.² Kenneth Waltz rejected Morgenthau’s explanatory reliance on human nature as too imprecise,³ but, as always, the concern with invariance, the continuity within the discontinuity, remained: ‘One who believes that he can account for changes in international politics must ask how continuities can be explained. ... Although changes abound, continuities are as impressive, or more so.’⁴ Waltz relocated the source of the continuities in the texture of the international existence of human communities into the ‘third image’, the decentralised, non-hierarchic structure of the international – the condition of anarchy – and in neo-Realism the anarchic structure that characterises the international field is taken as applying to the whole of human history, at least for as long as there has been a multiplicity of political entities. For Realist thinkers, these invariant essences, the unchanging character of human nature or the perennial structure of anarchy, mean that, at the highest level, the level of the international, the history of humanity has the

² See Morgenthau 2006, p.4 (he reiterates and expands somewhat on this point in the first of his lectures on political theory, collected in Morgenthau 2004). For Morgenthau, ‘realism ... is supposed to be the reiteration of an old argument’ (Gellman 1988, p.248), a reaffirmation of the ancient wisdom of the elders.

³ See the discussion of the ‘first image’ in Waltz 1959.

⁴ Waltz 1979, p.65.

character of a tautology – nothing new, nothing actually different, ever occurs. Nor can it occur within the limits identified by Realism as fundamental.⁵

The metaphysics of Realism is this fascination with tautology, ‘the striking sameness in the quality of international life through the millennia’,⁶ permanent identity. Certainly, history as historical fact and incident, even large-scale historical trends, has its place within Realist thought, but because it can only be illustrative of the changing embodiments of an identical structural essence it is necessarily history voided of substance and life. In the Realist vision, the truth of the infinite, brilliantly coloured detail of history is the grey-in-grey of the inexorable workings of the objective laws of international politics. The characteristic impulse of Realist theory is to reduce the great mass of material history provides, precipitating out a minimum number of axioms that will comprehend everything: Morgenthau’s ‘six principles of political realism’,⁷ Waltz’s parsimonious setting out of the implications to be deduced from the premise of anarchy, and, more recently, John Mearsheimer’s statement of Realism’s ‘five assumptions about the international system’.⁸ The ruthless search for the essence behind the appearance renders the appearance itself – the actual historical existence of people – shadowy and unreal, inherently null, just grist to the mill of anarchy and the balance of power. What Realism perceives in history are the boundaries that constrain the meaningfulness of the historical process. Change and development take place within the spaces marked out for the political existence of human communities; but the international is what exists outside those spaces and, as such, is itself without history, an eternal state of nature. The concepts of political theory derive from life on the inside but can only be minimally applicable to the outside, to the external existence of political communities. Hence the enigma of international theory, ‘the recalcitrance of international politics to being theorized about’,⁹ ruminated upon long ago by Martin Wight:

The reason is that the theorizing has to be done in the language of political theory and law. But this is the language appropriate to man’s control of his social

⁵ For Morgenthau, the constraints imposed by human nature are unchanging. Waltz’s emphasis on the condition of anarchy leaves open the, at least theoretical, possibility of the transformation of the international sphere from a decentralised anarchic realm into an organised hierarchic one, although it is a possibility that he rejects, on Kantian grounds, as conducive of tyranny and civil war (see Waltz 1959, p.228).

⁶ Waltz 1979, p.66.

⁷ Morgenthau 2006, pp.4–16.

⁸ Mearsheimer 1994–5, p.10.

⁹ Wight 1966b, p.33.

life. Political theory and law are maps of experience or systems of action within the realm of normal relationships and calculable results. They are the theory of the good life. International theory is the theory of survival. What for political theory is the extreme case (as revolution or civil war) is for international theory the regular case.¹⁰

The established discourse of politics and organised civil life stops at the border. The reason for the theoretical centrality of Realism within IR is that it has insisted with greater force than any other tradition on the specificity of this condition of the international, the anarchic multiplicity of political communities, and the imperatives of survival and power that derive from it. This is its great strength; but it is also what gives rise to its characteristic ‘thinness’, its lack of substantive content.¹¹ For, if ‘international politics differ from domestic politics in being less susceptible of a progressivist interpretation’,¹² then international theory can only reflect this absence of historical development, the essential self-sameness of the external existence of states. ‘Nothing seems to accumulate’¹³ lamented Waltz of the inadequacies of international theory construction. But what can accumulate in a state of nature, in which bare survival is always the first necessity? The parsimony of Waltz’s own enormously influential rethinking of Realism – his self-denying ordinance in theory construction – attests not just his commitment to a would-be scientific methodology, but, in the most extreme way, Realism’s vision of the ahistorical character of the circumstances in which international existence is condemned to take place.¹⁴

Marxism and History

IR Marxism has concentrated its challenge to Realism on this conception of history. Robert Cox, writing soon after Waltz published *Theory of International Politics*, grouped both Waltz and Morgenthau together as neo-Realists who had abandoned the substantial historical consciousness of an older Realist tradition in favour

¹⁰ *ibid.* Raymond Aron articulates the same idea: internal politics ‘has for its immanent goal the subordination of men to the rule of law’ but international politics ‘signify—in both ideal and objective terms—simply the survival of states confronting the potential threat created by the existence of other states’ (Aron 2003, p.6).

¹¹ See Callinicos and Rosenberg 2008, p.83 and pp.96–7.

¹² Wight 1966b, p.26.

¹³ Waltz 1979, p.18.

¹⁴ Elsewhere in *Theory of International Politics* Waltz implies the, as it were, primitive nature of the outside: ‘Internationally, decisions are made at the bottom level, there being scarcely any other’ (*ibid.*, p.113).

of ‘problem-solving theory’, inherently conservative, seeking only to manage the existing order, not to transform it.¹⁵ Critical theory, intent upon far-reaching social change, must seek to break this embalming of the present by rescuing the movement of history and the human agency that produces it. To that end, Cox eschews the structuralist Marxism of the Althusser school, which he suggests ‘shares some of the features of the neorealist problem-solving approach’,¹⁶ in favour of ‘a Marxism which reasons historically and seeks to explain, as well as to promote, changes in social relations’.¹⁷ For Justin Rosenberg, in his early work, the trouble with Realism is that its twin focuses on anarchy and on the state as ‘national-territorial totality’¹⁸ serve to stunt theory by obscuring the social processes that produce the characteristic dynamics of international relations in any given epoch: ‘If we displace for a moment the realist concern with anarchy, we see that the history of the states-system has a live political content ... and it is apparent that to understand the realm of the political we need a conception of historical agency as a dispersed property of human societies which state organizations will always attempt to mobilize, but which is never reducible to state policy.’¹⁹ In direct opposition to Realist ahistoricism, Rosenberg proposes what, in Robert Keohane’s terms,²⁰ might be designated a Marxist research programme, a ‘prospectus for an alternative history of the international system’,²¹ seeking to recover for IR the immense historical upheavals – imperial expansion, migrations, revolutions and world wars – associated with the global development of capitalist society, the actual social content of the abstracted anarchy of the modern states system and its attendant form of sovereignty. Cox’s and Rosenberg’s works were important early Marxist contributions to what Benno Teschke identifies more generally as ‘the historical turn in IR’²² – the investigation of the origins and history of the modern states system in response to contemporary debates about globalisation and the supersession or attenuation of state sovereignty. Teschke’s own work is positioned very much within this new (that is, new to IR) historical orientation, which he specifically characterises as a progressive movement within the discipline away from Waltzian neo-Realism,²³ under

¹⁵ Cox 1986, p.210.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p.214.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ Rosenberg 1994, p.36. The phrase is Fred Halliday’s (Halliday 1987, p.217).

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p.37.

²⁰ Keohane 1998.

²¹ Rosenberg 1994, Ch.6.

²² Teschke 2003, pp.1–2.

²³ *ibid.*, Ch.1.

whose captivating spell ‘history turns into a non-problem’,²⁴ and away from overarching or teleological abstractions from the historical process, towards theory that emphasises the priority of historical particularity and the differential outcomes of localised struggles. From this radically historicist perspective, the sin of Waltzian theory, in particular, is that its reliance on the twin premises of anarchy and variations of capability among the units makes it effectively useless for purposes of historical causal explanation: ‘Waltz’s structuralist model – with the exception of the persistence of anarchy itself – is completely indeterminate in its predictive and retrospective, that is, historically explanatory, capacities.’²⁵ Like Cox, but even more so, Teschke is hostile to any manifestations of structuralist rationalism (detecting it residually even in Rosenberg’s otherwise path-breaking work²⁶) as straying too far from the vital energies of the actual historical material and the in-principle open and alive potentialities of human praxis. He proposes instead the heuristic of Robert Brenner’s ‘theory of social property relations’ in order to bring into IR theory the (class) agency that, it is purported, produces the movement of history and the transformations of social orders and their modes of international relations.

The need of these representative Marxist contributions, both in their criticism of the supposed ahistoricism of Realism and in their substantive content, is to deny the constitutive elements of Realist theory in IR: the assumption of the specificity and autonomy of the political and, with it, ‘the positing of a discrete environment of “the international” in which the behaviour of states can be explained *sui generis* – requiring the insulation of the international from the domestic.’²⁷ The Marxists sense, more or less obscurely, a deadly threat from Realism: if any concession is made to these Realist axioms, then they would be trapped within the cage – political existence at the highest level becomes timeless and ontological, removed from any possibility of meaningful change through the human agency of transformative social movements.²⁸ How Realism thinks history has of course troubled other theoretical perspectives – John Gerard Ruggie, for example, famously observed that anarchy as an explanatory concept

²⁴ *ibid.*, p.15. To the contrary, it is the argument of this thesis that in Realism history in fact becomes a more profound problem than Marxist IR has hitherto realised.

²⁵ *ibid.* pp.14–15.

²⁶ *ibid.*, pp.39–41.

²⁷ Rosenberg 1994, p.30.

²⁸ Teschke, for instance, baulks at ‘the eviction of human volition (consciousness, choice, policy) and the negation of the very possibility of variable outcomes [that] constitute the criterion for Neorealism’s status as a science’ (Teschke 2003, p.15).

‘provides no means by which to account for, or even to describe, the most important contextual change in international politics in this *millennium*: the shift from the medieval to the modern international system’²⁹ – but the criticism has a particular urgency for Marxist theorists. If the Realist premises are accepted, if the political – and with it the international – can legitimately, in fact *must*, be conceptualised as somehow separate from and not reducible to other social processes, then international relations appear to be placed both beyond the reach of Marx’s theory of capital as a theory of social form, as well as of the understanding of history of which it is a part, and beyond any Marx-inspired emancipatory praxis. The imperative for Marxist theory, then, has been to breach that Realist ‘insulation of the international from the domestic’, to reconnect the outside to the inside and to fill the static and timeless realm of the international with the life and movement of the history of social development. This strategy has generally taken the form of demonstrating how changes of social form (in some cases the move from feudal, or, more broadly, non-capitalist, to capitalist social relations, in others epochal developments within the history of capitalism) produce changes in the character and dynamic of international relations in any given period, and showing how those changes of form are driven by ongoing class struggles generated through the process of societal reproduction. In this way, the dynamic of history is to be revealed as essential to IR theory, the empty political abstractions of Realism given content, and the present revealed as in principle open and subject to change.

However, it may be doubted how far this strategy succeeds. Certainly, the Marxists have produced deeper and more nuanced accounts of historical causation at the international level than Realists relying on the skeletal structure of Waltz’s theory can manage, but it is questionable whether counterposing historical content to Realist abstraction meets the threat that Realism poses. In *Theory of International Politics* Waltz is clear about the scope and limitations of his theory: ‘It can describe the range of likely outcomes of the actions or interactions of states within a given system and show how the range of expectations varies as systems change ... but it cannot tell us just how, and how effectively, the units of a system will respond to those pressures and possibilities.’³⁰ Already in 1959, Waltz was candid that ‘if the framework [the ‘third

²⁹ Ruggie 1986, p.141 (emphasis in original). See Ashley 1984, Walker 1987 and Kratochwil 1993 for other significant, non-Marxist, reflections on the problem of Realism and change.

³⁰ Waltz 1979, p.71.

image'] is to be called cause at all, it had best be specified that it is a permissive or underlying cause of war.'³¹ Twenty years later, he is emphatic that structural theory can only explain the general, not the particular: 'A theory of international politics will ... explain why war recurs, and it will indicate some of the conditions that make war more or less likely; but it will not predict the outbreak of particular wars.'³² Waltzian neo-Realism is designed to lay bare the systemic constraints that political entities of all sorts are confronted by in the field of international politics; it does not seek to explain the different ways in which they attempt to negotiate the imperatives of the system.³³ It is, as it were, a transcendental theory of the conditions of possibility of *any* international existence as long as the international domain is an anarchic self-help system of multiple units. To that extent, it can accommodate innumerable variations in the nature of the units involved, provided the character of the basic system is not changed. Once this is grasped, it becomes evident that none of the Marxist criticisms, nor their substantive theorising, actually touches Realism, let alone counters the challenge it presents – Realism can easily allow for changes of domestic social form so long as they are 'changes *in* the system' rather than 'changes *of* the system'.³⁴ In this sense, Marxist theory in IR has always been pitched below the level at which Realism exists with its greatest force. For a long time IR Marxism insisted that Realism's abstraction was unreal, simple reification, and could be set in motion by being resolved into the social processes Marxism analysed. But the return of Realism undigested in the recent *CRIA* debates demonstrates otherwise. In fact, it is the case that the Marxist contributions serve to reinforce Realism by demonstrating, albeit inadvertently, that all the far-reaching and historically epochal changes in 'internal' social relations they document continually issue in and reproduce 'externally' the essentially anarchic, unpacified, international domain that Realism insists upon. Class struggle and revolution have not transcended international anarchy but perpetuated it; the dynamism of history has not led out of the unreconciled and unfree condition of the international. Thus, it may be said that the Marxists have not explicated or sought to grasp the historical dialectic of

³¹ Waltz 1959, p.232.

³² Waltz 1979, p.69.

³³ To do so requires 'unit-level' theory, which is what the Marxists have generally pursued and why they have been able to produce 'thicker' and more varied accounts of historical causality than neo-Realism has. Waltz does not deny the necessity of analysis of the units in producing any complete causal account of international politics – 'more needs to be said about the status and role of the units in neorealist theory' (Waltz 1990, p.37) – but the real strength of his theory is its focus on the unchanging systemic conditions.

³⁴ Waltz 2000, p.5. This is Waltz's 'second image' criticism of those socialists who pointed to the specifically capitalist form of the state as the cause of war (Waltz 1959, Ch.5).

inside and outside, that is, shown why historical movement continues to reproduce stasis. Rather, they have sought to reduce the outside to the inside, to drag the ahistorical into the temporal and dissolve the static element in the flux of the dynamic.³⁵ But to show variations of social relations within the form of the international, as the Marxists have very successfully done, does not invalidate the form itself. The attack on Realist stasis through the insistence on the onward development of history misfires because it grasps Realism only abstractly, separating into bare opposition two moments that should be thought together dialectically – continuity and discontinuity – and prioritising one over the other. The Marxists' critiques can thus only be external to Realism while, simultaneously, their substantive theorising continues to be caught within the Realist delineation of the condition of the international: in believing they have escaped, they have remained trapped. The outbreak attempt fails.

Realism and Myth

Although it may be the case that the Marxist emphasis on historical change falls short of Realism, it nevertheless contains an essential moment of truth that is not to be gainsaid: its protest against the mythic character of Realism. For, without exception, the major themes of the Realist discourse – timelessness, stasis, equilibrium, history as cyclicity, the nullity of the particular, entrapment within a hostile objectivity – derive from the sphere of myth, and the eternal unfreedom that it represents. This section explores some of the key elements of Realist thinking in IR, both 'classical' and modern, in order to explain what is meant in describing the Realist imaginary as one of myth.

In the mythic experience, humans have separated themselves from submersion in the natural world, are no longer undifferentiatedly and immediately 'natural', but yet, despite that very separation, remain entrapped within a context that continues to envelop and oppress them, subject always to external powers of nature that they cannot control and whose existence they must just accept and adapt themselves to, even

³⁵ They are thus, in Waltzian terms, reductionist, a fact Rosenberg has accepted: 'What liberalism and Marxism have to say about IR is reasoned not from the circumstance of inter-societal coexistence, but rather from the impact upon that circumstance of social development occurring "elsewhere". (Thus Waltz's charge [Waltz 1979] of illicit reductionism has undeniable substance, though I denied its importance for a long time.)' (Callinicos and Rosenberg 2008, pp.96–7).

worship. In their liberation from the compulsions of nature, torn loose from non-conceptual animality, they yet remain unfree, everywhere encompassed by what has always been and cannot be changed. Hopeless enclosure within a totalised context of immanence and the absence of any transcendent horizon of freedom define the mythic world. It is impossible to break out, to escape, because there is no exit. Time and history can thus only be repetition, having their image in the endless recurrence of the cycles of nature. In such a context, the individual, as the specific, particular life, is restricted in its development, does not yet really exist properly for itself – like everything else, it will in the end simply be swallowed up by destiny, the implacable universal; and where individuality is so constrained, moral autonomy has only the most attenuated meaning. The world of myth is instead one of power, force and conflict, necessity and retribution. To submit to and propitiate the mysterious and awful might of the ancient and unmasterable forces that govern the world is as much as the individual can do to avoid a terrible fate: hubris, self-exaltation, or the attempt, in the manner of Prometheus or Icarus, to reach beyond the boundaries imposed, invites nemesis, vengeance. Realism's predilection for tracing its lineage back to at least Thucydides and the world of ancient Greece is no mere innocent claiming of classical authority and dignity: it represents the unbroken experience of involvement in myth, even through the long history of the development of rational thought and towards political maturity. The Greek moment of transition from prehistoric mythic thought to recognisably modern reason is also, more deeply, one of continuity: the Realist perception is that for all its mastery of nature, its scientific knowledge and civilisational achievements, society has never successfully freed itself from archaic entrapment. Even when the sovereign self and the rational concept have superseded belief in the old gods, the thematics of myth continue to hold. So, for Realism, perennially the condition of the international, the whole that encompasses the limited spheres of political freedom, remains one of heteronomous compulsion and unvarying identity.³⁶

Realism thinks the condition of the international in terms of these themes of enclosure and compulsion characteristic of the mythic experience. So, confronted by the

³⁶ As will be developed further in Chapter 3, to say that Realism is mythic does not mean that it is somehow literally still within the ancient world of myth, but that political being, at least at the international level, replicates the entrapment, immanence and heteronomy that define the condition of myth. Sovereignty, autonomy and reason do not produce freedom but rather reproduce unfreedom. Myth may thus be understood as the negation of freedom.

exigencies of international political existence, the immanence and objectivity of the unchanging condition of anarchy, Realism counsels the virtue of the lesser evil,³⁷ advising renunciation and admission of defeat, the forswearing of any ambition to know the whole. Prudence, ‘the statesman’s supreme virtue’,³⁸ and self-limitation are the wise course for securing self-preservation. In accordance with this maxim, a recent substantial Realist text that intends, against the self-aggrandising vainglory of modernist social science, to renew the traditional wisdom of classical Realism by reference to Greek tragedy, takes the latter as a model because ‘by making us confront our limits and recognize that chaos lurks just beyond the fragile barriers we erect to keep it at bay, tragedy can help keep our conceptions of ourselves and our societies from becoming infused with hubris.’³⁹ For this Realist, as for Morgenthau before him, human reason is a weak and fallible instrument and it is dangerous, self-defeating folly to believe it capable of grasping the Absolute. ‘No amount of knowledge or power can protect against the kind of reversals tragic heroes [*sic*] encounter or the suffering they bring on. Knowledge and power make reversals more likely by encouraging hubris.’⁴⁰ Humans should know and respect the limits imposed and not imagine themselves to be genuinely free, to be the equals of the gods; that way destruction lies. Thus the merit of Greek tragedy, as Lebow sees it, is that it warns against such error, with its ‘fundamental message ... that human beings and their societies alike must recognize their limits and learn to live within them.’⁴¹ Where self-limitation is wisdom in the face of unmasterable and unknowable circumstances, the freedom of the political entity has an illusory or insubstantial quality, and drastic restrictions are imposed upon the agency of the political decision maker.⁴² Enclosed within the ungoverned state of nature of the

³⁷ Morgenthau 1965, pp.192 and 202.

³⁸ Aron 2003, p.585.

³⁹ Lebow 2003, p.364. Lebow comments: ‘the arbitrariness of fate and the inability of humans to escape their condition goes back to the archaic age’ (ibid.).

⁴⁰ ibid., p.365. Again, Lebow observes: ‘Hubris is another Greek concept that is well established in archaic times’ (ibid.).

⁴¹ ibid., p.366. The theme is general in Realism; ‘The limits which nature ... thus puts to human aims and actions are principally those facts and phenomena which have been summarized under the heading of “realist” insights’ (Herz 1951, p.134).

⁴² Herein perhaps lies the reason for Realism’s discomfort with the notion of sovereignty, ‘a bothersome concept’ according to Kenneth Waltz, whose discussion is careful to remain strictly formal and functional, deliberately non-conceptual: ‘To say that a state is sovereign means that it decides for itself how it will cope with its internal and external problems,’ but ‘to say that states are sovereign is not to say they can do as they please, that they are free of others’ influence, that they are able to get what they want. ... The sovereignty of states has never entailed their insulation from the effects of other states’ actions. To be sovereign and to be dependent are not contradictory conditions’ (Waltz 1979, pp.95–6). Except that they are: sovereignty surely contains within its concept the idea of freedom, and freedom, in any emphatic sense, is incompatible with a condition in which heteronomous circumstances necessarily

international, the statesman, in deciding upon a course of political action, has no substantive freedom, being inexorably and unavoidably caught up in an objectivity that he can never hope to master or control.⁴³ The substantiality of the political entity, its in-itself, is rendered null and irrelevant in the face of the constant necessity for a cold-eyed assessment of the balance of forces. Adapting himself to the objective circumstances, the wisdom of the statesman is to renounce happiness or fulfilment in favour of the pragmatic, realistic calculation of the necessities of self-preservation, cancelling himself in accommodating to a reality that cannot meaningfully be changed. 'A realist theory of international politics, then, will guard against two popular fallacies: the concern with motives and the concern with ideological preferences.'⁴⁴ There is thus no correlation between morally laudable subjective intentions and a happy result of policy. To imagine oneself and to behave as if free within the oppressive, unfree whole is delusion, blindness. Under the spell that binds together the mythic context, good intentions untempered by judicious appraisal of the objective factors are always liable to be twisted by the malevolent cunning of fate into disastrous outcomes:

Neville Chamberlain's politics of appeasement were, as far as we can judge, inspired by good motives; he was probably less motivated by considerations of personal power than were many other British prime ministers, and he sought to preserve peace and to assure the happiness of all concerned. Yet his policies helped to make the Second World War inevitable and to bring untold miseries to millions of people. Sir Winston Churchill's motives, on the other hand, were much less universal in scope and much more narrowly directed toward personal and national power, yet the foreign policies that sprang from these inferior motives were certainly superior in moral and political quality to those pursued by his predecessor.⁴⁵

impose unavoidable constraints. No attempt is made by Waltz to analyse the meaning of sovereignty or to examine why and how freedom (sovereignty) and necessity (the constraints of the international) exist together, indeed constitute each other. Similarly, Raymond Aron, at the conclusion of his discussion of the difficulties involved in defining sovereignty, remarks, 'personally, I should offer no objection to abandoning this concept, because of the ambiguities it sustains' (Aron 2003, p.743).

⁴³ In Morgenthau in particular, the figure of the statesman is invested with something of the pathos of the tragic hero, an existential Everyman, exemplary in his exceptionality, who both raises himself above his circumstances and remains trapped within them, caught in-between: 'the statesman is indeed the prototype of social man himself; for what the statesman experiences on his exalted plane is the common lot of all mankind. Suspended between his spiritual destiny which he cannot fulfil and his animal nature in which he cannot remain, he is forever condemned to experience the contrast between the longings of his mind and his actual condition as his personal, eminently human tragedy' (Morgenthau 1965, p.221).

⁴⁴ Morgenthau 2006, p.5. A version, transferred to IR, of the Weberian theme of the 'irrationality of the world', whose recognition is essential to political judgement (see Weber 1991, p.123).

⁴⁵ Morgenthau 2006, p.6. The higher powers ensure that age-old identity, the context of immanence, is not breached and that human intentionality always comes to naught: 'Time and again it has been the tragedy of Political Idealism to witness the fatal reversal whereby, as soon as the situation or condition under attack was replaced by something new, the laws of Political Realism turned the result into the opposite of the expected utopia' (Herz 1951, p.39).

Catastrophe follows from the attempt to step outside the limits imposed and to think directly in terms of the universal; pursuit of enlightened self-interest is the best course for the preservation of the individual and the maintenance of the always ungraspable whole. The totality remains something ever opaque and inscrutable, beyond the reach of the individual, and the mediation of universal and particular does not produce reciprocal enlightenment but is the domination of the latter by the former.

Similarly, for Waltz the varying motivations of political actors are beside the point because in the international sphere they are continually thwarted by the objective circumstances that obtain: ‘In the history of international relations ... results seldom correspond to the intentions of actors. ... When and how internal forces find external expression, if they do, cannot be explained in terms of the interacting parties if the situation in which they act and interact constrains them from some actions, disposes them towards others, and affects the outcomes of their interactions.’⁴⁶ Indeed, the demands of the perennial circumstances of anarchy so void the subjectivity of the individual units involved that Waltz sees no difficulty, in fact a necessity, in reducing them to qualitative identity in his theory, taking into account only quantitative differences, variations in capability in the pursuit of survival.⁴⁷ The continual pressure exerted by the whole renders each particular null in itself, an empty ‘unit’, identical to all others, a helpless executor of the higher laws that govern its existence.⁴⁸ Like the natural context of myth, in Realist thought the encompassing circumstance of anarchy, the scene of international politics, is immemorial and unchanging, resistant to any progress. History as societal development is enshrouded in a fateful condition that does not itself develop: states and statesmen, politics and politicians, of varying ambitions and capabilities, driven by different necessities and desires, come and go, but the whole, the totality, always remains the same. ‘While men and gods may attempt in their short span to assess their fates by a measure other than blind destiny, existence triumphs over them in the end.’⁴⁹ In the condition of anarchy, all states exist as if under a curse; as Waltz emphasises again and again, the forces of circumstance are such that, whether

⁴⁶ Waltz 1979, p.65.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, pp.93–7.

⁴⁸ Thirty years before Waltz, John Herz was already writing that ‘because of the security competition among the political units any new unit and its leaders have to adopt power as the basis of their politics’, whether they want to or not (Herz 1951, p.25). This is an idea that, in philosophy-of-history terms, Adorno and Horkheimer articulate in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: ‘The awakening of the subject is bought with the recognition of power as the principle of all relationships’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.5).

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p.11.

they wish it or not, in their international existence states are compelled, out of the imperatives of survival, endlessly to repeat the same few patterns of behaviour: war or peace, alliance or opposition.⁵⁰ Hence the ‘dismaying persistence’⁵¹ of the conflict-ridden nature of the international domain, the condition of the international.⁵² Not to understand or wilfully to contravene the binding rigour of the logic of anarchy is to lay oneself open to destruction: ‘the requirements are *imposed* by an automatic sanction: Departure from the rational model imperils the survival of the state.’⁵³ Just as with the mythic hero, failure to heed the higher necessities, whether out of vanity, vaulting ambition or just carelessness, leads inexorably to downfall: ‘States are free to disregard the imperatives of power, but they must expect to pay a price for doing so’.⁵⁴

The single principle of order in the anarchic international domain is the balance of power. Coeval with and as ancient as the condition of anarchy, it is ‘the masterpiece of international politics’,⁵⁵ the guiding logic that organises Realism’s understanding of the dynamics of international relations. Indeed, a Realist theory of international politics must, in large measure, be a theory of the workings of the balance of power.⁵⁶ A concise statement of this theory, though, was long hard to achieve. Martin Wight, in his historical survey of usage of the term distinguished nine separate meanings,⁵⁷ and ‘Inis Claude noted [that] Morgenthau admitted to using the term in four different senses, and

⁵⁰ *Theory of International Politics*, in its parsimonious, ‘scientific’, brevity (in an already short book, only the first six chapters really constitute the theory proper; the final three are extraneous and have the feel of something tacked on), in its paradoxical combination of thinness and import, self-evidence and opacity (the theory both explains everything and explains nothing – ‘Is structure ... an empty concept? Pretty much so, and because it is it gains in elegance and power.’ Waltz 1979, p.70), and in the fierce conflicts that interpretation of its meaning has aroused (for the most recent round of which, see Booth 2011b), has something of the quality of an oracular utterance. Certainly, in thinking about theory in IR, it is to be ignored or dismissed at one’s peril.

⁵¹ Waltz 1979, p.66.

⁵² The real interest of *Theory of International Politics* is in trying to articulate this mythic quality of the international as a modality of human existence, the eversameness. For this reason, all those many critiques that mistake it for a predictive theory, fault it as such and try to fill or supplement it with other variables and factors do not improve on Waltz’s work. Rather, the power and importance lie precisely in the thinness, the emptiness.

⁵³ Waltz 1959, p.201 (emphasis in original). As in Waltz’s discussion of sovereignty, freedom is no such thing, amounting to a continual dilemma between adaptation and doom: ‘Pursuing a balance-of-power policy is still a matter of choice, but the alternatives are those of probable suicide on the one hand and the active playing of the power-politics game on the other’ (ibid., p.205). Either way, there is no escape.

⁵⁴ Waltz 2000, p.37. In the previous sentence he observes, ‘Stephanie Neuman’s book, *International Relations Theory and the Third World*, abounds in examples of states that failed to mind their own security interests through internal efforts or external arrangements, and as one would expect, suffered invasion, loss of autonomy, and dismemberment.’

⁵⁵ Wight 1966b, p.21.

⁵⁶ Waltz describes it as ‘the main theoretical prop of those traditionally called realists’ (Waltz 2008, p.137).

⁵⁷ Wight 1966a.

in practice added a fifth.⁵⁸ Morgenthau's discussion of the concept in *Politics among Nations* illustrates the difficulty involved. He is in no doubt about the necessity and importance in international politics of 'a configuration that is called the balance of power', chiding the presumptuous and moralistic 'misconception [that] asserts that men have a choice between politics and its necessary outgrowth, the balance of power, on the one hand, and a different, better kind of international relations, on the other'.⁵⁹ And the substance of his survey, a sort of guide to policy options, is an overview of the different patterns and structures involved and the methods available to the participants. However, in his concluding 'Evaluation'⁶⁰ he confronts a conundrum. In its classical configuration, among the states of Europe from approximately the 17th century onwards, the working of the balance of power ensured that the continent was not dominated by a single country; 'yet universal dominion by any one state was prevented only at the price of warfare, which from 1648 to 1815 was virtually continuous and in the twentieth century has twice engulfed practically the whole world'.⁶¹ Even the brief periods of tranquillity 'were preceded by the wholesale elimination of small states and were interspersed ... by a great number of isolated acts of a similar nature'.⁶² The stability, order and rationality of the balance, its timeless elegance, was only achieved through the irrationality of virtually relentless conflict and destruction, the weakest being consumed in the struggle.⁶³ Of what use can conscious regard for the balance then be as a prescription for policy? Perplexed by the irrational means by which the rational outcome of equilibrium is achieved, Morgenthau therefore concludes by expanding upon the three main weaknesses of the balance of power as the guiding principle for policy in international affairs: 'its uncertainty, its unreality, and its inadequacy'.⁶⁴ The central point of Morgenthau's criticism is the virtual impossibility of correctly calculating, from among the innumerable variables, what policy would serve to maintain or correct the balance. No individual state, which in any case must be

⁵⁸ Donnelly 2000, p.29.

⁵⁹ Morgenthau 2006, p.179.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, Ch.14.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p.213

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ John Herz quotes the 19th-century liberal John Bright on the costs of the equilibrium achieved in the balance of power, 'this foul idol – fouler than any heathen tribe ever worshipped': 'It rises up before me when I think of it as a ghastly phantom which during one hundred seventy years, whilst it has been worshipped in this country, has loaded the nation with debts and with taxes, has sacrificed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Englishmen, has desolated the homes of millions of millions of families' (Herz 1951, p.213).

⁶⁴ Morgenthau 2006, p.214.

concerned always with its own power status, can grasp the whole sufficiently to formulate a course of action that would deliberately serve the balance. In international politics subjective reason is inadequate to the objective whole.

Waltz draws the inevitable conclusion from the explanatory difficulty Morgenthau becomes entangled in, removing all elements of foreign policy considerations and reformulating balance-of-power theory in wholly objective terms. Subjective factors of state motivation not only do not account for the creation and perpetuation of balances of power, they serve only to vitiate the meaning of the theory. If they were to be included, then:

one [would] not need a balance-of-power theory, for balances would result from a certain kind of behavior explained perhaps by a theory about national psychology or bureaucratic politics. A balance-of-power theory could not be constructed because it would have nothing to explain. If good or bad motives of states result in their maintaining balances or disrupting them, then the notion of balance of power becomes merely a framework organizing one's account of what happened, and that is indeed its customary usage.⁶⁵

Sweeping aside the assorted errors that result from attempting to ground the theory in 'internal' factors, Waltz is categorical: 'Balance-of-power politics prevails wherever two, and only two, requirements are met: that the order be anarchic and that it be populated by units wishing to survive.'⁶⁶ The theory becomes one of outcomes rather than motives, of the results inexorably produced, often against their will, by the uncoordinated actions of states with diverse motivations. Thus reformulated, balance-of-power theory ceases to need assumptions of rationality or of subjective calculation of the balance by any of the actors: 'To contrive and maintain a balance may be the aim of one or more states, but then again it may not be. According to the theory, balances of power tend to form whether some or all states aim for universal domination.'⁶⁷ What Waltz sees is that the balance, the point of indifference, comes about not despite the continual and multitudinous ambitions and strivings of the powers involved, but precisely *through* them. The result of all the discontinuities, all the conflicts, is in the end self-sameness, stillness; the sum of the factors involved is ultimately always zero. The balance of power is revealed as a sort of global law of non-contradiction, which is

⁶⁵ Waltz 1979, p.121.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, p.119.

realised only as the quintessence of all contradictions. Like the immemorial mythic context, within which heroes arise, clash, and meet their end, the balance of power serves continually to reinstate what always was, the eversameness of the unchanging condition of anarchy.⁶⁸ Equilibrium, the triumph of the empty identity of the universal, is mythic stasis.⁶⁹ What the theory, thus clarified, loses in immediate explanatory capacity, it gains as the minatory expression of fate: ‘Realist theory predicts that balances disrupted will one day be restored. A limitation of the theory ... is that it cannot say when. ... Of necessity, realist theory is better at saying what will happen than in saying when it will happen. Theory cannot say when “tomorrow” will come.’⁷⁰ With all the baleful inexorability of the fulfilment of a mythic prophecy, reversal of fortune is inevitable, but not predictable – vengeance may strike suddenly or hang over its victim, foreordained, for many generations. But it is certain that any power that waxes over-mighty, that offends against the laws that structure the condition of anarchy, will eventually pay the price and be humbled, forced to make reparation for its guilt: ‘It is so ordained that one atones at once, another later; but even should one escape the doom threatened by the gods, it will surely come to pass one day, and innocents shall expiate his deed, whether his children or a later generation.’⁷¹ The centrality of the

⁶⁸ Richard Little has recently discussed the concept of balance of power in terms of ‘metaphors, myths and models’ (see Little 2007, esp. Ch.3), but what is meant there by myth is in fact more like a weak version of ideology: a discourse that has persuasive effect through a power of suggestion rather than reason. That conception still assumes the validity of the rationalistic opposition between reason and myth, the latter being something ‘not really true’, a sort of delusion, albeit a potent and even necessary one.

⁶⁹ For Waltz, within the anarchic international state of nature, bipolarity is the most stable structure (Waltz 1979, Ch.8). More than simply a panglossian affirmation of the rigid fixity of the cold war superpower confrontation (Teschke, 2003, p.44), this is mythic dualism as scientific theory: ‘Just as the constellation Gemini, like all other symbols of duality, refers to the inescapable cycle of nature ... the scales (Libra) held by Zeus, which symbolize the justice of the entire patriarchal world, point back to mere nature’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.12). Scales are, of course, a classical image for the balance of power (Little 2007, pp.40–9).

⁷⁰ Waltz 2000, p.27.

⁷¹ Solon, Athenian statesmen and lawmaker, quoted in Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.5. Contemporaneously with Solon, and long before Thucydides, the single surviving fragment of the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaximander of Miletus, virtually the origin of Western philosophy, expresses the unvarying structure of assertion and retribution that is inscribed in the logic of the balance of power: ‘And he says that the original sources of existing things are also what existing things die back into “according to necessity; for they give justice and reparation to one another for their injustice in accordance with the ordinance of Time”’ (Waterfield 2000, p.14). Adorno, whose work repeatedly recurs to the Anaximander fragment, comments: ‘We might say that in its development hitherto history is constructed like a gigantic process involving the exchange of cause and effect. It is as if the principle of exchange were not only the determining factor in the countless myriad of actions that constitute the life of human beings, but as if the macro-structure, the macro-cosmic nature of history, were itself just one great exchange relationship in which penance follows the act of taking so that in this sense history never escapes from the bonds of *myth*. This was a presentiment, incidentally, that was not alien to the early philosophers. ... If you take the famous saying of Anaximander and also certain statements of Heraclitus, and look at them from the standpoint of the philosophy of history ... you will get something of a sudden insight into the exchange structure of history’ (Adorno 2006a, p.93. Emphasis in original). In this sense, the mythic origins of

condition of anarchy and the balance of power to the Realist vision explain the latter's essentially static conception of history, in which movement can at most be circularity or cyclicity, the history of the rise and fall of great powers – always the same archetypal story, merely in different guises.⁷² Nothing new, nothing qualitatively different may ever establish itself. Just as in myth, all the sound and fury ultimately signifies nothing, and time is issueless, the eternal return of the eversame. Statements to this effect from the Realist literature are well known: 'International politics is the realm of recurrence and repetition',⁷³ 'the texture of international politics remains highly constant, patterns recur, and events repeat themselves endlessly',⁷⁴ 'the behaviours of states, the patterns of their interactions, and the outcomes their interactions produced [have] been repeated again and again throughout the centuries despite profound changes in the internal composition of states',⁷⁵ 'the wealth of historic precedents which taught the eternal recurrence of strife and conflict among the units of international society'.⁷⁶ And so on. For Realism, resigned to the permanence and inalterability of the condition of the international, it is only through acceptance and comprehension of such repetition that security and self-preservation may be achieved. That is the substance of Realism as 'science'. In Morgenthau's formulation: 'The realist parts company with other schools of thought before the all-important question of how the contemporary world is to be transformed. The realist is persuaded that this transformation can be achieved only through the workmanlike manipulation of the perennial forces that have shaped the past as they will the future.'⁷⁷ The question is indeed all important, but Realism's answer is no answer. In it instead resounds the mockery of the gods, in that the Realist sentiment of disillusioned, grown-up responsibility⁷⁸ simply negates itself: for it is precisely

balance-of-power theory can be traced back even further than Thucydides, to the very moment of transition between myth and enlightenment.

⁷² A well-known example is Robert Gilpin's *War and Change in World Politics*, which thinks macro-history in terms of alternations of 'Growth and Expansion' (Ch.3) and 'Equilibrium and Decline' (Ch.4): ancient history was 'The Cycle of Empires' (pp.110–15), the modern world 'The succession of hegemonies' (pp.144–5). But the power of this imaginary is such that cyclicity can also be discerned structuring even determinedly dynamic Marxist accounts of the historical changes involved in the development of capitalism. See, for instance, the work of Giovanni Arrighi, especially Arrighi 1994. Historical development takes place only through a circular pattern from which it can never break free.

⁷³ Wight 1966, p.26.

⁷⁴ Waltz 1979, p.66.

⁷⁵ Waltz 1993, p.45.

⁷⁶ Herz 1951, p.75.

⁷⁷ Morgenthau 2006, pp.12–13. Similarly, both Carr and Herz argue, unconvincingly, even despairingly, for a sensible blend of Realism and utopianism, a moderate middle way.

⁷⁸ A typical theme of Realism; compare Carr's characterisation of the supersession of utopianism by Realism as the development of mature science out of childish wishful-thinking (Carr 2001, Ch.1). As will

submission to, and fetishisation of, the ‘perennial forces’ and the endless patterns of repetition they enforce, that foreclose the possibility of any meaningful transformation.⁷⁹ The pose of hard-headed practicality – looking the facts in the face – really bespeaks only impotence and immemorial entanglement in unfreedom and hopelessness:

The principle of immanence, the explanation of every event as repetition, which enlightenment upholds against mythical imagination, is that of myth itself. The arid wisdom which acknowledges nothing new under the sun, because all the pieces in the meaningless game have been played out, all the great thoughts have been thought, all possible discoveries can be construed in advance, and human beings are defined by self-preservation through adaptation—this barren wisdom merely reproduces the fantastic doctrine it rejects: the sanction of fate which, through retribution, incessantly reinstates what always was. Whatever might be different is made the same. That is the verdict which critically sets the boundaries to possible experience.⁸⁰

Such is Realism: international anarchy as perennial entrapment and the balance of power as the logic of fate.

Marx and Myth

For Realism, modernity is implicated in the mythic context of anarchy and the balance of power as much as, perhaps more than, any other historical epoch. History is superficially change but fundamentally more of the same, and the contemporary globalised system of formally free and equal sovereign states finds its most compelling theoretical expression in the extreme abstraction and timelessness of neo-Realism. Though Marxist IR has insisted on the dynamic of history, in fact these Realist perceptions are deeply related to the character of modernity as it is explicated in Marx’s theory of capital: the critique set out in *Capital* and the *Grundrisse* is structured by mythic themes at every level of the analysis.⁸¹ The following sub-sections elaborate this important mythic dimension of Marx’s theory, moving progressively from the surface

be developed further later on, Adorno and Horkheimer perceive in this ‘bourgeois disillusionment ... the external schema for the internalization of sacrifice’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.45).

⁷⁹ Adorno and Horkheimer write of the dialectic of demythologisation, the process of which Realism is representative in IR: ‘the more the illusion of magic vanishes, the more implacably repetition, in the guise of regularity, imprisons human beings in the cycle now objectified in the laws of nature, to which they believe they owe their security as free subjects’ (ibid., p.8).

⁸⁰ ibid.

⁸¹ For reflections on the wider problem of the temporality of history, of time’s being ‘out of joint’, in Marx’s thought generally, rather than specifically the theory of capital as is the focus here, see Derrida 2006. On the subject of constructions of time in international politics, see Hutchings 2008.

of the text right into the innermost secrets of the system formed by capital, one in which ‘individuals are subsumed under social production; social production exists outside them as their fate.’⁸² The section as a whole is intended to illuminate an important side of Marx’s thinking that brings it into a constellation with Realism’s philosophy of history as the continual negation of freedom.

Metaphor

Even at the apparently superficial layer of the metaphoricity of the texts, in Volume I of *Capital* in particular (the only volume actually completed and seen through the printing presses by him), Marx’s prose bristles with motifs drawn from the realm of myth to reveal the hellish nature of the bourgeois world in which capital is sovereign. Volume 1 is entitled ‘The Production Process of Capital’ and the theoretically decisive transition comes at the end of Part II where, after a lengthy analysis of exchange, of the development of the value form and money, and of the general formula of capital (M–C–M’), Marx arrives at the central paradox of the surface forms of capitalist society: ‘The money-owner ... must buy his commodities at their value, sell them at their value, and yet at the end of the process withdraw more value from circulation than he threw into it at the beginning.’⁸³ How is this riddle of simultaneous equality and inequality to be solved? The clew⁸⁴ is the commodification and sale of labour power, but following this clew leads not out of the labyrinth but into it, away from the sphere of exchange, ‘a very Eden of the innate rights of man ... the exclusive realm of Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham’,⁸⁵ into a dark world of pain, misery and suffering, the inferno of production. Marx announces this transition with what is surely a parodic, mock-heroic, version of the mythical motif of the descent into the underworld, complete with ominous warning over the portal: ‘Let us therefore, in company with the owner of money and the owner of labour-power, leave this noisy sphere [of exchange], where everything takes place on the surface and in full view of everyone, and follow them into the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there hangs the notice “No

⁸² Marx 1973, p.158.

⁸³ Marx 1990, p.269.

⁸⁴ A clew is a ball of thread such as Ariadne gave Theseus to reveal the way back out of the labyrinth, hence an indication to follow or key.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, p.280.

admittance except on business”.⁸⁶ Heaven and hell are linked. With the entry into the dolorous abode of production, the character of Marx’s text changes, the dialectical unfolding of logical forms being not so much supplemented as displaced by a vast mass of historical evidence, drawn mainly from 19th-century Britain, on the frightful exploitation of the workers by capital, ‘graphically depicting the corporeal depths of capitalist immiseration.’⁸⁷ But this is not a turning away from theory to history, from the abstract to the concrete; rather, it is a revealing of the real content of the abstractions, the real costs of production of the elegant, self-regulating mechanism idol-worshipped by the bourgeois apologists of political economy.

In this world the workers, who constitute the great mass of society, undergo continual, relentless, senseless punishment, trapped in a system of perpetual torment, of physically exhausting labour that has no issue and no conclusion, an infinite task: ‘The wearisome routine of endless drudgery in which the mechanical process is ever repeated, is like the torture of Sisyphus; the burden of toil, like the rock, is ever falling back upon the worn-out drudge.’⁸⁸ The immense machinery of production that capital calls into being, ‘an animated monster’,⁸⁹ utterly remote from the dimensions of human physique and capability,⁹⁰ is in no sense under the worker’s control but dwarfs and overwhelms him: ‘Cyclopean machines’ of ‘Cyclopean dimensions’ that produce on ‘a Cyclopean scale’.⁹¹ The antagonistic relations of production constitutive of capital set the worker and the machine in confrontation with each other, a battle in which the human is no match for the animated monster: ‘the instrument of labour strikes down the

⁸⁶ Adorno and Horkheimer write of Odysseus’s visit to Hades in the *Odyssey*: ‘this oldest stratum [of the epic] also contains a tendency which—as in the tradition of the journeys to the Underworld of Orpheus and Heracles—most decisively transcends myth. Indeed, the motif of forcing the gates of hell, of abolishing death, is the innermost cell of all antimythological thought.’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, pp.59–60). No such hope can be imputed to Marx’s wretched worker (he expects only ‘a tanning’ (Marx 1990, p.280)), but it is surely the ambition of Marx’s text to reveal the reasons for the mythic nature of capitalist society and thereby enable the spell to be broken: ‘The secret of profit-making must at last be laid bare’ (ibid.).

⁸⁷ Fracchia 2008, p.40.

⁸⁸ Marx 1990, p.548.

⁸⁹ ibid., p.1007. Twenty years previously, in the *Communist Manifesto* Marx declared that ‘a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells’ (Marx and Engels 2002, p.225).

⁹⁰ Marx notes that ‘one of these machines, used for forging paddle-wheel shafts in London, is in fact called “Thor”’ (Marx 1990, p.507).

⁹¹ ibid., pp.506–7.

worker.⁹² Marx's analysis reveals how the development of the productive powers of capital is always at the same time the development of its destructive powers, which ruin the worker 'and drag his wife and child beneath the wheels of the juggernaut of capital.'⁹³ The helpless worker is the mere plaything of these maleficent forces and he cannot escape the totality that progressively encloses him: 'the law which always holds the relative surplus population or industrial reserve army in equilibrium with the extent and energy of accumulation rivets the worker more firmly to capital than the wedges of Hephaestus held Prometheus to the rock.'⁹⁴ Not only does capital continually damage and deform its victims, physically and morally; Marx goes further, identifying the most modern and rational society with the most brutally primitive and irrational, when he writes of 'the ceaseless human sacrifices required from the working class, in the reckless squandering of labour-powers, and in the devastating effects of social anarchy'.⁹⁵ In the benighted lands where capital has established its rule, this grim practice is carried out on an industrial scale: 'Every large town may be looked upon a place of human sacrifice, a shrine where thousands pass yearly through the fire as offerings to the moloch of avarice.'⁹⁶ The society as a whole sustains and reproduces itself, on an ever grander scale, through consumption of the individuals that compose it.

Fetish, Vampire, Metamorphosis

Just as the seemingly reasonable workings of the Edenic sphere of exchange can in fact only be explained by recourse to the hell of the abode of production, each revealed as inhering in the other, so all of Marx's categories in the critique of capital should be thought of as simultaneously rational and irrational, modern and mythic. As much is suggested by the famous section on 'The Fetish-Character of the Commodity and its Secret'.⁹⁷ For the consciousness of healthy commonsense, blind to the societal

⁹² *ibid.*, p.559. If, as Adorno and Horkheimer suggest (and will be explored in Chapter 3), Odysseus's confrontation with Polyphemus, the tricking and blinding of the mythical monster, is emblematically a decisive moment in the formation of the hard, self-denying identity necessary for the comparatively weak human to evade the superior forces of nature, then in industrial capitalist society the Cyclops has his revenge.

⁹³ *ibid.*, p.799.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, p.799.

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, p.618.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, p.812.

⁹⁷ 'Influentially mistranslated in both English versions as "fetishism of commodities" and its secret, as if to suggest that the fetishism in question were nothing more than a mode of apprehending commodities, rather than the character of commodities themselves' (Sutherland 2008, p.4). As Sutherland observes, the satire of this section, undercutting enlightened reason, works in a number of directions. One is aimed at the 18th-century anthropological 'drama of astonishment and its disciplining' (*ibid.*, p.16). In Marx the

totality and the specific form of the social relations that produce it, the commodity is both an ordinary, commonplace use value and also something in fact extraordinary, the bearer of the mysterious and powerful property ‘value’ as a quality intrinsic to it, its own proper self, its essence. Fetishism is intrinsic to the system of capital at all levels;⁹⁸ here, at this early stage of his analysis, Marx restricts himself to some caustic satire at the expense of the self-satisfied modern bourgeois, condemning the enlightened reason of modern society as no better than archaic nature-worship. Ancient societies ‘founded either on the immaturity of man as an individual, when he has not yet torn himself loose from the umbilical cord of his natural species-connection with other men, or on direct relations of dominance and servitude’,⁹⁹ were characterised by primitive forms of religion, cults that enlightened reason would reject: ‘these real limitations are reflected in the ancient worship of nature, and in other elements of tribal religions.’¹⁰⁰ But what, then, should one think of the modern capitalist world, with its idolatrous veneration of ‘the mystical character of the commodity’? Modernity is itself enveloped in the fetish-worship it thought it had overcome: demythologisation is remythologisation. But the fetish now is the social substance, value, rather than natural powers, second nature rather than first. Social power takes on the ineluctable appearance of natural power. The section on the fetish-character of the commodity appears, somewhat suddenly, at an early stage of the analysis in *Capital* and marks ‘a moment of stylistic transition that is

course of this drama is short-circuited because it is we, as inhabitants of the world of capital, who take the place of the savages as objects of astonishment: Marx’s analysis allows no ground of theoretical objectivity on which we can securely stand at a distance from the satire because we, as necessarily members of bourgeois society, are ourselves implicated in that which is being critiqued. In fact, ‘demystification of the commodity in *Capital* is aggressively satiric: we grow up beyond the Kantian “self-imposed immaturity” of unthinking confidence, we leave a phantom home on the promise of a material home, only to be lodged by analysis itself in a mysterium more nauseatingly intricate and Byzantine than anything in the playground of phantoms we were so proud to grow out of’ (ibid., pp.18–19). There is thus also an implied rejoinder to Kant’s answer to the question, ‘What is Enlightenment?’: ‘Marx’s description of the commodity in part one, section three of *Capital* is a negative mirror image of the enlightened *mündig* person, as well as a contribution to the larger theoretical account of his present impossibility’ (ibid., p.24). Additionally, Marx’s satire is surely aimed at Hegel. Where Hegel’s dialectical analysis, as in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, begins with the most familiar and obvious thing in order to read out of it the metaphysics of the absolute, Marx’s dialectic, beginning with the simple commodity, reveals a system not of rational but of irrational abstraction, a phantasmagoria, a topsy-turvy world of ‘magic and necromancy’ (Marx 1990, p.169), of dancing tables and talking things, a world still enthralled to hidden powers and age-old fetishism.

⁹⁸ The apogee of the fetish-character that spreads across the system is, as Marx shows in Volume III, the form of interest, in which ‘it becomes as completely the property of money to create value, to yield interest, as it is the property of a pear tree to bear pears’: ‘The fetish character of capital and the representation of this capital fetish is now complete. In *M–M'* we have the irrational form of capital, the misrepresentation and objectification of the relations of production, in its highest power’ (Marx 1991, p.516).

⁹⁹ Marx 1990, p.173.

¹⁰⁰ ibid.

abrupt and even dramatic.¹⁰¹ It is as though Marx was willing, even anxious, to take the risk of interrupting the continuity of the dialectical exposition in order to signal to the reader that this critique of political economy will be no straight-forwardly scientific work of conceptual elaboration, but that the very conceptuality of capital should always be understood as being essentially fetishistic, its logic as irrational.¹⁰²

Such is the import of two other of Marx's recurring metaphors that have a deep critical, thematic significance. The first is his much-observed fascination with the figure of the vampire.¹⁰³ Where wealth takes the form of value, the immense means of production generated by society constitute an ever-expanding mass of what Marx calls dead labour. This inert body must be continually revived by being brought into contact with living labour in the person of the worker, again the sacrificial victim. Because, like everything else in capitalist society, their meaning and function derive only from their value-character, the forces of production can have no intrinsic connection with the fulfilment of human needs; rather, it is the reverse – the living humans must continually satisfy the voracious appetite of the colossal and ramified social apparatus of production. It is into this scene of the ghastly and compulsive consumption of human labour power that Marx's vampire makes his entrance: 'Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.'¹⁰⁴ In the capitalist phantasmagoria the creatures of the night are the lords of the daytime world,¹⁰⁵ indeed they strive to turn night into day, although such is capital's 'blind and measureless drive, its insatiable appetite for surplus labour'¹⁰⁶ that 'the prolongation of the working day beyond the limits of the natural day, into the night, only acts as a palliative. It only slightly quenches the vampire thirst for the living blood of labour.'¹⁰⁷ At the conclusion of the chapter on the working day Marx returns to the theme of the dialectical reversal of the modern into the mythical, freedom into slavery. On the labour market, worker and capitalist had stood face to face as formally equal owners of commodities engaged in a process of exchange of equivalents.

¹⁰¹ Sutherland 2008, p.1.

¹⁰² So that society forms what Adorno called a *Verblendungszusammenhang*, a context of delusion.

¹⁰³ See Neocleous 2003 for a useful critique of cultural and stylistic understandings of Marx's vampirism, and a persuasive argument that the metaphor has much greater weight than those readings allow.

¹⁰⁴ Marx 1990, p.342.

¹⁰⁵ As well as the vampire, Marx refers to capital's 'werewolf-like hunger for surplus labour' (ibid., p.353).

¹⁰⁶ ibid., p.375.

¹⁰⁷ ibid., p.367.

Both parties were free in the sense that no direct coercion or compulsion was involved: they contracted of their own volition. ‘But when the transaction was concluded, it was discovered that he [the worker] was no “free agent”, that the period of time for which he is free to sell his labour-power is the period of time for which he is forced to sell it, that in fact the vampire will not let go “while there remains a single muscle, sinew or drop of blood to be exploited”.’¹⁰⁸ Capital incessantly hungers for the worker’s labour, which, transformed into abstract labour,¹⁰⁹ is the life-blood of society, coursing through every branch of production that composes the social body, keeping it alive.

At one of those characteristic moments in the *Grundrisse* where his thought leaps from the detailed examination of a specific problem to speculative reflection on the nature of capital, Marx brings together the figure of the vampire with a meditation on the mystery of the peculiar social substance, value:

Capital posits the permanence of value ... by incarnating itself in fleeting commodities and taking on their form, but at the same time changing them just as constantly; alternates between its eternal form in money and its passing form in commodities; permanence is posited as the only thing it can be, a passing passage – process – life. But capital obtains this ability only by constantly sucking in living labour as its soul, vampire-like.¹¹⁰

Marx’s texts are notoriously resistant to a positivistic, fixed interpretation. The plasticity and movement of the concepts cannot be captured and held fast by definition: attempt to pin them down – stake them through the heart – and they shrivel up and die. What in Marx’s concepts irritates the compulsively doctrinal or tidy-minded is their fluidity, their shape-shifting quality. But in this Marx is simply obeying the Hegelian injunction to be inside the material, to follow it rather than impose an abstract schema on it externally.¹¹¹ For, as he demonstrates again and again in his analyses, it is capital

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*, pp.415–16. The phrase quoted by Marx is from Engels’ ‘Die englische Zehnstundenbill’.

¹⁰⁹ Marx characterises abstract labour as a ‘*bloße Gallerte unterschiedsloser menschlicher Arbeit*’. See Sutherland 2008 for a discussion of the meaning of *Gallerte*, a type of jelly-like comestible. The implication is that ‘the capitalist ... is the great devourer of this undifferentiated human labor.’ (Sutherland 2008, p.8. Cf. Marx 1990, p.1007: ‘the capitalist devours the labour power of the worker’.) As *Gallerte*, abstract human labour is ‘a disgusting, paradigmatically unnatural food product for the bourgeois consumer, the “vampire which sucks out its [the proletariat’s] blood and brains and throws them into the alchemist’s vessel of capital”’ (*ibid.*, p.10, quoting Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*).

¹¹⁰ Marx 1973, p.646.

¹¹¹ Marx’s method is therefore inextricably bound to that of which it is a critique. In truth, as with Adorno, ‘method’ is really the wrong word to apply to Marx. It is no accident that so many of his texts are critical commentary on the writings of others. This is true even of *Capital* and the economic texts,

itself that is fluid, that can only be understood as a process rather than as a fixed ‘thing’. Capital is present in all its moments but is not reducible to any of them; unity and multiplicity, identity and difference, eternity and transience, are dialectically conjoined. This is the context of the third of Marx’s recurrent and structural mythic metaphors: metamorphosis. In the system of generalised exchanges, value, which constitutes the moment of identity between two dissimilar objects and makes the exchanges possible, increasingly takes on a life of its own, the use value becoming simply a bearer for this social substance to manifest itself in. ‘Capital becomes commodity and money alternately ... but not this or the other commodity, rather a *totality of commodities*. It is not indifferent to the substance, but to the particular form; appears in this respect as a constant metamorphosis of this substance.’¹¹² Analysis of the circulation of capital is therefore analysis of ‘The Metamorphoses of Capital and their Circuit’,¹¹³ as value constantly changes shape, appearing in different forms. The omnipresent nature of value as the animating social force is such that all things in the capitalist world must be understood through its movement. The individual element can only be comprehended in relation to the whole, the single commodity understood as a microcosm of the total social capital: ‘Just as the metamorphosis of the individual commodity is but one term in the series of metamorphoses of the commodity world as a whole, of commodity circulation, so the metamorphosis of the individual capital, its turnover, is a single term in the circuit of the social capital.’¹¹⁴ Value – and Marx’s entire analysis in *Capital* is nothing other than a tracing out of the societal movement of value that is implicit in the single act of exchange – is the *mana* of the mythical world of capital, the invisible and all-powerful force behind everything manifest, the essence that is the truth of all appearances.¹¹⁵ It is the mysterious property, the spirit, that in its metamorphoses brings to life seemingly dead, inanimate things and endows commodities with the social power, to be feared and adored, that makes them objects of fetish-worship.

which take the form of an immense metacritique both of bourgeois political economy and of German Idealist philosophy. *Capital* is systematic to the extent that the social process of which it is a critique purports to be systematic; thus Adorno called it a ‘negative system’ (quoted in Jarvis 2004a, p.89). Indeed, what Adorno, in philosophically more self-reflexive terms, said about his own thinking concerning a materialist dialectic can also be said of Marx’s theorising of capital: ‘Negative dialectics is thereby tied, at its starting-point, to the highest categories of identity-philosophy. To this extent it also remains false, identity-logical, itself that which it is being thought against’ (Adorno 2001b, ‘On the Dialectics of Identity’).

¹¹² Marx 1973, pp.261–2 (emphasis in original).

¹¹³ The title of Part One of Volume II of *Capital*.

¹¹⁴ Marx 1992a, p.427.

¹¹⁵ ‘The circle Money–Commodity–Money’ being what Marx refers to in the *Grundrisse* as ‘the constant individualization of the elemental’ (Marx 1973. p.202).

System

What Marx's mythic metaphoricity points towards is an encompassing structural fact: capital posits itself as a context of entrapment, the productive activities of every member of capitalist society serving continually to generate, on a scale that binds together the whole ever more tightly, an objective system that has power over them all.¹¹⁶ The enlightened, rational world is revealed as unconscious of itself and uncomprehending of its blind and anarchic processes of reproduction, which are *a fortiori* uncontrollable:

As much, then, as the whole of this movement appears as a social process, and as much as the individual moments of this movement arise from the conscious will and particular purposes of individuals, so much does the totality of the process appear as an objective interrelation, which arises spontaneously from nature; arising it is true, from the mutual influence of conscious individuals on one another, but neither located in their consciousness, nor subsumed under them as a whole. Their own collisions with one another produce an *alien* social power standing above them, produce their mutual interaction as a process and power alien to them.¹¹⁷

Just as with the mythic world controlled by the vengeful and inscrutable gods, or the neo-Realist system of international anarchy, in the most modern society the ungraspable whole continues to dominate the parts. Such subjection cannot be doubted in the case of the workers, who relentlessly have surplus value pumped out of them. Marx repeatedly emphasises the degree to which the worker is bound to, indeed absorbed into, the objective force confronting him, such that he is compelled to sacrifice his subjectivity and think of himself as and to become merely a thing, an element of the productive apparatus. In such circumstances it is delusional to analyse the process of societal reproduction rationalistically, in the manner of orthodox economics, as addressing the question of how a given group of organised human beings produces and distributes its means of consumption. In capitalist society, in which production irrationally becomes an end in itself, the rationalistic assumption is turned upside-down, the producers being objects of consumption for the omnivorous productive machine that society becomes: 'It is *at bottom false to say* that living labour consumes capital; capital (objectified

¹¹⁶ John Mearsheimer notes that 'Marx's later writings ... lay out a structural theory of politics that has much in common with realism' (Mearsheimer 1994–5, p.38). Marx's mature theory is a structural theory of society, rather of politics, but it is true that thematically it does have much in common with Realism, as the exposition here is intended to show. What Mearsheimer does not say is that Marx's intention was, of course, always critical.

¹¹⁷ Marx 1973, pp.196–7 (emphasis in original).

labour) consumes the living in the production process.¹¹⁸ Simply another unit input to be fed into the system, the ‘free’ worker has no freedom, but is held in thrall to an overwhelming societal totality that confronts him as something manifest and unquestionable, that which simply *is*, as inescapable as the natural context of myth once seemed,¹¹⁹ and his subjectivity is inevitably stunted and damaged as he is forced, amid the relentless competition of the labour market, to adapt himself to the requirements of capital, looking always to the maintenance of his use value of being an object capable of producing exchange value.

The anarchic system of capital, populated by formally free and equal units, generates immense disparities of power. But it is not only the worker, the object of exploitation, who is unfree in his freedom. The system objectively dominates also those, the capitalist ruling class, who think of it as their own and who feel their being to be confirmed by its workings – what one might think of, in IR terms, as the Great Powers of the system. In the ‘Preface’ to the first edition of Volume I, Marx insists that to grasp the truth of capitalist society it is necessary to rend the ‘individualistic veil’¹²⁰ that is woven by its surface appearances: ‘My standpoint, from which the development of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he remains, socially speaking, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them.’¹²¹ Repeatedly, through the three volumes, Marx stresses that the capitalist as much as the worker remains a captive of the very system that instils in him his sense of power and freedom, and that his subjectivity is therefore unreal.¹²² Even the mightiest cannot escape the system; as with the worker, the capitalist’s being-for-himself is really a being-for-capital. The glories of free competition, the magic of the market,¹²³ which for the bourgeois mind represent the height of liberty and personal autonomy, are shown, as

¹¹⁸ Marx 1973, p.349 (emphasis in original).

¹¹⁹ ‘The advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws’ (Marx 1990, p.899).

¹²⁰ As Adorno called the screen of narcissism that delusively shelters the individual from the power of the universal that, if gazed upon directly, would destroy the sense of self (see the section of *Negative Dialectics* of that name).

¹²¹ Marx 1990, p.92.

¹²² ‘As a capitalist he is only capital personified. His soul is the soul of capital’ (Marx 1990, p.342). for variations on the same theme, see also *ibid.*, pp.254, 739 and 1053–4; Marx 1992a, p.197; Marx 1991, pp.397, 403, 496, 958, 963, 969 and 1019–20.

¹²³ The phrase reveals that the market does not arise as an expression of human freedom but is heteronomous, a part of what Adorno called the ‘spell’ that keeps humans ensnared.

with so many of the other categories of modernity that are turned upside-down in Marx's theory, to be continued entrapment, individualisation, through diabolical cunning, to be the very medium of the negation of the individual: 'This kind of individual freedom is therefore at the same time the most complete suspension of all individual freedom, and the most complete subjugation of individuality under social conditions which assume the form of objective powers.'¹²⁴

Equilibrium

The objective system-character of capital, like the condition of international anarchy in Realist thinking, compels the actors involved into certain patterns of behaviour, quite independently of their subjective intentionality. Executors of the inner laws of capital, the capitalists simply identify themselves with the coercive force that they in any case cannot avoid, except on pain of destruction *qua* capitalists. Their freedom is identification with necessity. Just as, for Realism, it is impossible for each state, which must be continually mindful of its own security, to calculate the obscure intentions of all others amidst international anarchy, with the result that 'wars occur because there is nothing to prevent them',¹²⁵ so crises of capital are inevitably generated because in a condition of generalised competition each capitalist must look to his own survival, pursue his own interest, which, as the contradictions involved in accumulation play themselves out, drives the system as a whole into breakdown: 'In every stock-jobbing swindle everyone knows that some time or other the crash must come, but everyone hopes that it may fall on the head of his neighbour, after he himself has caught the shower of gold and placed it in secure hands. *Après moi le deluge!* is the watchword of every capitalist and every capitalist nation.'¹²⁶ The disaster is the outcome of the multitude of uncoordinated individual actions but it cannot be understood as the product of the conscious will of the participants. Rather, like political powers in the anarchic realm of neo-Realist theory, they act under blind compulsion: 'looking at these things as a whole, it is evident that this does not depend on the will, either good or bad, of the individual capitalist. Under free competition, the immanent laws of capitalist production confront the individual capitalist as a coercive force external to him.'¹²⁷ Although there

¹²⁴ Marx 1973, p.652.

¹²⁵ Waltz 1959, p.232.

¹²⁶ Marx 1990, p.381.

¹²⁷ *ibid.*

are enormous disparities of power among the market participants, some having greater capabilities for survival than others, none is ever in control. The crash, the general conflagration, is the means by which a degree of balance – equilibrium, in the favoured conception of orthodox economics from Adam Smith’s ‘hidden hand’ onwards – is returned to the anarchic societal process of capitalist production. As with the balance of power internationally, capitalist society as a whole reproduces and maintains itself at the expense of the parts, which are consumed in periodic orgies of creative destruction. Equilibrium, the point of stillness and identity, comes about only through continual instability and destructive conflict. Of this grim and relentless process of the sacrifice of individuals to the collective, Marx observes: ‘the proportionality of the particular branches of production presents itself as a process of passing constantly out of and into disproportionality, since the interconnection of production as a whole here forces itself on the agents of production as a blind law, and not as a law which, being grasped and therefore mastered by their combined reason, brings the productive process under their common control.’¹²⁸

Cyclicity

The periodic and uncontrolled movement into and out of proportionality is a part of the repetition and recurrence intrinsic to capital in all its moments. The worker is condemned by the nature of the capitalist societal division of labour to the punishment of Sisyphus, endless repetition of the same task. But the labour process is only one element within the overall movement of value, a moment of repetition within a totality of repetition,¹²⁹ as Marx notes when, at the beginning of Part Seven of Volume I, having completed his journey through the hell of production, he turns to ‘The Process of Accumulation of Capital’. The commodities that come out of the sphere of production contain, by virtue of the inequality involved in the labour contract, more value than was stored up in their original component parts. If capital is to function as capital and profit is to be made, this surplus value must be realised, and so the commodities must be returned to circulation: ‘They must be sold, their value must be realized in money, this money must be transformed once again into capital, and so on, again and again. This cycle, in which the same phases are continually gone through in succession, forms the

¹²⁸ Marx 1991, p.365.

¹²⁹ ‘Capital by its very nature only maintains its capital character precisely by functioning as capital within ever repeated production processes’ (Marx 1992a, p.382).

circulation of capital.¹³⁰ The movement of value describes a whole series of ever-repeated cycles and circuits of varying durations, from the microcosm of the reproduction of an individual capital investment to the macrocosm of the historical trajectory of capitalist society as a whole. It is like a gigantic machine, wheels within wheels: the circuit of money capital; the circuit of productive capital; the circuit of commodity capital; the turnover period of capital (tied, in its measurement, to the timeless natural cyclicity of the agricultural year),¹³¹ the trade cycle; the business cycle; cycles of boom and bust, prosperity and crisis, all the way up to the long, alternating waves of capitalist expansion and stagnation, punctuated by crisis, that Marx speculates on in a footnote added to the French edition of Volume I.¹³² It is, in fact, not just the worker who is a modern-day Sisyphus: the motion of capitalist society as a whole is one of endless recurrence, the senseless and compulsive tracing out of a circular pattern that is necessarily issueless and from which there is never any breakout to something qualitatively different. 'The return of capital to its point of departure is always the characteristic movement of capital in its overall circuit.'¹³³ Capital's very infinitude, its boundless quality, enforces the treadmill effect of continual repetition by virtue of the fact that, the means having finally usurped the ends, there is no limit to accumulation, no endpoint – never 'enough!' – because there is no intelligible and definite purpose to the whole process outside its own survival: it is objectless and wholly immanent.¹³⁴ Viewed as a totality, capital ceaselessly drags itself along the same aimless path with wearisome and pointless inevitability. At a certain moment in Volume III, having followed through the process by which disproportionalities and contradictions develop to produce a crisis, which is then destructively resolved – the balance restored – in order to open the way for another round of accumulation to be followed inevitably by further crisis, Marx breaks off from his scientific analysis, just briefly, to utter almost a cry of despair at the insane repetition-compulsion of this social form: 'And so we go round the whole circle once again ... the same cycle of errors is

¹³⁰ Marx 1990, p.709.

¹³¹ See Marx 1992a, p.236 and Marx 1973, p.640.

¹³² See Marx 1990, p.786.

¹³³ Marx 1991, p.468.

¹³⁴ Capital constitutes 'a system of exploitation of the natural and human qualities, a system of general utility, utilizing science itself just as much as all the physical and mental qualities, while there appears nothing *higher in itself*, nothing legitimate for itself, outside the circle of production and exchange' (Marx 1973, p.409. Emphasis in original). On the market as a form of immanence, see Hullot-Kentor 2006, p.214.

pursued once more.¹³⁵ Strictly speaking, the movement of capital is spiriform rather than simply circular because the accumulation that takes place through the repetition produces a linear, directional momentum.¹³⁶ But this directionality is itself directionless and meaningless, accumulation for accumulation's sake, as senseless as the historical process itself viewed as the mere succession of one generation by another, each forming a link in the chain that keeps humans tethered to their past, the unfreedom of archaic myth – the analogy Marx finds when discussing the process of increasing value through accumulation: 'It is the same old story: Abraham begat Isaac, Isaac begat Jacob and so on.'¹³⁷

Timelessness

The movement and dynamism of capital, the ceaseless passage of value through the moments of its reproduction and expansion, are inseparable from circularity and the recurrence of the eversame. Exchange society has inscribed within it a compulsion towards timelessness and stasis. Adorno comments: 'to exchange commodities is to cancel one act by another; it is, thus, an essentially timeless activity although it takes place in time—not unlike a mathematical operation, which is also, in its essential nature, out of time.'¹³⁸ Exchange implies equality, the sum of all the factors always amounting to zero, a continual balancing of accounts. The universalisation of this process is the negation of the historical because, as Adorno goes on, 'to balance accounts is to leave nothing unaccounted for; but the historical is essentially what cannot be accounted for.'¹³⁹ The withering of historical consciousness that the spread of exchange relations induces 'is the forerunner of a static society, in which the bourgeois principle of universal exchange and balanced accounts will triumph, and in which bourgeois rationality will reign supreme. Everything historical will be excluded from such a society.'¹⁴⁰ The totalisation of the exchange principle, so that every element in the society is immediately encountered as for-another, makes it progressively more difficult to experience that which is not commensurable, that which cannot be forced into the strait-jacket of exchange and identity. As the network of exchange spreads by

¹³⁵ *ibid.*, p.364.

¹³⁶ 'By describing its circle it expands itself as the subject of the circle and thus describes a self-expanding circle, a spiral' (Marx 1973, p.746).

¹³⁷ Marx 1990, pp.727–8.

¹³⁸ Adorno 1961, p.41.

¹³⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*

virtue of capital's inexorable expansion of value relations, its subsumption of the non-capitalist world to itself, both horizontally (the conquest of pre-capitalist social spaces) and vertically (the penetration of the commodity form ever deeper into the life of society) the annihilation of the experience of time takes place in a further way. Long before 'globalisation' and the transformations in the organisation of production associated with it, Adorno observed that with the further development of capital, 'industrial production will also cease to be essentially temporal: It will proceed more and more in identical and potentially simultaneous cycles.'¹⁴¹ This tendency is in fact foreshadowed variously in Marx's own analysis of capital. For example, he notes that, because the value content of machinery is only preserved through its use in the production process, 'the greater the scale on which fixed capital develops ... the more does the *continuity of the production process* or the constant flow of reproduction become an externally compelling condition for the mode of production founded on capital.'¹⁴² And as the scale and seamlessness of production develop, so 'likewise [do] the continuity and the constant growth of consumption'.¹⁴³ The dynamic of capital is therefore towards an absolutely continuous, interlocking and interrelated production process, employing to the full the colossal technological apparatus of which humans are mere appendages.¹⁴⁴ As a result of this tendency, 'there will no longer be any need for the rudiments of craftsmanship or for a long apprenticeship—the paradigms of qualitative accumulated experience'.¹⁴⁵ Complete continuity equals instantaneity; the absolutely dynamic is the absolutely static. The forced collapsing of the diachronic into the synchronic manifests itself also in the circulation sphere. Circulation is 'the passing of capital through the various conceptually determined moments of its necessary metamorphosis – its life process'.¹⁴⁶ But it is also a barrier to capital's own growth because it posits no new value, being merely the process by which the value stored up in the commodity during production is realised. 'Circulation time thus appears as time during which the ability of capital to reproduce itself, and hence to reproduce surplus

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*, pp.41–2.

¹⁴² Marx 1973, p.703 (emphasis in original).

¹⁴³ *ibid.*, p.719.

¹⁴⁴ 'Continuous simultaneous labour (production) increases in regularity, in intensity and in scope. The speed of the means of transport, together with the all-sidedness, increasingly transforms ... the necessity of antecedent labour, as far as circulating capital is concerned, into that of simultaneous, mutually dependent, differentiated production' (*ibid.*, p.826).

¹⁴⁵ Adorno 1961, p.42.

¹⁴⁶ Marx 1973, p.658.

value, is suspended’;¹⁴⁷ from this perspective, it is ‘a limiting, negative principle’.¹⁴⁸ Capital’s insatiable appetite for surplus value cannot tolerate such a limitation, which it strives to overcome: ‘The necessary tendency of capital is therefore *circulation without circulation time*.’¹⁴⁹

If exchange involves equivalence and therefore stasis, the non-equivalence within the equivalence, the principle of movement within the equality of exchange, is the surplus value extracted during production, which is ultimately transformed into profit. It is the production and appropriation of surplus value that give the movement of capital a spiral form rather than a simple circular one. The measure of the vigour of this directional movement – the index of the momentum of accumulation in bourgeois society – is the rate of profit. However, the theoretical investigations of the classical economists, especially Smith and Ricardo, had seemed unavoidably to suggest a, to them, horrifying conclusion: that the outcome of capitalist society’s accumulation process is a falling back into stasis because the workings of the same laws that establish accumulation and the rate of profit also force down that profit rate tendentially to zero. Accumulation inclines to revert to simple reproduction. Almost from the very beginning, bourgeois society is beset by a gnawing conviction of its own historical limitation, the insufficiency and illusory quality of its dynamic principle and its temporality. For, if the rate of profit were reduced to a nugatory value, ‘the animating fire of production would be totally extinguished. It would die out. It is the rate of profit that is the driving force in capitalist production, and nothing is produced save what can be produced at a profit.’¹⁵⁰ In Volume III of *Capital* Marx refutes Smith’s and Ricardo’s formulations of the theory that articulates this law, demonstrating instead that it is the very advance of capital, its necessity of constantly forcing up productivity, that works to undermine the basis of its own dynamism: accumulation produces a progressive change in the organic composition of capital, dead labour supplanting living (and becoming, ultimately, a colossal burden that living labour can hardly sustain¹⁵¹), with the effect that the surplus-value producing element – the life-blood of capital – forms an ever smaller

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p.658.

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p.659.

¹⁴⁹ *ibid.* (emphasis in original).

¹⁵⁰ Marx 1991, p.368.

¹⁵¹ In *Minima Moralia* Adorno argues that living labour can in fact only sustain this burden by turning itself into its opposite: society’s ‘consummate organization demands the coordination of people that are dead’ (Adorno 2005a, p.229).

part of the total capital investment. The dynamic of capital is therefore towards continual expansion of production, a growing absolute *mass* of profit, but at the expense of a falling *rate* of profit. As it expands, it slows down.¹⁵² The law of the tendential fall of the rate of profit – said by Marx to be ‘in every respect the most important law of modern political economy, and the most essential for understanding the most difficult relations ... the most important law from the historical standpoint’¹⁵³ – is rooted deep in the workings of the system of capital, at a level that defies straightforward empirical observation; only theory reveals such inner truths, the laws of essence. For the classical economists, the law, with the historical fate it implied, was experienced as something terrible and final, situated ominously at the edge of the horizon of history and consciousness, a ‘bourgeois “Twilight of the Gods”—the Day of Judgement’.¹⁵⁴ The mythic world of capital is itself subject to a doom.

Static and Dynamic

The theory of capital is one of the modern world as a gigantic system of entrapment that everywhere negates freedom. The point of Marx’s analysis is that enlightened bourgeois society has never escaped from myth; its disenchanted rationality is delusional. Marx’s theorisation of capital, though, had a dynamic intention. The purpose was to historicise the social form of the modern world, and thereby to refute the reified thinking endemic to bourgeois political economy, which tended to regard the categories of capitalist society as timeless and natural, simply given. Throughout *Capital*, Marx demonstrates, to the contrary, that those categories can only be properly comprehended and their systematic interrelation grasped when they are understood not as immediate but as mediated, the products of a specific historical configuration of social relations. Adorno observed that this aspect of Marx’s theory derived from his critique of fetishism, which he pursued into all the categories of bourgeois economics: ‘His basic theme was a Hegelian one ...: What appears to *be* should be conceived as something that has *come* to be—or in Hegel’s terminology, as something “mediated”’.

¹⁵² Looked at from this perspective, the entire expansionary dynamic of capital, both extensive and intensive, can be viewed as a desperate attempt to stave off its own collapse back into stasis, to provide periodic reanimating shocks to its failing heartbeat. But the law suggests that ultimately, whichever way it turns, capital is caught in a trap: the more it dynamically expands, the more it reverts to a static condition. Its expansion *is* its collapse.

¹⁵³ Marx 1973, p.748.

¹⁵⁴ Marx 1969, p.544.

What has come to be, and hence, everything that would come under the abstract concept of the static, is thus stripped of its pretensions to “being in itself”.¹⁵⁵ To break bourgeois stasis would be to return historical dynamism to society: if the forms of the contemporary world could be demonstrated to be not eternal and general but limited and become, then the future would be opened to the possibility of a different social existence. This is the side of Marx that has been most influential on the tradition of Marxism and has inspired most Marxist thought in IR. And, without doubt, IR Marxism does not completely misrepresent Marx in its emphasis on inner-historical dynamics. Virtually all of Marx’s early works, still under the influence of the French Revolution, are centred on the urgent prospect of transformative revolution – modernisation – in Germany;¹⁵⁶ and the *Communist Manifesto* sets out in classical fashion a historical conception that would remain basic to Marx’s thought: that bourgeois society had wrought immense transformations, creating the material conditions for freedom, but had at the same time, as it were, taken out a mortgage on the future that it could not redeem because of its own limited and contradictory nature. Capital is vertiginously dynamic but nevertheless betrays the movement it appears everywhere to affirm because its productivity and transformative potential are restricted by its continued entanglement in antagonistic social relations. Only the victorious struggle of the proletariat and the creation of a classless society can bring humanity home to the promised land of freedom that capitalist society leads towards but can never itself enter. The Marxian idea is therefore that the static element of the bourgeois world is indeed a fetter, but one that will be broken by the dynamism of what is essential to society: onward progress, driven by the dialectic of the forces and relations of production and class struggle, will in time blast through the hardened, reified shell. The historical promise that capital deceptively embodies would be fulfilled through the latter’s sublation in revolution: dynamics unleashed.¹⁵⁷

Marx’s critique of fetishism and of the unmediated, one-sided categories of bourgeois political economy was, as Adorno noted, a Hegelian theme, and it has long

¹⁵⁵ Adorno 1961, pp.43 (emphases in original).

¹⁵⁶ For a discussion of the importance of the experience of German backwardness (at least in relation to Britain and France) for the trajectory of Marx’s thought, see Shilliam 2006.

¹⁵⁷ For a contemporary version of this traditional Marxist topos, see the concluding Part 4 of Hardt and Negri 2001. See also Cox 2008, a hymn to the virtues of ‘chaos, complexity, and uncertainty’ (p.88) in ‘a Heraclitan world’ (p.93), hoping to shatter the rigidity of Parmenidean being with the mobility of Heraclitan flux, not seeing that constant change, absolute flux, is the same as stasis.

been realised that the architectonic structure of *Capital* as a whole was modelled upon Hegel's conception of the dialectic, especially as expounded in the *Science of Logic*.¹⁵⁸ Yet, for all its setting in motion of rigid and isolated categories, drawing them together in the elaboration of the totality, Hegel's dialectic by no means dissolves everything into the movement of historical dynamics. Adorno again:

The other, less popular aspect of dialectic is its static side. The self-movement of the concept, the conception of history as a syllogism, as it is to be found in Hegel's philosophy, is no developmental doctrine. ... The law that, according to the Hegelian dialectic, governs the restlessly destructive unfolding of the ever-new consists in the fact that at every moment the ever-new is also the old lying close at hand. The new does not add itself to the old but remains the old in distress. ... Thus, throughout all its antithetical mediations, history remains one vast analytic proposition. That is the historical essence of the metaphysical doctrine of the identity of subject and object in the Absolute. The system of history, the elevation of the temporal to the totality of meaning, abolishes time and reduces it to an abstract negation.¹⁵⁹

Hegel's dynamisation of static categories is only possible because it is held together, at the apex, by the principle of stasis and self-sameness: the absolute identity of subject and object. History is the activity of Spirit through the process of its self-estrangement, but the principle of identity, which compels the movement, remains in essence the same at the end as it was at the beginning: the whole historical development is simply the elaboration and flowering of what was in fact always already there, from the in-itself to the for-itself. As conceived by Hegel, the dynamic of history is articulated and driven by an overarching principle of identity and stasis,¹⁶⁰ and the image he finds for his philosophical conception is the mythic one of the circle.¹⁶¹ In a way, this side of Hegel is also preserved, in critical form, in the Marxian analysis of political economy: the class antagonism of bourgeois society is the fullest development of the age-old social division between power and obedience; and in the totalisation of value, identity has achieved existence as for-itself, the conceptuality of capital constituting a universal system of entrapment, an objective structure that is the product of the unconscious activity of humans and which consumes them. What *Capital* demonstrates on every page is that all the *Mündigkeit* of Enlightenment and modernity has not liberated humanity from myth,

¹⁵⁸ Exactly how this works is the subject of intense and ongoing debate within Marxology. For a recent authoritative statement, see Arthur 2004.

¹⁵⁹ Adorno 2003a, p.95.

¹⁶⁰ See Adorno 2001b, 'Detemporalization of Time'.

¹⁶¹ Hegel 1991, §15, p.39.

The dark, archaic and irrational origins still shape the most modern. Seen from this perspective, what Marx says in *Capital* is exactly what Realism says: that, in the terms of the 'Preface' to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, history is still prehistory.¹⁶² *Capital* presents itself as second nature, just as, politically, humans remain trapped within the Realist state of nature. For both Marx and Realism, the present remains chained to the past because the only change that would really be change has not happened: history has not yet begun. To this day the static reigns supreme.

In a sense, then, there are two Marxes: a dynamic one and a static one. For a long time the former held sway, under the banner of the world-historical role assigned by Marx to the dynamic force of Labour. But that the revolution never happened and the working class never overthrew bourgeois society, calls into question the primacy awarded to the dynamic Marx.¹⁶³ What history has revealed is that between these two elements there is a failure of dialectic in Marx: the static and the dynamic exist in an insufficiently mediated tension in his thought as a whole. To a considerable extent, they directly contradict each other.¹⁶⁴ Hegel had the better dialectical insight, although it is affirmed as something positive in his thinking – that the inner principle of the system, identity, is both dynamic and static, so that the dynamic continually reproduces the static and the static gives rise to the dynamic. Each exists within the other.¹⁶⁵ In IR, this would accord with Realism's perception that all the dynamism of history does not

¹⁶² Marx 1971, pp.21–2.

¹⁶³ Adorno, for one, was profoundly suspicious of the exaltation of labour as the principle of movement and change: 'Members of the bourgeoisie and their supporters have been loud in their praise of Marxism on account of its dynamism, in which they detect the same industrious mimicry of history that characterizes their own efforts. ... This praise ... arouses our distrust. ... Dynamism is merely one side of dialectic: it is the side preferred by the belief in practicality, masterful action, the indefatigable "can-do" attitude, because constant change is the best way to conceal the old untruth' (Adorno 2003a, pp.94–5). For Adorno, Marx's 'metaphysics of the forces of production' (Adorno 2008, p.96) were all too reminiscent of the absolute productivity of the Spirit that was central to German Idealism.

¹⁶⁴ Read with an eye to this problem, it is evident that the theorisation of capital does not actually support much of Marx's wider philosophy of history. Thus, for instance, in his discussion of the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, Marx concludes that 'when it has reached this point [i.e. the highest contradiction between the development of the productive powers and their social basis], capital ... enters into the same relation towards the development of social wealth and of the forces of production as the guild system, serfdom, slavery, and is necessarily stripped off as a fetter' (Marx 1973, p.759). However, this is not derived stringently from the theory of capital, *per se*, but is imported from Marx's idea of the dynamic of history being driven by the dialectic of the forces and relations of production. If the latter conception is insufficient (on which, see Adorno 2001b, 'On the Unleashing of the Productive Forces'), then the consequence Marx draws from the inexorable tendency of the rate of profit to fall does not necessarily hold either, without the law itself thereby being invalidated. For a recent speculation on the possibility of an undynamic capitalism, historically treading water, see Balakrishnan 2009.

¹⁶⁵ On this, see the discussions of universal history and the problematic nature of rationalisation as the principle of historical development in Adorno 2006a.

overcome the static condition of the international; in fact, it would be better to understand the principle of historical movement as continually reproducing international stasis and timelessness. There is thus something fundamentally amiss with the dynamic principle in that it has never led out of Realism's context of myth to a humanity that, at a global level, is self-aware and in conscious control of its own existence – one that is actually free. In the same way, all the immense dynamism and productivity of capital only reproduces mythic entrapment: modernity has not liberated itself from prehistory. It was argued above that IR Marxism, in its emphasis on change, has been unable to grasp the real depth of Realism. Perhaps, instead, by exploring the static side of Marx, what lies behind the theorisation of capital as mythic, it would be possible to crack open the meaning of Realism and to explain its ahistorical and timeless conception of the international.

Conclusion: The purpose of this chapter was to break down the opposition that has been established in IR theory between a Marxism that emphasises historical movement and change and a Realism that remains fixated on stasis and repetition. It has shown that the Realist discourse on the condition of international existence can be understood as one of mythic oppression and compulsion, political freedom remaining to this day trapped within a wider context of unfreedom. And it has also shown that there is another side to Marx, different from that normally encountered in IR: the theory of capital is suffused at every level with motifs drawn from myth, such that it may be said to be fundamental to Marx's conception of the world-historical meaning of capital that society recreates entrapment in myth. Looked at in this way, it becomes evident that Realism and Marxian theory are much more congruent in their understandings of modernity and their philosophies of history than has ever been allowed by Marxism in IR. This is not to imply that they are identical. Marx's thinking is, of course, *critique* (the world is mythic – and therefore it ought to be changed) whereas Realism is really a form of bourgeois resignation (the world is mythic – and cannot be changed). But it does suggest that explication of this side of Marx may lead to a deeper understanding of the meaning of Realism. By exploring why Marx thought of capital as mythic, what it means that modernity has not escaped myth, it might be possible then to grasp why

Realism thinks the international in the way it does, what is the cause of the timelessness and the repetition and recurrence. It is to this that the thesis now turns.

Chapter 3

Ideality and Myth

Introduction: This chapter explains what is meant by thinking of capital and modernity as mythic. Developing this idea means, for the moment, stepping back from immediate reference to IR, but with the intention of deepening the overall argument so as subsequently to return to and explicate issues that are central to the discipline. The principle theme of this chapter is the problem of abstraction or ideality, what in the Hegelian tradition to which Marx and Adorno belong was referred to as the Concept. The chapter falls into two halves, one focusing on Marx, the other on Adorno. It opens with a brief section setting out the centrality of the progress of abstraction to Marx's thinking about history. There follow two sections looking more closely at this materialist aspect of Marx: first, his critique of ideality in Hegel's philosophy, as found in some of the early writings; and second, the centrality of abstraction to the basic categories of capital. The central section, on which the chapter pivots, suggests that the failure of Marxism as practice prompted Adorno in the mid-20th century to push the materialist critique of ideality much further than Marx had done. The second half of the chapter looks at *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, drawing out the major themes of its first two chapters, to explain how Adorno developed a philosophical anthropology of conceptuality and thereby theorised the entanglement of modernity in myth.

The Rule of Abstraction

If it is the case that the mythic thematics of Marx's critique of capital should be understood as having substantive critical content, then the question of their deeper significance arises: why does the seemingly most advanced, certainly the most productive, social form in world history simultaneously have the character of a regression to myth?¹ What does it mean to say that capital is mythic? Answering this

¹ Regression, as Adorno used it, has a Freudian meaning. It 'is not to be understood concretely, as traveling back to an earlier period, but as the manifestation of conflicts that were never resolved in the

question requires addressing Marx's critique of abstraction. At a certain point in the chapter on money in the *Grundrisse* Marx pauses from his criticism of the absurdity of the idea of replacing money with labour time-chits in order to reflect on the inner character of the great social transformation that took place initially in early-modern Europe and thereafter all over the world, from social relations principally of direct authority and servitude to ones everywhere mediated by exchange. In considering the former, pre-capitalist, sort of society, he observes, 'it is clear from the outset that the individuals in such a society, although their relations appear to be more personal, enter into connection with one another only as individuals imprisoned within a certain definition',² lord and vassal, landowner and serf, and so forth. Here the individual is both defined and restricted by a fixed structure of social relations which are heterogeneous to him, and in which he has a specific, unchanging, place. These pre-capitalist social relations may well have been experienced as substantial because they were immediate and evident, and to those involved they doubtless seemed God-given, inalterable and eternal, akin to a metaphysical structure. But from the perspective of developed exchange society that immediacy is revealed as the immediacy of power and the relations of domination as, to use the favoured term of the 18th-century Enlightenment in its struggle against the remnants of feudalism, 'arbitrary'. By contrast,

in the money relation, in the developed system of exchange (and this semblance seduces the democrats), the ties of personal dependence, of distinctions of blood, education, etc. are in fact exploded, ripped up (at least, personal ties all appear as *personal* relations); and individuals *seem* independent (this is an independence which is at bottom merely an illusion, and it is more correctly called indifference), free to collide with one another and to engage in exchange within this freedom.³

In capitalist society the individual appears to be freed, to have the fetters of direct relations of power removed (although the violence involved in this process of liberation is more than suggested by Marx's language) so that he is at liberty to determine himself and to pursue his own interest in the unregulated, anarchical sphere of civil society. This

first place. In this, Adorno agrees with Freud in emphasizing that the infantile past of the individual and of humanity itself remains active within both the individual and society in conflicts that continually reemerge in moments of crisis that reveal the ongoing failure to solve these conflicts' (Hullot-Kentor 2006, p.9). This specific, psychoanalytically derived, usage was of course not available to Marx, and so as a result the equation of myth and modernity is much more explicitly conceptualised in Adorno's work than in Marx's. But the thematic elements are already there in Marx to a significant degree.

² Marx 1973, p.163.

³ *ibid.*, pp.163–4 (emphasis in original).

is the Eden of liberal rights and freedoms. To Enlightenment eyes the long, dark night of arbitrary and restrictive feudal power is at last dispelled to reveal the clear, bright dawn of natural, self-evident social relations, in which the individual stands forth in his true-born freedom.

But, Marx immediately goes on, such enlightened thinking does not understand itself. These social relations can appear as freedom only by ignoring ‘the *conditions of existence* within which these individuals enter into contact (and these conditions, in turn, are independent of the individuals and, although created by society, appear as if they were *natural conditions*, not controllable by individuals).’⁴ Critical theory, breaking through the semblance character of individual liberty and sovereignty, reveals the condition of the apparent freedom of each to be the objective dependence of all on the whole they together form, a societal totality unified ever more tightly by the uncontrollably proliferating exchange relation. Where once the individual was defined by his direct relationship to another, capital constitutes an ‘objective restriction of the individual by relations independent of him and sufficient unto themselves.’⁵ Personal, limited restriction, becomes impersonal, generalised restriction. It is here that Marx identifies the continuity within the immense, world-historical transformation from feudal to capitalist society, the identity within the seemingly all-transforming rupture:

These external relations are very far from being an abolition of ‘relations of dependence’; they are rather the dissolution of these relations into a general form; they are merely the elaboration and emergence of the general *foundation* of the relations of personal dependence. Here also individuals come into connection with one another only in determined ways. These *objective* dependency relations also appear, in antithesis to those of *personal* dependence (the objective dependency relation is nothing more than social relations which have become independent and now enter into opposition to the seemingly independent individuals; i.e. the reciprocal relations of production separated from and autonomous of individuals) in such a way that individuals are now ruled by *abstractions*, whereas earlier they depended on one another. The abstraction, or idea, however, is nothing more than the theoretical expression of those material relations which are their lord and master.⁶

⁴ *ibid.*, p.164 (emphases in original).

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.* (emphases in original).

The historical transition from particularity and limitedness to universality is conceived here as a dialectical development. Rather than a simple split occurring between one social formation and another,⁷ there is an inner, conceptual, continuity within the undoubted and manifest difference. The universal mediation of the exchange society does not simply cancel or supplant the restrictions of feudalism – it is, rather, their unfolded truth, the realisation of the Idea of domination. The abstract individual of modern society is, to be sure in a very different manner, just as defined and limited⁸ as the restricted individual of feudal society, perhaps more so. Not only, therefore, do the universal ‘*objective* dependency relations’ of capital contain a specific class relation within them,⁹ albeit in a highly mediated form, but the seemingly direct and personal relations of feudalism (and pre-capitalist societies generally) already embody abstraction and objectivity, though in a partial, not yet fully developed way.¹⁰ Pre-capitalist social forms, as shapes of Spirit, are constituted by human alienation and objectification but only in capitalist society is the ‘general foundation’ revealed. Capital is the revelation of this inner principle of society and the progress of abstraction is this inner content of the historical transformation: the discontinuity is created through the continuity. This short, dense passage from the *Grundrisse* both signals the centrality of questions of abstraction – ideality, form – for understanding Marx’s critique of capital and also points further, containing embryonically several perceptions that Adorno and Horkheimer would go on to elaborate in the mode of the philosophy of history in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: human development as the conjoined advance of domination and abstraction and history as the progressive movement of society towards the universality of the ideal.

⁷ Which then needs to be located at a specific historical moment, leading to the many overblown and fruitless debates within Marxology about the transition from feudalism to capitalism, and in the IR context about the significance or otherwise of the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia.

⁸ Damaged, to use Adorno’s term from the subtitle to *Minima Moralia*.

⁹ The point of Marx’s revelation of archaic domination and exploitation within the apparently free and fair exchange of the capital relation.

¹⁰ Something Marx hastens to point out in the next paragraph: ‘(As regards the illusion of the “purely personal relations” in feudal times, etc., it is of course not to be forgotten for a moment (1) that these relations, in a certain phase, also took on an objective character within their own sphere, as for example the development of landed proprietorship out of purely military relations of subordination; but (2) the objective relation on which they founder [*sic*] has still a limited, primitive character and therefore *seems* personal, while, in the modern world, personal relations flow purely out of relations of production and exchange)’ (ibid., p.165. Emphasis in original).

The problem of abstraction is thus central to Marx's critical social theory and his philosophy of history, and to those of Adorno after him.¹¹ The following two sections examine the scope of Marx's critique of ideality in greater detail: first, in the early writings, which concentrate on the puncturing of what he takes to be inflated abstractions in Hegel and others, ideal forms that serve to oppress real people; and second, in the mature Marx's theorisation of capital, which he shows to be a system constituted by objective, real abstraction that has achieved existence for itself.¹²

The Ideal and the Real

Marx's materialism was formed out of an intermittently renewed but lifelong struggle with Hegel, the intellectual battle that lies behind the more localised theoretical and political skirmishes with the Young Hegelians, Proudhon, the utopian socialists and the anarchists, Feuerbach, the bourgeois political economists, and so on.¹³ His thinking takes place in the shadow of Hegel's Spirit, its development representing the effort to go beyond Hegel without, in the attempt, falling behind him.¹⁴ Central to Marx's continual argument with Hegel was his disputing of the status of the ideal in his predecessor's thought. From the beginning, the critique of hypostatised idealities and the search for their real conditions of possibility form much of the substance of the young Marx's polemics. Consciousness of comparative German backwardness – of being trapped anachronistically in a superannuated quasi-feudal world, able to observe the political and economic development of France and England but not to be part of the forward movement of history – doubtless motivated the rejection of Hegelian Absolute Idealism.¹⁵ The attack on philosophy was born out of the urgent desire for social change,

¹¹ On the philosophical theme of critique of abstraction, see Osborne 2004.

¹² A 'real abstraction' is one that is not the product, nominalistically, of subjective conceptual operations but rather of people's actual social activity, although in a way that bypasses their individual consciousnesses. It is an abstraction or objectivity that holds in reality and cannot be subjectively thought away. The notion is central to the theorising of Hegel, Marx and Adorno (see Adorno et al. 1976, pp.79–80, Backhaus 1992 and Reichelt 2007, pp.3–7).

¹³ The subject of Marx's relation to Hegel is, of course, enormous and full of controversies. The intention here is certainly not to attempt an exhaustive treatment, but simply to pick out some significant themes. For three important non-doctrinal, non-Marxist treatments of the problems of critique and inheritance that Marx struggled with regarding Hegel, see Hyppolite 1969, Henry 1983 and Derrida 2006.

¹⁴ As, despite his initial enthusiasm, he would adjudge, for instance, Feuerbach's anthropological materialism to have done (see Schmidt 1971, pp.20–33 and Henry 1983, Ch.4).

¹⁵ Along with the radical idea that to supersede German philosophical thinking in actuality would also be to transcend the limited economic and political, forms of emancipation allowed by the modern type of

to release Germany from the dead weight of its history and bring it into modernity. So, according to his own testimony, in the 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*,¹⁶ Marx began his serious theoretical studies with a paragraph-by-paragraph critical commentary on Hegel's theorisation of politics, law and the state in the *Philosophy of Right* – the fragmentary text that has survived under the name 'Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of the State'. Again and again, with relentless enthusiasm, Marx here criticizes and picks holes in Hegel's purported reconciliations of the general and the particular in the political sphere, the merely theoretical harmonisation of the ideality of the state with the various empirical moments that constitute it (family, civil society, monarchy, bureaucracy, and so on): where Hegel proclaims achieved totality, Marx everywhere sees unresolved antagonism and contradiction.

The argument against Hegel is played out through the continual contrast between the state as perfected Hegelian form and the reality of the activities of actual individuals reproducing their existence within their families and civil society. For the philosopher of absolute idealism, the latter are the manifestations in empirical existence of the Idea, its own self-sundering as subject, realising itself through discovering itself in its opposite, the ideal in the real. Marx repeatedly denounces this conceptualisation of the real as 'mysticism' and as a reversal of the true situation: 'The family and civil society are the preconditions of the state; they are the true agents; but in speculative philosophy it is the reverse. When the idea is subjectivized the real subjects ... are all transformed into *unreal*, objective moments of the Idea.'¹⁷ In the young Marx's reading of Hegel, the ideality of the state, the self-consciousness of the political community, does not grasp or encompass the actuality of the activities of real individuals: the sensuous and the abstract are in unresolved contradiction, the former being unable to find expression and self-awareness through the latter. The real, living, embodied individuals do not recognise themselves, find themselves reflected, in the ideal sphere of the state because the mediations that Hegel establishes between civil society and the state consistently fail to produce an identity. To be sure, the critique of Hegel at this stage of Marx's theoretical development is not that, idealistically, he seeks to achieve

sociation. This is the thrust of the complex historico-revolutionary argument Marx tries to construct in 'Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction' (Marx 1992b).

¹⁶ Marx 1971, p.20.

¹⁷ Marx 1992b, p.62 (emphases in original).

identity, but that he is unsuccessful in doing so: ‘Marx himself *wants* the identity of the particular and the universal, and what he reproaches Hegel with is having affirmed this identity without being able to establish it.’¹⁸ This is the tenor of, for example, Marx’s analysis of Hegel’s discussion of monarchy. So far from representing an authentic universality, monarchy is only a bad form of particularity, an untrue universal that restricts rather than properly expresses what is subsumed beneath it. As such, Hegel’s theory of the state only serves to trap Germany in the past. The limitation of the constitutional form of monarchy is to be contrasted with democracy as the genuine expression of the will of the *demos*. Where, under monarchy, the people are confined by a constitution alien to their real being, ‘in democracy the *constitution itself* appears only as *one* determining characteristic of the people, and indeed as its self-determination. In monarchy we have the people of the constitution, in democracy the constitution of the people.’¹⁹ Democracy would represent the achieved truth of the concept of the political, the unity of form and content: ‘Every other *political formation* is a definite, determinate, *particular* form of the state. In democracy the *formal* principle is identical with the *substantive* principle. For this reason it is the first true unity of the particular and the universal.’²⁰ As Marx reads Hegel’s theorisation, the individual cannot be really free because it is trapped by a false, badly particularistic universality. Only through the transformation of this universal can the individual realise itself, although Marx’s ambition here of an identity of the universal and the particular still sits firmly within an idealist horizon.²¹

The originating fallacy of Hegel’s false totalisations, Marx argues, is his fetishisation of the concept, the inversion by which that which is derived is elevated as that which is originary. In the more or less contemporaneous *Economic and*

¹⁸ Henry 1983, p.18 (emphasis in original).

¹⁹ Marx 1992b, p.87 (emphases in original). An early example here of Marx’s favourite rhetorical trope, chiasmus, almost obsessively present in these polemical texts. However, inversion of the terms does not escape the structuring duality in which they are caught. This will mark a point of difference between Adorno and Marx: ‘Adorno’s idea of negative dialectic is not a simple reversal of Hegel, another attempt brusquely to “stand the dialectic on its feet”. Adorno prefers another of Marx’s metaphors: he suggests that German idealism can be made to “dance to its own tune”’ (Jarvis 1998, p.168).

²⁰ *ibid.* (emphases in original).

²¹ It is for this reason that Michel Henry observes of the ‘Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State’ that ‘the opposition directed at Hegel—the philosophy of immanence—leads to a hyper-Hegelianism, to political totalitarianism’ (Henry 1983, p.33), in that Marx at this point seeks, at least theoretically, to overcome the unresolved antagonism between the *bellum omnium contra omnes* of civil society and the rationality of the state through an achieved identity of the two, by the complete politicisation of society.

Philosophical Manuscripts Marx takes Hegel to task for the hypostatisation of self-consciousness, its establishment as the instantiating principle: 'For Hegel, *human nature*, *man* is equivalent to *self-consciousness*. All estrangement of human nature is therefore *nothing* but *estrangement of self-consciousness*'.²² Estrangement, the subject's experience of itself in the object, is abstract and contentless when it is equated with the movement of self-consciousness and human practical activity is reduced to an empty 'willing'. It is precisely man's *human nature*, his physical, corporeal powers and capacities, that are alienated in a privative way in the glorification of self-consciousness, the Hegelian manoeuvre, characteristic of philosophy as a whole,²³ that, so Marx argues, reverses the real situation: 'Man is equated with self. But the self is only *abstractly* conceived man, man produced by abstraction.'²⁴ As Marx reads him, Hegel subordinates the natural, sensuous capacities of humans to their abstract self-consciousness. Giving the ideal priority over the material in this way again reverses the real situation: '*Self-consciousness* is rather a quality of human nature, of the human eye, etc.; human nature is not a quality of *self-consciousness*'.²⁵ The absolutisation of the ideality of self-consciousness as the truth of the self cancels, renders abstract, its real material substance. Just so, in the critique of Hegel's political and legal philosophy, Marx accuses Hegel of subjectivising the state in a mystical way. The state is posited as the subject and the real individuals who constitute the political community are reduced to mere predicates of this subject: 'Because Hegel starts not with an actual existent ... but with predicates of universal determination, and because a vehicle of these determinations must exist, the mystical Idea becomes that vehicle.'²⁶ The result of Hegel's positing of the state as originary being is that he is rendered unable to grasp the reality of civil society and individual life; the individual can then only be understood in an abstract and merely formal way, split between being a member of civil society and being a member of the state. So, for Marx, Hegel's political philosophy remains a thinking of the concept but not a thinking of reality, an elaboration of abstract 'logico-metaphysical determinations'.²⁷

²² Marx 1992b, p.387 (emphases in original).

²³ Hegel's philosophy being, for Marx, '*the philosophy*' (ibid., p.386 (emphasis in original)), the one that summates all others (see also Hyppolite 1969, p.97).

²⁴ Marx 1992b, p.387 (emphasis in original).

²⁵ ibid. (emphases in original).

²⁶ ibid, p.80.

²⁷ ibid., p.73.

Hegel's true interest is not the philosophy of right but logic. The task of philosophy is not to understand how thought can be embodied in political determinations but to dissolve the existing political determinations into abstract ideas. The concern of philosophy is not the logic of the subject-matter but the subject-matter of logic. Logic does not provide a proof of the state but the state provides a proof of logic.²⁸

Because ideality does not express the actual life of individuals, the hypostatisation of self-consciousness, the ontologising of the idea and the thinking of the political as the self-unfolding of the concept remain trapped within unfreedom: the fate of the various powers of the state 'is predestined by the "nature of the concept", it lies sealed in the holy archives of the Santa Casa (of the *Logic*)'.²⁹ The paradoxical results of the absolutisation of self-consciousness and of the state at the expense of the material elements are that ideality, form, repeatedly reverts to brute nature, such that 'at every point Hegel's political spiritualism can be seen to degenerate into the crassest *materialism*',³⁰ and that reason, willing, the rationality of the concept and of self-consciousness, resolve themselves into caprice and arbitrariness.³¹ Idealism has thus never succeeded in liberating itself from subjection to the natural condition it thought it had raised itself above. But the failure of Hegel's political philosophy, Marx argues, is not the result of subjective folly, an eccentric and misplaced obsession with the Absolute Idea. Rather, the Hegelian conception reaches deep into the reality of the modern state form; his error lies in mistaking the untruth of society for its truth: 'Hegel should not be blamed for describing the essence of the modern state as it is, but for identifying what is with the *essence of the state*. That the rational is real is *contradicted* by the *irrational reality* which at every point shows itself to be the opposite of what it asserts, and to assert the opposite of what it is.'³²

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *ibid.*, p.70. The Santa Casa was the prison of the Inquisition in Madrid.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p.174 (emphasis in original). Further: 'The *body* of the monarch determines his dignity. At the apex of the state mere physicality, and not reason, is the deciding factor. Birth determines the quality of the monarch as it determines the quality of cattle' (*ibid.* p.91); primogeniture makes humans mere appendages of land and their 'political qualifications appear here as *the property of landed property*, as something directly arising from the *purely physical earth* (nature)' (*ibid.*, p.175); and 'the highest offices of the state thus acquire an *animal* reality. Nature takes revenge on Hegel for the contempt he has shown her. If matter is to be shorn of its reality in favour of human will then here human will is left with no reality but that of matter' (*ibid.*, p.174. All emphases in original).

³¹ 'The two moments are the *accident of will*, caprice, and the *accident of Nature*, birth, and so we have *His Majesty the Accident*. Accident is accordingly the real unity of the state' (*ibid.*, p.94. Emphases in original).

³² *ibid.*, p.127.

This last critical observation complicates the trajectory of Marx's argument. The ideal sphere of the state may be an irrational reality, but it is, nonetheless, real. Marx's 'racy polemics'³³ of the 1840s, penned in expectation of the impending revolution that was to set things to rights, struggle towards an articulation of this contradiction. On the one hand, the self-moving abstractions of the philosophers are to be denounced, in the name of reality, as mystificatory, obscuring real practical activity: '*History* does *nothing*, it "possesses *no* immense wealth," it "wages *no* battles." It is *man*, real living man, that does all that, that possesses and fights; "history" is not a person apart, using man as a means for *its own* particular aims; history is *nothing but* the activity of man pursuing his aims.'³⁴ And if society and its laws of movement are ever finally to be understood so that it may be decisively changed, then it too may not be hypostatized. So, Proudhon is lambasted for personifying society, for turning it into 'a *person-society*',³⁵ an ideal thing that appears to have an existence independent of the activities of the individuals who compose it. This side of Marx's intellectual development in these years is characterised by a drive to liquefy the static and the abstract in the dynamic and 'real', and thereby perhaps to compel the onward march of history: 'There is a continual movement of growth in productive forces, of destruction of social relations, of formation in ideas; the only immutable thing is the abstraction of movement—*mors immortalis*.'³⁶ However, the paean to historical dynamism also, in the same moment, concedes its opposite. Adorno comments on this famous passage:

The last remark is meant ironically in this case; it portrays the abstract general concept of the static as the corpse of the dynamic social process. But it also points beyond its immediate object: Although Marx's nominalist convictions do not allow him to hypostatize abstractions, his reference to *mors immortalis* shows him to be dimly aware that an abstraction may also denote a social reality.³⁷

The intention of Marx's nominalism was the puncturing of abstractions that have become idols or fetishes, and that keep humans in chains, but he remained a good enough student of Hegel to understand that the abstractions have objective existence. The aim of great swathes of Marx's theorising is to strip the mystical veil from these

³³ Adorno 1961, p.43.

³⁴ Marx and Engels 1956, p.125 (emphases in original).

³⁵ Marx 1978, p.85 (emphasis in original).

³⁶ *ibid.*, p.102.

³⁷ Adorno 1961, p.44.

real idealities and to expose them as the products of social processes rather than metaphysical entities. Doing so may demystify the abstractions but it does not dispel them; for they are not subjective thought errors but objective realities, produced by human social activity. Marx was thus, as it were, ironically a conceptual realist:³⁸ where for Hegel the objective Concept is the truth of being, for Marx it is a dead, oppressive weight, a fetter on freedom that keeps humans subjected to heteronomy, to brute nature and to the nightmare of the history of social oppression and unfreedom. The critical theory of society and history, as it developed during the 1840s, is intended to wrench open this contradiction, uncovering the material presuppositions of the progress of Spirit, the reality of violence and domination that is transfigured in any metaphysics of history. So, the dialectic of the forces and relations of production can be seen as the immemorial struggle to conquer nature, to compel it to human purposes, and the doctrine of class conflict is the societal setting, the battleground, on which this age-old war takes place. The theory outlined programmatically in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* of successive revolutions in the relations of production brought about by the inexorable progress of the forces of production is a materialist reinscription of Hegel's conception of history as a developing series of shapes of Spirit formed through the progressive identification of the object with the subject.³⁹ In that text Marx also points to the turn to the study of political economy as the decisive step in the effort to uncover the substance of the surface phenomena of 'legal relations' and 'political forms'.⁴⁰ His mature theory analyses the process of the reproduction of society that takes place outside the rational sphere of the state, in the civil society that in the critical commentary on the Hegelian doctrine of the state he called 'the dark ground of nature from which the light of the state is born'.⁴¹ In this theory, materialist reworking of the Hegelian objective Concept and critique of the mythic power of societal abstraction are taken to vertiginous heights – constituting what Adorno called 'a phenomenology of the anti-Spirit'.⁴² The following section explores just a few of the basic categories of Marx's theory of capital to show how abstraction,

³⁸ In the same way that he 'was ironically a social Darwinist: what the Social Darwinists praised and wished to act according to, is for him the negativity, in which the possibility of its sublation awakens' (Adorno 2001b, "Natural History").

³⁹ Marx 1971, p.21.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p.20.

⁴¹ Marx 1992b, p.61.

⁴² Adorno 2001b, "Natural History". Chris Arthur notes that it is 'a striking feature of capital ... that it has a certain conceptuality to it' and that, after Marx, 'Adorno was one of the few to have understood this' (Arthur 2004, p.243. *Emphasis in original*).

embodied in money, constitutes capital. In this system of abstraction come alive, Marx's critique of ideality is brought to a climax because the mythic character of capitalist society examined in Chapter 2 is shown to be the product of the abstraction that is intrinsic to the exchange relationship.

Critique of the Economic

Marx's works on political economy are not a positive economics. They do not simply seek to explain how the economy works (and, by implication, how it could do so better, with less friction, in a socialistic way), taking its basic presuppositions as given.⁴³ From the arguments directed against the petty-bourgeois fantasy of generalised commodity exchange without money onwards, Marx's analyses relentlessly demonstrate both the logical necessity of the categories that constitute the bourgeois economy⁴⁴ and that the system thereby expounded is utterly beyond conscious human control. Capital can never be made reasonable; the economic is thoroughly irrational. Viewed in this way, Marx's economic texts represent a radicalisation of the tradition of transcendental enquiry begun in German philosophy by Kant. Michel Henry notes that 'from Kant to Marx, the transcendental question shifts; it is no longer an interrogation concerning the essential possibility of a science, in this case of political economy, but one that concerns first of all the reality which comes to be the object of this science, the "economy," now understood in relation to praxis and to the fundamental modes of its actual realisation'.⁴⁵ In Marx, the economy itself is placed in question, such that economics is revealed not merely as having a history, a course of development, but as something that has itself become, something whose apparent naturalness is in fact historical. Economics is de-ontologised and the critique of political economy is really part of the philosophy of history.⁴⁶ Marx asks how it is that such a thing as an economy that dominates every aspect of society down to the smallest details, as is the case in

⁴³ See Backhaus 1992 and Backhaus 2005.

⁴⁴ Hence the dialectical mode of presentation, the insufficiency of one category calling up, or 'positing', the next, more concrete, one (see Arthur 2004, Ch.4).

⁴⁵ Henry 1983, p.191.

⁴⁶ As Adorno reads him, Marx himself, despite making this world-historical intellectual breakthrough, nevertheless did not open out the full implications in this direction of his critique of political economy, his conception of the conditions of freedom instead in some significant respects falling short of the objective meaning of the critical theory (see, for instance, Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.32; and Adorno 2008, p.96 on Marx's idealistic construction of the relationship of freedom and necessity). Hence Adorno's pursuit of materialist thought through a more thoroughly self-reflective, negative, dialectics.

capitalist society, could come to be: ‘What makes this sort of economy possible? What is it that has allowed something like exchange to be produced in history?’⁴⁷ Transcendental enquiry is thus taken beyond itself, in that the aim is not to unveil an even more abstract and super-transcendental structure or principle,⁴⁸ but to break open the prison of the transcendental itself by demonstrating its own conditions of possibility in the actions of humans, actions that both constitute and take place within social labour. The abstract system of categories is to be brought down to earth: the transcendental is revealed as something that humans themselves create against themselves.

Marx’s dialectical exposition of the possibility of capitalist society famously takes the simple object, just as it presents itself, as the point of departure, from which everything else will be elaborated: ‘The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as “an immense collection of commodities”’.⁴⁹ But what is a commodity? The analysis that Marx undertakes in the opening sections of Volume 1 of *Capital* reveals that the essence of the commodity is abstraction. Each of the first two sections addresses the commodity’s existence as a simultaneously concrete and abstract thing, establishing the unity of and contradiction between these two aspects: first, use value and exchange value, then concrete and abstract labour. The commodity must necessarily be the product of someone’s actual labour (tailoring and weaving are Marx’s examples) and it must have a use value in order to find a buyer, but it is created to be exchanged and, as Marx demonstrates, exchange has abstraction as its substance. In the act of exchange two qualitatively different objects are equated, held to be identical – indeed, if they are not different, there is no exchange. To the extent that the objects differ, they cannot be the same; it follows, therefore, that ‘the exchange relation of commodities is characterised precisely by its abstraction from their use values’.⁵⁰ The qualitative, material dimension of objects is wholly set aside. Rather, for the exchange to occur, the dissimilar objects must be held to be ‘equal to a third thing’,⁵¹ and in their

⁴⁷ Henry 1983, p.191.

⁴⁸ For a compelling argument that that sort of approach, typical of many efforts to recuperate Marx for philosophy or theory, drastically vitiates the critical force of his texts, see Sutherland 2008, *passim*, esp. pp.19–20. A phantasmagoria of ever more noumenal and purportedly essential concepts is conjured up to obfuscate Marx’s satiric materialism.

⁴⁹ Marx 1990, p.125. Marx quotes himself from *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.

⁵⁰ Marx 1990, p.127.

⁵¹ *ibid.*

character as exchange-values, ‘reducible to this third thing’.⁵² The only thing that the use values have in common is being the products of human labour, although *prima facie* this is specific, qualitatively distinct labour (the tailoring that has produced the coat and the weaving that has produced the linen), the concrete labour of actual persons (the tailor and the weaver). Marx’s argument is that, as occurred with the use value character of the commodities, in exchange the specificity of the labour that produced them is also extinguished: ‘With the disappearance of the useful character of the products of labour, the useful character of the kinds of labour embodied in them also disappears; this in turn entails the disappearance of the different concrete forms of labour. They ... are all together reduced to the same kind of labour, human labour in the abstract.’⁵³ The reduction in the exchange process of the multiplicity of concrete labours to the common substance of abstract labour enables them to be quantified according to standardised time, the time socially necessary for the production of a specific amount of a specific thing. This socially necessary abstract labour is the substance of value and the form of wealth in capitalist society. The simultaneous unity of and contradiction between the concrete and the abstract in the commodity is mirrored in the contradiction between the independent, mutually indifferent commodity producers and the unified social whole of which they each form a part, a system bound together by the network of exchanges. Because such a society is simultaneously a whole and infinitely fragmented, the reductions and abstractions that take place in the ever-widening exchange process escape the conscious control or understanding of any of the participants. Exchange establishes itself as societal objectivity: ‘The various proportions in which different kinds of labour are reduced to simple labour as their unit of measurement are established by a social process that goes on behind the backs of the producers; these proportions therefore appear to the producers to have been handed down by tradition.’⁵⁴

The development of the value form that Marx undertakes in section 3 of Chapter 1 similarly traces out a process of progressive abstraction. The simplest, isolated form of exchange is revealed as containing within itself ‘the germ of the money form.’⁵⁵ In truly dialectical fashion, each form development is shown to arise as a result of the

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ *ibid.*, p.128.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p.135.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p.163.

inadequacies and contradictions of the preceding form, the movement being motivated in a wholly immanent, logical, way, while we, in the manner of Hegelian phenomenological observers, simply look on. It is surely correct, against a long-standing tradition of interpretation deriving from Engels, that these opening sections of *Capital* do not concern a putative, one-class society of ‘simple commodity production’ – the entire analysis from the beginning in fact presupposes developed capitalist society – and that the method of *Capital* is not straightforwardly logical-historical.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, as Marx’s own remarks in this section demonstrate, the logical cannot be wholly separated from the historical. The simple form of value, we are thus told, ‘appears in practice only in the early stages, when the products of labour are converted into commodities by accidental, occasional exchanges.’⁵⁷ By contrast, ‘the expanded form of value comes into actual existence for the first time when a particular product of labour, such as cattle, is no longer exceptionally, but habitually, exchanged for various other commodities.’⁵⁸ And Marx’s delight at having surpassed Aristotle in the scientific determination of value is premised on the fact that the form of value itself develops historically – Aristotle’s perception was restricted by the fact that he lived in a society based on slave labour, one in which, because of the structure of the social relations, all labour was not recognised as equivalent, so the value form, itself inherently infinite, could only have a comparatively restricted social instantiation.⁵⁹ The pursuit of clarity about the logical form of the systematic dialectic of the capitalist mode of production contained in *Capital* does not mean that that dialectic can be severed from the historical one.⁶⁰ Indeed, Marx’s remarks about Aristotle, and his famous statement in the methodological ‘Introduction’ to the *Grundrisse* that history is to be understood from the perspective afforded by bourgeois society – ‘human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape’⁶¹ –, suggest rather that the systematic dialectic of capital summates within itself the historical dialectic. Certainly, the logical developmental process that is

⁵⁶ See Arthur 2004, Ch.2.

⁵⁷ Marx 1990, p.158.

⁵⁸ *ibid.* Marx notes that ‘in Homer, for instance (*Iliad*, VII, 472–5), the value of a thing is expressed in a series of different things’ (*ibid.*, p.154).

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, pp.151–2. In the *Politics*, exchange value appears as something troubling, not properly limited, that disrupts the natural and authoritative order of use value (Aristotle 1998, pp.12–18). The money form, whose intrinsic infinitude worried Aristotle, long pre-dates the development of capitalist society, of course, but it is only in the latter that *everything* is exchangeable, the entire society being subsumed to the commodity form and money (see Marx 1973, p.103). On Marx and Aristotle, see Meikle 1985.

⁶⁰ If it were to be, dialectics would collapse into the familiar diremption of structuralism and historicism, the rational and the empirical.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p.105.

set out in the analysis of the value form is strikingly homologous in its inner, conceptual, nature to the historical development from pre-capitalist to capitalist societies whose logic was specified by Marx in the *Grundrisse* passage examined above. In both, the movement is one of totalisation, from singularity, limitation and submersion in the materiality of the particular, to generality and universality, abstraction which has raised itself above material specificity. If the progress of abstraction is the inner movement of history, the triumph of the value form in capitalist society represents the fullest extent of this development of abstract generality, the objectified ideal raised out of the material and dominating it.

The simple form of value, the primitive, accidental exchange, takes places directly between two objects that are equated with each other; this is still a relation between intrinsically separate and different items, among which an identity is only fortuitously established. Value here has no congealed objective existence against the material: it glimmers for a moment in the instant of the exchange and then is gone. The expanded form of value widens the network of exchanges and identifications – more objects are brought into relations of equivalence with one another – but remains, in Hegelian terms, a bad infinity, lacking systematic unity and conceptual coherence and stability, ‘a motley mosaic of disparate and unconnected expressions of value [in which] the relative form of value of each commodity is an endless series of expressions of value which are all different from the relative form of value of every other commodity.’⁶² The general form of value provides the missing unity in that all commodities are now identified with each other through their relation to a single equivalent form, but it remains enmeshed in the limited and the personal to the degree that the commodity that stands in the position of equivalent is simply one use value and form of concrete labour (linen and weaving, in Marx’s example) among others. The form has not yet properly lifted itself above the material. It is the transition from the general form to the money form (a transition that in purely logical terms appears slight, in that both forms have the same structure, but is in fact absolutely decisive) that completes the movement of abstraction, being the moment in which the proper, adequate form of value as identity-in-otherness crystallises: all commodities are now identical with and exchangeable for one another because they are all identifiable with

⁶² Marx 1990, p.156.

and exchangeable for a third one, money. The emancipated conceptual existence of value attains its adequate objective form in, classically, gold, a material that is, as it were, abstraction and neutrality embodied, being both extremely durable and completely homogenous, self-identical and fungible, every part of it the same as every other part.⁶³ The money form is demonstrated by Marx to be the form in which the value abstraction obtains a stable, objectified existence as a real abstraction. This is what the inner logic of the exchange abstraction drives towards. Money is infinite, in the Hegelian sense, in that it finds itself reflected in everything it confronts – it is the single truth of all the multitudinous commodities. Correlatively, the society in which the money form itself attains its own adequate existence, becomes universal, is the society that is ruled by abstraction.

In its infinitude, the money form signals a world of achieved subjective immanence. Where the object has become a commodity, its real substance, its being-in-itself, is its value content, its quotient of socially mediated subjective labour. It is in the nature of the commodity to be both singular and directly, but contradictorily, universal. In this way, the commodity form is truly ‘the identity of identity and non-identity. The commodity is equal in essence to money and at the same time different from it.’⁶⁴ The material aspects of the commodity are something secondary and incidental, merely ‘the material bearers [*Träger*] of ... exchange value’,⁶⁵ the husk of a subjective content, and, as the value abstraction truly comes alive, the owners of commodities, who perform the exchanges, are reduced to an automatic, functional role by the exchange system in which they cannot help but become enmeshed: ‘the characters who appear on the economic stage are merely personifications of economic relations; it is as the bearers of these economic relations that they come into contact with each other.’⁶⁶ In societies in which personal relations of authority have been dissolved and that are instead unified by the exchange relation, ideality really does posit materiality in Hegelian style: nothing is produced other than for the sake of its exchange value, concrete individual labour only counts to the extent that it is also validated as abstract social labour, and everybody is

⁶³ ‘Only a material whose every sample possesses the same uniform quality can be an adequate form of appearance of value, that is a material embodiment of abstract and therefore equal human labour’ (ibid., p.184).

⁶⁴ Backhaus 1980, p.109. The phrase is, of course, originally Hegel’s (Hegel 1977a, p.156).

⁶⁵ Marx 1990, p.126.

⁶⁶ ibid., p.179.

compelled to find a role within the social production apparatus in order to be functional to the single overall purpose of generating value. Further, because it is the case that in capitalist society no production on any meaningful scale can occur other than for the purpose of creating value, capital itself, the self-moving abstraction, absorbing all factors of production, in a real sense becomes the productive force:

Labour itself is *productive only* if absorbed into capital, where capital forms the basis of production. ... The productivity of labour becomes the productive force of capital just as the general exchange value of commodities fixes itself in money. Labour, such as it exists *for itself* in the worker in opposition to capital, that is, labour in its *immediate being*, separated from capital, is *not productive*.⁶⁷

Totalised, the abstraction-in-motion produces reality, its opposite, out of itself. However, as this passage also indicates, capital only properly becomes the all-enveloping social substance-and-subject through the exchange between itself and labour. The circulation sphere cannot explain how an increment in value can arise. That riddle can only be solved by recourse to the hellish abode of production, in which the peculiar capacity of the commodity labour power of producing more value than it contains is harnessed and, by a dialectical reversal, the laws of private property turn into their opposite, laws of appropriation.⁶⁸ Generalised commodity production, the money form spread across society, has generalised domination at its core, in that domination no longer contents itself with appropriating some of the product after it has been produced but grasps hold of the production process itself so that everything that is produced is its, the worker being paid simply the costs of his reproduction. The total subjectivisation of the world in the form of the value character of the commodity is also its total alienation in the objective, abstract, transcendental system that stands over against and dominates all of society, that, in fact comes to embody society as the all-embracing functional context. The world becomes an economy when the germ of the simple accidental form of the value abstraction has completed its inexorable development first into the triumphant money form and then ultimately into capital, subsuming all objectivity to itself. It is this monstrous abstract totality, the worship of which is satirised in the section on the fetish character of the commodity, that is continually denounced by Marx in *Capital*, in all the different registers of his mythic thematics.

⁶⁷ Marx 1973, p.308 (emphases in original).

⁶⁸ Marx 1990, pp.725–34.

Progress and Regression

The meaning of Marx's thinking of capital as mythic is that abstraction, even though it is the product of their own activity, oppresses humans as an objectified force. Their conquest of the world in reducing it to commodities is their own subjection: through the abstract being of capital humanity dominates itself. So, for all Marx's nominalist attack on him, the critique of political economy in fact demonstrates that Hegel was in an important sense right: capitalist society really does have as its metaphysical essence a system of self-moving, totalising ideality. However, philosophically, Marx never resolved the contradiction between the pre-1848 denunciation of 'mystified' idealities and the post-1848 theorisation of capital as abstraction-in-motion.⁶⁹ Instead, he trusted in the practical revolutionary activity of the proletariat to put an end to humanity's entrapment in this abstract system that it has itself created and to set the inverted world the right way up, on its feet. But, in the decades after Marx death, history proved the illusory nature of that faith, as 'the revolution went the way of the return of the Messiah':⁷⁰ the First World War revealing the brittle, fractured reality of the internationalism of the workers movement; Stalinism consolidating itself where revolution did occur; and, most damagingly for the traditional Marxist theory of the historical trajectory of class struggle, the German working classes siding in huge numbers with Hitler rather than creating a free society.⁷¹ After such catastrophe, the implication of modernity in myth, progress in regression, had to be recognised as deeper and more intractable than Marx, in his confidence that the future was on the side of freedom, had ever permitted himself to believe. The drastic negation of the Marxist understanding of the dynamic of history as being ineluctably towards the overthrow of class society necessarily affected the substance of the theory. In a lecture course from the mid-1960s, Adorno remarked that 'to reflect on why it did *not* happen and why it *could* not happen – this theoretical question is a matter of no small

⁶⁹ Marx's polemics against idealism in the 1840s thus display both the virtues and the vices of polemic: on the one hand great force and abundant penetrating and suggestive insight and on the other a sort of roughness, a lack of rigour and care in making the critique as complete and far-reaching as possible. This led Adorno to comment that Marx 'rampaged through the epistemological categories like the proverbial bull in the china-shop' (Adorno 2001b, 'Materialism Imageless'). For reflections on the limits of Marx's critique of ideality, see Derrida 2006.

⁷⁰ Adorno 2001b, 'Materialism Imageless'.

⁷¹ Adorno it seems never held with the Marxian theory of the revolutionary proletariat, considering the postulation of a final, identical subject/object of history, especially as propounded by Lukács, quintessentially idealist (see Buck-Morss 1977, pp.24–36 and Jarvis 1998, pp.52–5).

significance for a philosophy that claims to be relevant today. It belongs ... to a dialectical anthropology which is assuredly no small part of the problem of philosophy in our time.⁷² Adorno's thinking about why the transformation of the world failed set aside all the Marxist narratives about the tactics and strategies of revolutionary movements and the betrayals or mistakes of leaders, indeed the whole rhetoric of the struggle between capital and labour, as illusory. Still blinkered by the assumption of the immanence and developmental linearity of the historical process, with organised Labour as its ultimate subject, such orthodox Marxist thinking failed to grasp the full meaning of capital and the problem of abstraction. Instead, Adorno took up the critique of ideality initiated in Marx's writings and pushed it substantially further. If capital is a system of abstraction-in-motion and if Labour does not lead out of it, then it would be necessary to rethink identity to understand why the human capacity for conceptuality, the means of separation from nature, produces entrapment and self-destructive conflict, not freedom. If modernity regresses so disastrously to myth, then enlightenment must never have broken with myth in the first place.

This is the principle theme of the *Philosophical Fragments*⁷³ collected under the title *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.⁷⁴ Written in the historical moment of its catastrophe, the work summates a whole tradition of German thought: the ghosts of Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Weber and Benjamin can all be readily discerned in it. Here, in the first two chapters in particular, Adorno and Horkheimer seek to theorise the formation of identity, to understand how the ideal could come into being. These chapters are dialectical anthropology as philosophy of history, the speculative construction of the origins of conceptuality and the continued entanglement of history in prehistory.⁷⁵ They seek to demonstrate that rational thought, conceptuality, is constituted

⁷² Adorno 2008, p.46 (emphases in original).

⁷³ The subtitle of the work.

⁷⁴ *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is, of course, a co-authored work. The first Excursus, 'Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment', has always been largely attributed to Adorno and Robert Hullot-Kentor persuasively argues (against the influential opinion of Jürgen Habermas) that Adorno's hand is the more prominent in the famous lead essay, 'The Concept of Enlightenment'. Whatever the case, Adorno never resiled from the ideas set out in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which remained central to all his later thinking (indeed, those ideas can be found in embryonic form in his writings from the 1930s), whereas, Hullot-Kentor suggests, the work stands as something of a singleton within Horkheimer's *oeuvre*. This is not to claim the book solely for Adorno – as Hullot-Kentor notes, it is genuinely *co*-authored: 'The book is throughout a hybrid' (Hullot-Kentor 2006, p.27) –, simply to indicate its importance for Adorno in particular. (See also Schmid Noerr 2002.)

⁷⁵ The kind of historical argument elaborated in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is the fruition of the critique of historicism that Adorno and Walter Benjamin had developed through the 1930s: 'Instead of telling a

only through the principle of myth and so cannot escape it. Because the concept is thus itself mythical, the historical transition from myth to enlightenment (located in the pre-Socratic moment) and the formation of the unified self (read out of the Homeric narrative of Odysseus's wanderings during the return to Ithaca: Odysseus as Robinson, 'the prototype of the bourgeois individual'⁷⁶) are revealed to be not steps forward in a linear, evolutionary movement but moments of qualitative disjuncture in an encompassing dialectic of human development that never breaks free from prehistory.⁷⁷ This dialectic of enlightenment is the articulation of the static and the dynamic: the progress of identity as power and domination, mastery and exploitation of nature for the purpose of survival, remains always tethered to its mythical origins. The drive for control over disparate nature is what Adorno called 'the permanent *reductio ad hominem*',⁷⁸ the relentless movement of identification by which the subject both creates its own unitary self and masters the object by identifying it with that abstract self, and because identity's origin is in domination, enlightenment does not simply cancel myth, relegating it to prehistory and establishing objective truth in place of credulous superstition, but is rather the development of the inner principle of myth. The implication of Adorno and Horkheimer's argument is that myth itself in fact already contains the possibility of enlightenment and, in a sense, releases it out of itself. So, the more the power of the concept develops, the more its origins in myth are revealed. Hence the famous twin theses, set out programmatically in the Preface: 'Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to myth.'⁷⁹ The following sub-sections seek to develop some of the principle thematic elements of these first chapters of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to show how Adorno and Horkheimer substantiate this claim about the entanglement of history and prehistory, the concept and myth. The central idea is that

story, which would start from some distant and inevitably hypothetical "origin", and then eventually arrive in the twentieth century, the book starts out from where we are now, from the assumptions about concepts and about the world which we habitually deploy. ... It sets out to give an account of how we got to these assumptions, but does this by working back from these assumptions themselves. It asks: what must have happened for our thinking to have become what it is?' (Jarvis 1998, p.21). On Adorno and Benjamin's rethinking of the philosophy of history, see Buck-Morss 1977, Ch.3 and Hanssen 2000, Ch.1.

⁷⁶ Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.35.

⁷⁷ The book is often taken to be a revelation of the dark side of modernity, a critique of science and of instrumental rationality – putting forward the gloomy idea that reason has somehow 'gone wrong' in the modern world. This misconstrues the thesis. The point of Adorno and Horkheimer's identification of myth and modernity, of Odysseus and *homo oeconomicus*, is that science and instrumental rationality are the teleological outcome of what thought has always been. As with Marx's *Capital*, the untruth of history as a whole is revealed in modernity.

⁷⁸ Adorno 2001b, 'Desire of Salvation and Block'.

⁷⁹ Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.xviii.

the subject's escape from nature does not result in freedom because it is achieved only through the mimesis of what it seeks to escape: the concept comes into being through the internalisation of the abstract universal experienced in nature. As a result, ideality, what should be the means of freedom from subjection to nature, always in fact remains caught within the natural condition it longs to escape. The purpose of this section, therefore, is both to show how Adorno and Horkheimer develop the Marxian critique of abstraction and to set out some of the theoretical grounds for Adorno's critique of the concept, which will be taken up further in Chapter 4 in relation to the question of political form.

Ur-history of the Concept

*Fear*⁸⁰

The development of the concept, the capacity to solidify the world as an object world and make it knowable, separated humans from nature, definitively producing the subject/object schism and creating the possibility of civilisation. In one of the 'Notes and Sketches' appended to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, entitled 'Man and Beast', Adorno and Horkheimer consider the animal condition as it appears to the reflective capacity of humans:

The world of animals is without concepts. There is no word to hold fast the identical in the flux of phenomena, the same genus in the succession of specimens, the same thing in changing situations. ... There is nothing in the flux that could be defined as lasting, and yet everything remains one and the same, because there is no fixed knowledge of the past and no clear prospect into the future. The animal responds to its name and has no self, is enclosed in itself, yet exposed, one compulsion is followed by another, no idea extends beyond it. ... Even the strongest animal is infinitely feeble.⁸¹

⁸⁰ This and the following subheadings are not meant to be strongly analytical. Any exposition of Adorno is immediately confronted by the grave difficulty that his thought, which aims to do without a method detachable from the substance, at every turn resists disaggregation into separate, discrete elements that can then be rearranged in a hierarchy of logical importance (for acute reflections on this aspect of Adorno's thought, see Hullot-Kentor 2006, pp.154–68). Nevertheless, if exposition wishes to do anything more than simply repeat Adorno's own words, it has to find ways into the text without doing too much violence to it, and that is the limited intention of the headings. To grasp how Adorno's thought works, it is necessary to understand that the themes the headings announce are in fact all woven into each other, as different aspects of a single complex of ideas.

⁸¹ Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.205.

The fate of the conceptless animal is to live submerged in the monotonous, formless flux of the eversame because it is not able to determine itself and the world, to create any stable, fixed identity that would allow phenomena to be experienced as anything other than fleeting, more or less chance stimulants encountered in its environment. This incapacity to raise itself out of its natural condition, to throw off the oppressive weight of brute materiality, in order to shape and control its surroundings and be free makes every animal, ‘even the strongest’, pathetically vulnerable, constantly at the mercy of the accidents and contingencies of nature: it is simultaneously trapped within itself, its own limitations, and open and exposed. This vulnerability in the face of the might of nature is what, on Adorno and Horkheimer’s account, drives the human animal, ‘so much more ill-equipped than other creatures’,⁸² to the development of conceptuality: thought is born of fear and weakness. The prehistoric human experiences nature both as full of meaning and significance and as opaque and resistant, ego-alien and continually threatening – a context that is mysterious and marvellous as well as amorphous and terrifying. In this condition of wild nature, individual existence counts for little. The totality, both the species and nature as a whole, maintains itself at the expense of the individual being. The primitive perception of the power of the encompassing generality of nature as the truth of the individual manifestation (the tree as a location of *mana*) already foreshadows and is of the same structure as the much later metaphysical duality of essence and appearance and the modern, rational distinction between object and concept.⁸³ The overwhelming power of ‘the complex concatenation of nature in contrast to its individual link’⁸⁴ elicits the primal scream of fear that becomes the name and the earliest explanatory principle of enlightenment, ‘*mana*, the moving spirit, is not a projection but the echo of the real preponderance of nature in the weak psyches of primitive people.’⁸⁵ Myth, and even pre-mythic modes of thought and behaviour, magic, animism and archaic mimesis, are in this way already part of the movement of enlightenment and knowledge, and of the formation of the unified self that provides strength and protection in place of animal defencelessness and exposure, power in place of feebleness. They are attempts, albeit still directly reflecting in their content the

⁸² Adorno 2005b, p.258.

⁸³ ‘The concept, usually defined as the unity of the features of what it subsumes, was rather, from the first, a product of dialectical thinking, in which each thing is what it is only by becoming what it is not’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.11).

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, p.10.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, pp.10–11.

preponderant power of nature, to explain the world as a system of force and effect and to develop techniques and rituals designed to enable control of, or influence over, natural processes. The pattern of enlightenment, and all that Adorno develops about the inner structure of the concept, stretches as far back as the first attempts by humans to free themselves from the burden of nature. And it follows that, if thought springs from primal dread and the ingrained experience of weakness and vulnerability, laboriously detaching itself from immersion in material nature, there can be no return to origins, no recapturing of a pure, pre-lapsarian condition prior to the fall into subjectivity: 'Before the subject constitutes itself, undifferentiatedness was the terror of the blind nexus of nature, was myth. ... After all, undifferentiatedness is not unity, for the latter requires, even according to Platonic dialectic, diverse entities of which it is the unity.'⁸⁶

Equivalence

The eternal natural order is the essence of the mythic explanation of the world – stasis and timelessness, immemorial repetition, and the impossibility for the mere natural being of escape or redemption. Every individual thing comes into existence and passes away, has its own history, but the order as a whole survives unchanged, ahistorical, and indifferent to every element within it. The mythic vision expresses the domination of the particular by the universal: everyone and everything is born guilty, and the judgment of fate is inevitable and unavoidable. In a world devoid of transcendence or any horizon of freedom, nothing new or incommensurable may ever come into being. 'The world controlled by *mana*, and even the worlds of Indian and Greek myth, are issueless and eternally the same.'⁸⁷ Myth thus bespeaks the absence of hope. Adorno and Horkheimer designate the ordering schema of this context of enclosure as the principle of equivalence: dualism and exchange everywhere prevail,

⁸⁶ Adorno 2005b, pp.246–7. This marks a point of difference from Marx, who, Adorno suggests, as part of the left-political 19th-century struggle against anarchism, 'refrains, mistrustful of all anthropology, from relocating antagonism into the essence of humanity or into primeval times, which are drawn up instead according to the topos of the golden age' (see Adorno 2001b, 'Antagonism Contingent?'). Adorno speculated, rather, that the fall out of nature into labour and conceptuality was itself experienced as a sort of fateful transgression, leaving a wound: 'If in fact history turns out to be a permanent catastrophe, then we cannot simply reject the conjecture that something terrible must have happened to mankind right at the start, or at the time when mankind was becoming itself, and that this terrible event is like those that have been handed down to us in the myths about original sin and similar stories in which the origins of mankind and the growth of reason are associated with some disaster from the remote past' (Adorno 2006a, pp.54–5).

⁸⁷ Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.11.

action equals reaction ('all birth is paid for with death, all fortune with misfortune'⁸⁸) and every symbol of myth repeats the 'inescapable cycle of nature'.⁸⁹ The universal, the One that is always reinstated through the principle of equivalence, is a sort of nothing, an empty, timeless, self-identical point of abstraction or indifference which grinds everything down into the nullity of abstract equality, rendering the dissimilar the same. Equilibrium and self-sameness are the timeless logic of the universal, and equivalence has inequality at its heart, the injustice that the everlasting generality does to the transient particular that passes away. The individual is subsumed and crushed by the universal as an enveloping context of enclosure, rather than finding freedom through it. In propitiation of the mythical powers before which it is vulnerable, enlightenment internalises the principle of equivalence from the beginnings of the attempt to influence nature – 'The shaman wards off a danger with its likeness. Equivalence is his instrument'⁹⁰ – right down to the modern world in which the principle has spread across every aspect of existence – 'Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence.'⁹¹ With the advance of positive knowledge of and control over nature, the substantive contents first of animism and magic, and then of mythic thought, are left behind as irrational, but the maintenance of equivalence nevertheless runs like a thread through this progress of reason, binding the modern to the archaic. Adorno and Horkheimer descry the same inner structure of equivalence and stasis, of entrapment within endlessly repeating nature, hypostatized in an ever more hardened, abstracted and generalised form in the succession of explanations of being in Western ontology, from the profusion of mythic demons and gods, the pantheon of Olympian deities, pre-Socratic hylozoism, the Platonic forms and Aristotelian metaphysics, down to the laws of modern mathematics and physics and Heideggerian Being: 'The categories by which Western philosophy defined its timeless order of nature marked out the positions which had once been occupied by Ocnus and Persephone, Ariadne and Nereus.'⁹² The dynamic of the

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

⁸⁹ *ibid.*

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, p.12.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, p.4.

⁹² *ibid.*, p.3. This is why Adorno's philosophical thinking was rigorously and vehemently opposed to ontology, *prima philosophia*. Philosophy's traditional search for a final, unconditioned truth, something utterly in-itself and unmediated, is the internalisation and rationalisation of the metaphysics of myth, and thus replicates the context of enclosure and hopelessness. The subject's quest to discover a metaphysical first, a ground of being, is a delusion: 'every universal principle of a first, even that of facticity in radical empiricism, contains abstraction within it', so 'the first and immediate is always, as a concept, mediated and thus not the first' (Adorno 1982, p.7). By its form, then, before all content, 'all ontology [is] idealistic', the subject's celebration of its own entrapment by itself.

historical process of societal development and the progress of self-preserving reason in the form of scientific knowledge and technological capacity do not lead out of the immanence of the closed sphere of natural being; rather, the wider the chasm that separates humans from nature and the deeper the division between subject and object, the greater the power of the principle of equivalence and the more thoroughly it is driven into human rationality. In the universality of their reason, humans reiterate the archaic experience of the eversame:

The step from chaos to civilization, in which natural conditions exert their power no longer directly but through the consciousness of human beings, changed nothing in the principle of equivalence. Indeed, human beings atoned for this very step by worshipping that to which previously, like all other creatures, they had been merely subjected. Earlier, fetishes had been subject to the law of equivalence. Now equivalence itself becomes a fetish. The blindfold over the eyes of Justitia means not only that justice brooks no interference but that it does not originate in freedom.⁹³

Law

Fetishisation of equivalence as worship of the power of the universal is, in Adorno and Horkheimer's account, integral to the subject's escape from helpless vulnerability to natural forces and its elevation to mastery. They read the narrative of Odysseus's wanderings as an allegory of the development of subjectivity out of the encounter with the blind eversameness of nature.⁹⁴ The voyage back to Ithaca has an aspect of conquest about it, of the wild being charted, open sea and strange lands being brought within the sphere of the known, as Odysseus confronts hostile powers and monsters and, by virtue of his self-preserving reason, survives each one: 'The primeval world is secularized as the space he measures out. ... The adventurer bestows names on each of these places, and the names give rise to a rational overview of space. The shipwrecked, tremulous navigator anticipates the work of the compass. His powerlessness, leaving no part of the sea unknown, aims to undermine the ruling powers.'⁹⁵ In this sense, the *Odyssey* is a story of demythologisation, as through Odysseus's success in striking out beyond the security of the domestic sphere and

⁹³ Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.12.

⁹⁴ Part of their argument is that the epic contains various layers, one of which is Odysseus's narration of his wanderings. The stories recounted there are the oldest elements, a series of ancient myths, which are taken up and unified by the rationalising intention of the epic.

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, p.38.

returning to tell the tale, the ancient mythical beings that had ‘originally sprung in the face of primal dread’⁹⁶ are pushed back to the very margins of the known world, rationally ordered space inexorably encroaching on them. But how could the powerless human undermine the ruling powers of this mythical world? In his wanderings, Odysseus confronts archaic beings whose substance is the force of law:

The mythical monsters under whose power he falls represent, as it were, petrified contracts and legal claims dating from primeval times. ... The fact that it would be impossible to choose any route other than that between Scylla and Charybdis may be interpreted rationalistically as the mythical representation of the preponderant power of sea currents over the little ships of ancient times. But translated into the objectifying language of myth, it means that the natural relationship between strength and powerlessness has already taken on the character of a legal relationship. Scylla and Charybdis have a claim on whatever comes between their teeth, just as Circe has a right to metamorphose those who are not immune, or Polyphemus a right to the bodies of his guests.⁹⁷

The forces of nature take on the character of law and are irresistible as such. They pay no heed to the particularity of what comes within their power, instead confronting Odysseus and all others as an abstract self-sameness. They thus present Odysseus with an apparently insoluble dilemma. He can never engage the mythical monsters and sorceresses in direct physical struggle because, their power being the power of nature, they are too strong to be overcome by the human’s inferior strength. But nor can he simply find another route past Scylla and Charybdis or the Sirens, for, as embodiments of abstract legality and necessity, the claims these ancient powers insist upon must be satisfied. Ineluctable as fate, they can neither be avoided nor defied.

What Odysseus discovers in his moments of extremity in these encounters is how at the same time to fulfil the statute by submitting to it, paying off the debt that he owes merely by existing, and escape its penalty – to satisfy the principle of equivalence and evade it. The method of self-preservation that he discovers is cunning, ‘defiance made rational’.⁹⁸ Thus, in his encounter with the Sirens, Odysseus does not attempt to take a different course and nor does he hubristically imagine himself free to listen without incurring the penalty; rather, ‘he cowers [and] the ship takes its preordained,

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, p.45.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, p.46.

fateful course'.⁹⁹ But, through the ruse of having himself bound to the mast and blocking his men's ears with wax, Odysseus both complies with the mythical contract and escapes it through a loophole. Equivalence is reinstated, guilt atoned for, and self-preservation achieved. The law-like demands of the primeval powers have a harsh, abstract force, one that is indifferent to the particularity of what they confront. But they only embody, or represent legality – they have not absorbed into it their being, reflected it into themselves. They are legality in-itself but not for-itself. Adorno and Horkheimer note that the epic says contemptuously of the Cyclopes that they are not political beings, for they live solitary and isolated and 'have no assemblies for the making of laws, nor any settled customs',¹⁰⁰ and that 'when Homer calls the Cyclops a "lawless-minded monster" he does not mean simply that the Cyclops does not respect the laws of morality but that his thinking itself is lawless, unsystematic, rhapsodic.'¹⁰¹ Threatened by this mythic lawfulness, the strategy of the rational self's cunning is one of adaptation and immanence: to take into itself the strength of the hostile force that opposes it in order to overthrow what threatens. Odysseus applies to himself the abstracting, dominating power, indifferent to content, of the archaic legal force making its claim on him, repressing his own dread and distancing himself from the immediacy of what confronts him in order to be able to manipulate it. In this way, his thinking becomes systematic, lawful and rational, rejecting rhapsodic wandering. This enables the legalistic literalism that finds and exploits the loophole in the Sirens' fateful contractual claim, and in Polyphemus's cave Odysseus, using the ruse of the name, is in the same manner able to break the mythical unity of signifier and signified, to become aware of and exploit the difference between word and thing – 'Odysseus' and '*Udeis*', hero and nobody – to secure his survival. This breach opened between word and object, concept and world, wins Odysseus his life, but it is a desperate exigency of self-preservation achieved through the internalisation of the abstract power that threatens. The human mastery that is unleashed thereby does not free itself from myth but is rather the extension of mythic, natural power: 'From the formalism of mythical names and statutes, which, indifferent like nature, seek to rule over human beings and history, emerges nominalism, the prototype of bourgeois thinking.'¹⁰²

⁹⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, p.51

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*

¹⁰² *ibid.* p.47.

Renunciation

Hero and nobody – Odysseus’s successful self-assertion, his fabled capacity to survive thanks to his cunning, is at the same time self-renunciation. He wins his life by denying himself. To be able to exert self-control at all times, to act in a rational, calculating manner, the better to serve self-preservation, he must repress the instinctual reactions of the nature within him. Adorno and Horkheimer note of a metaphor in Book XX of the *Odyssey*, describing Odysseus’s struggle to contain his own rage at the licentiousness that he discovers on returning to Ithaca:

The effect is equated with an animal which the human being is subduing ... The subject, still split and forced to do violence to nature both within himself and outside, “punishes” his heart, compelling it to be patient and denying it direct satisfaction in the present for the sake of a more distant future. Beating one’s breast later became a gesture of triumph: What the victor really expresses is that the victory is over his own nature. The achievement is accomplished by self-preserving reason.¹⁰³

The stability of the self, which ensures that it can hold itself together rather than being panic-stricken and bewildered by fear, is achieved through a splitting of the subject, an internalised abstract power being established to dominate and control the material, natural being. To attain such conceptual coherence, the channelling of all behaviour through the calculating medium of self-consciousness, the self cuts away, excludes from itself, its own illogical, non-conceptual materiality, repressing the irrational instinctual drives that threaten relapse into the flux of nature. That affinity with nature cannot be entirely extinguished – the human is, inalienably, a natural creature – but it is increasingly denied and held at a distance, outside the purified circle of the abstract rational identity. Unity and order thus come into being through internal division and repression. Because renunciation is instantiated as the principle of the self’s formation, defeat being admitted in advance and the superior destructive force of nature acknowledged by the mind that has evaded it, the self’s survival through cunning is continually played out within the ambit described by myth. It can except itself, through a loophole, but it cannot escape to be free. So, with self-relinquishment as its principle, the struggle against nature continually compels realism: ‘All bourgeois enlightenment is agreed on the demand for sobriety, respect for facts, a correct appraisal of relative

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, p.259.

strength. Wishful thinking is banned. The reason, however, is that all power in class society is beset by the gnawing consciousness of its powerlessness in face of physical nature and its social successor, the many.¹⁰⁴ Resignation as wisdom places a ban upon utopia. Fulfilment is perpetually deferred because self-forgetfulness, ‘the urge to attain entire, universal, undivided happiness’¹⁰⁵ entails weakness in the fight for survival and therefore can only be regarded as delusion or foolishness, in any case as self-defeating. The present is continually sacrificed to the future, happiness perpetually put off for the sake of self-preservation. As a result, freedom cannot escape from necessity and disillusionment is integral to the mature, developed self: Odysseus ‘can never have the whole, he must always be able to wait, to be patient, to renounce; he may not eat the lotus or the cattle of Hyperion, and when he steers through the narrows he must include in his calculation the loss of the companions snatched from the ship by Scylla. He wriggles through—that is his survival.’¹⁰⁶ The escape from the natural context is bought only at the expense of perpetual adaptation to what continually threatens doom and involves compulsive self-relinquishment and denial of the substantiality of the self in the effort to secure survival. It is therefore no escape. Odysseus may have evaded the natural powers and won his survival through reflecting their legality into himself, objectifying himself, but the result of this internalisation of the universal as rationality is the incorporation of myth into civilisation. In the sovereignty of his reason, he becomes the image of the dominating natural force that he was once subject to: ‘it is implacable nature that [Odysseus] now commands, which triumphs on his return home as the implacable judge, avenging the heritage of the very powers he has escaped.’¹⁰⁷

Sacrifice

Renunciation is a form of self-sacrifice and the practice of sacrifice is a central element in Adorno and Horkheimer’s account of the formation of identity and the mastering of the world by means of abstraction. The ancient gods are destroyed through

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p.44. In IR terms, the many would be the multiplicity of political units. Cf. Morgenthau: ‘The insight and the wisdom of the statesman gauge accurately the distribution and relative strength of opposing forces and anticipate, however tentatively, the emerging pattern of new constellations. The statesman has no assurance of success in the immediate task and not even the expectation of solving the long-range problem. ... No formula will give the statesman certainty, no calculation eliminate the risk, no accumulation of facts open the future’ (Morgenthau 1965, p.221. On Odysseus and risk, see Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.48).

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, p.45.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*, p.45.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, pp.38–9.

the very sacrificial acts by which they are worshipped. These rituals represent submission to the power of nature and the veneration of the principle of equivalence: an exchange is made with the deity, an offering in return for divine beneficence, and the social whole is reconnected with the natural essence whose power it is reliant upon. But sacrifice also contains elements of rationality and cunning that are in contradiction with its function of reaffirming the collectivity's oneness with nature. As a form, sacrifice points in two directions. Through the symbolic communion with the deity, it irrationally reinforces the strength of the social body and the authority of the societal power holders and the religious functionaries (sorcerers, medicine men, and so forth) who perform the sacrificial act, but at the same time the god that is sacrificed to is also brought within the power of human reason: 'All sacrificial acts, deliberately planned by humans, deceive the god for whom they are performed: by imposing on him the primacy of human purposes they dissolve away his power, and the fraud against him passes seamlessly into that perpetrated by unbelieving priests against believing congregations.'¹⁰⁸ As Adorno and Horkheimer read it, this double aspect of sacrifice, its simultaneous rationality and irrationality, contains the possibility of self-assertion through adaptation. The moment of fraud in the sacrificial ceremony opens the way for substitution, which enters the sacrificial scheme as a moment of cunning: the contract is fulfilled, the exchange takes place, and equivalence is formally maintained, but now something worth less has been given for something worth more.¹⁰⁹ Inequality has been introduced into the equality. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, 'the substitution which takes place within sacrifice marks a step toward discursive logic',¹¹⁰ the supersession of the specific qualities of the sacrificial object by the generality of the specimen, so that, in the end, through this unfolding logic of substitution, 'representation gives way to universal fungibility',¹¹¹ the elimination of the qualitative altogether. Abstraction and demythologisation grow out of sacrificial substitution and, in this way, sacrifice from the beginning contains the principle of its own dissolution as a historical practice.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*, p.40.

¹⁰⁹ As Marx went to such lengths to expose, in unequal exchange – domination and appropriation within equivalence – lies the secret of surplus value, the structuring principle of the thoroughly rationalised liberal society of formally free and fair exchange. His analysis was thus a decisive advance over the thinking of classical theorists such as Turgot, for whom surplus value could only be explained, magically and fetishistically, as something inexplicable and irrational, a providential 'gift of nature', 'which would continue to be given only providing that no artificial obstacles were put in the way of free exchange' (Jarvis 2004a, p.89).

¹¹⁰ Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.6.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*, p.7.

However, ‘if the principle of sacrifice was proved transient by its irrationality, at the same time it survives through its rationality’.¹¹² This is because ‘exchange represents the secularization of sacrifice’,¹¹³ not its transcendence. The inequality that is developed in sacrifice, within the observance of the principle of equivalence, is transferred to ‘the magic schema of rational exchange’¹¹⁴ between the propertied and the propertyless. Again, modernity repeats myth. Archaic society was structured by the power of the ancient rulers, the awesome might of the god to whom the sacrifice must be made, and the weakness of the mass of believers who are bound together through the representative restoration of direct communication with nature that the sacrifice represents. This is mirrored in modernity by the dominance of the property owners, the destructive power of the societal totality and the vulnerable mass of the propertyless who, through the mystical medium of money, must continually exchange their life force (the capacity for labour) with this enveloping power in order to stay alive.¹¹⁵

The reason for this continuity is that the rational self overthrew archaic sacrifice by means of sacrifice. It is ‘only the moment of fraud in sacrifice [that] is raised to self-consciousness through Odysseus’:¹¹⁶ the sacrificial structure itself is not overthrown. And if the moment of rationality in sacrifice is constitutively tied to its irrationality, then the heightening of the former does not lead out of the sacrificial context. So the escape does not result in freedom, as Odysseus’s self-preservation by means of denying himself through the ruse of the name in Polyphemus’s cave symbolically attests: ‘Bargaining one’s way out of sacrifice by means of self-preserving rationality is a form of exchange no less than was sacrifice itself. The identical, enduring self which springs from the conquest of sacrifice is itself the product of a hard, petrified sacrificial ritual in which the human being, by opposing its consciousness to its natural context, celebrates itself.’¹¹⁷ The self wins its survival by sacrificing itself to itself: it venerates its abstract, controlling consciousness as its own internal god to which it progressively sacrifices its natural being. Hence the famous assertion that ‘the history of civilisation is the history

¹¹² *ibid.*, p.42

¹¹³ *ibid.*, p.40. Adorno and Horkheimer observe that the practice of giving gifts to the host recorded in the Odysseus narrative stands midway between sacrifice and rational exchange.

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Robert Hullot-Kentor comments: ‘The power to substitute an ox for a human sacrifice is no different from the power of the employer to substitute the labor of others for the employer’s own’ (Hullot-Kentor 2006, p.38).

¹¹⁶ Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.40.

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*, p.42.

of the introversion of sacrifice—in other words, the history of renunciation.¹¹⁸ Just as Marx's critical theory was constantly struggling against Hegel, so this argument turns inside-out Hegel's philosophy of history: 'Adorno's project is unthinkable except as a critical transformation of Hegel's doctrine of the ruse of reason'¹¹⁹ by which Hegel sought to explain the movement of history as the self-development of Spirit. 'Divested of its theodicean veneer ... Hegel's theory of the cunning of history became Adorno's fundamental insight into the dialectic of enlightenment: the unity of the self is the work of sacrificial cunning.'¹²⁰ Society has never left behind myth and the domination of the universal over the particular because in the very movement by which it sought to escape blind nature it bound itself to it: 'If we define the universal as the inequality of what renders everything equal, then we can claim that cunning always remains the instrument of a universal that it never endangers.'¹²¹

Identity

Just as the repression of inner nature is an act of self-sacrifice, so escape from nature as adaptation to nature means that the mimetic capacity of humans is turned against itself: 'The reason that represses mimesis is not merely its opposite. It is itself mimesis: of death.'¹²² Abstraction is the subject's achievement in making itself like that which threatens, in order to survive it. The formation of self-identity through the self's domination of itself and the resulting emergence of the cunning of self-preserving reason are a mimesis of the emptiness of the universal in nature, that which survives while all else perishes in the endless cycles of growth and decay. 'Only when made in such an image does man attain the identity of the self which cannot be lost in identification with the other but takes possession of itself once and for all as an impenetrable mask.'¹²³ The enduring self-identity that resists the power of myth is the product of mythic power, because 'only thought that does violence to itself is hard

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*, p.43.

¹¹⁹ Hullot-Kentor 2006, pp.36–7.

¹²⁰ *ibid.*, p.37.

¹²¹ García Düttmann 2002, p.28.

¹²² Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.44. They of course have in mind here Hegel's account of the intertwining of the formation of rational self-consciousness with societal power and domination in his master/slave dialectic: 'the presentation of itself, however, as the pure abstraction of self-consciousness consists in showing itself as the pure negative of its objective mode, or in showing that it is not attached to any specific *existence*, not to the individuality common to existence as such, that it is not attached to life' (Hegel 1977b, p.113. Emphasis in original).

¹²³ Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.6.

enough to shatter myths',¹²⁴ to break itself free from nature. The impulse of enlightenment, against the enforced acknowledgement of the superior might of nature that is evident in mythic thought, is the desire to quell fear through the conquest of nature as what is threatening and different, and demythologisation takes the form of the continual identification of the world, through the concept, with the hardened self, the abstract point of unity: to know the object is to make it like the self-as-subject, breaking its power of enchantment and bringing it to heel, making it available for use. Abstraction is the means through which the self determines itself and by which things are subsumed under concepts, natural processes under rules and laws. Through the distancing that abstraction enables, the flux of nature, from which the conceptless animal could not escape, is solidified and made coherent, capable of being grasped, manipulated and turned into use values.¹²⁵ With the definitive formation of the 'impenetrable mask' of self-consciousness through which it controls internal and external nature, the subject establishes itself as the locus of truth.¹²⁶ Conceptuality becomes the essence of all things as that which is solid and lasting, and the timelessness of metaphysics and ontology inherit from myth.

However, the structure of identity contains a contradiction. On the one hand both the subject's desire to conquer the world, taking it into itself or finding itself

¹²⁴ *ibid.*, p.2

¹²⁵ Against much of the Marxist tradition, which has validated a good, concrete and material, use value as against a bad, abstract and immaterial, exchange value, the two moments should be seen as dialectical: historically, the more the object has become a use value, disenchanted and made functional, completely subsumed to purposes of human utility, the more it has also become an exchange value, the material bearer of social labour. Marx's analysis suggests that the commodity is at the same time both something 'homely' and 'natural' (Marx 1990, p.138), apparently familiar and self-evident to the subject, and something *unheimlich*, uncanny and metaphysical, subject-alien and mystical. Both aspects are constitutive of its fetish-character. As Adorno and Horkheimer observe: 'False clarity is only another name for myth. Myth was always obscure and luminous at once' (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.xvii). The ambition of materialism, therefore, would not be to reduce the object to a straightforward and commonsensical use value, eliminating mystificatory exchange value, but to bring about a world 'in which things are freed from the drudgery of being useful', an experience of the object beyond both use value and exchange value (Benjamin 1999, p.9). This motif from Benjamin's 1935 *Exposé* for the *Arcades Project* was specifically approved twice by Adorno in his otherwise notoriously critical letter to Benjamin (Adorno and Benjamin 1999, pp.104 and 113) and note also Adorno's remark in the same letter that 'the mere concept of use-value by no means suffices of itself as far as a critique of the commodity character is concerned, but only takes us back to a stage prior to the division of labour' (*ibid.*, p.108). On Adorno's critique of use value, see Kaufmann 2001 and Vatter 2008.

¹²⁶ As Adorno put it in more epistemological terms in *Negative Dialectics*: 'The abstraction ... whose reification in the history of nominalism since the Aristotelean critique of Plato has been ascribed to the subject as its error, is itself the principle whereby the subject becomes the subject in the first place, its own essence. That is why the recourse to that which it is not itself seems external, violent. What convicts the subject of its own caprice, its prius of its own posteriority, always sounds like transcendental dogma to it' (Adorno 2001b, "'Transcendental Appearance'").

reflected in everything, and its capacity for identity are inherently limitless and universal. ‘Humans believe themselves free of fear when there is no longer anything unknown. ... Nothing is allowed to remain outside, since the mere idea of the “outside” is the real source of fear.’¹²⁷ The historical advance of identity and of knowledge and mastery of the world, are the progress of the internalisation of the outside, of what was once experienced as subject-alien. But because the infinite self is modelled on the abstract universal in nature, which itself violently ruled over the particular, identification is always also misidentification, involving a continual injustice to the object, the severing from the thing of its specificity and singularity in order to make it known. The form of the subject’s universality, imitated from blind nature, inevitably represses the object. It is the inequality that renders the unequal equal: ‘Abstraction, the instrument of enlightenment, stands in the same relationship to its objects as fate, whose concept it eradicates: as liquidation.’¹²⁸ Bringing the outside inside, identifying it, can therefore only be achieved through the banishment of that living element of things that cannot be subsumed or made identical because it resists conceptualisation – an element that comes to be regarded as chaotic and irrational, and that endangers self-preservation through the threat of the dissolution of identity that it poses. What this contradiction in identity reveals is that all the subject’s power over the object is still just weakness: it remains enthralled to nature and transfixed by mythic fear, even in its escape. It is not reconciled with nature but dominates it, just as nature once dominated it.¹²⁹ Identification is thus the elimination of what is in-itself rather than for-us, what is outside the magic circle of identity and thus causes fear. In the drive for security, humans make both external nature and themselves into inherently neutral, thing-like objects, equating ‘the living with the non-living, as myth had equated the non-living with the living.’¹³⁰ If myth still expressed the age-old consciousness of the substantiality

¹²⁷ Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.11.

¹²⁸ *ibid.*, p.9.

¹²⁹ Adorno and Horkheimer’s perception here is deeply related to Marx’s argument in the *Grundrisse* that capital, for all its world-spanning productivity, its installation of humans as masters, is, in its constitutive distinction between necessary and surplus labour, still conceptually based upon want, privation and the desperate struggle against nature: ‘*Labour time as the measure of value* posits wealth itself as founded on poverty and disposable time as existing *in and because of the antithesis to surplus labour time*; or, the positing of an individual’s entire time as labour time, and his degradation therefore to mere worker, subsumption under labour. *The most developed machinery thus forces the worker to work longer than the savage does, or than he did himself with the simplest, crudest tools*’ (Marx 1973, pp.708–9. Emphases in original). Capital is the absolutisation of the drive for self-preservation and represents power but not freedom, continued enthrallment to nature in the perpetual struggle against it.

¹³⁰ Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.11.

of nature, the movement of enlightenment against myth is the continual ‘extirpation of animism’,¹³¹ both the denial that the object represents anything other than lifeless, neutral matter onto which humans project a self-generated meaning – ‘value’ – and the repression by the subject of its own capacity to experience itself and the object as other than fixed and reified. In pursuit of security, the perpetual maxim of enlightenment is: ‘All gods and qualities must be destroyed’.¹³²

Domination

The development of identity is inseparable from societal domination: ‘The distance of subject from object, the presupposition of abstraction, is founded on the distance from things which the ruler attains by means of the ruled.’¹³³ Where Odysseus quelled his inner nature and assured his survival by elevating the abstract self to a position of mastery, in like manner the societal body is made more integrated and powerful, better capable of ensuring its self-preservation, through the instantiation and objectification of domination, what reveals itself eventually in Marx’s analysis of 19th-century capital as depersonalised class rule. Like the self, society’s principle of unity is also its principle of division: it is bound together through the antagonism that threatens to pull it apart.¹³⁴ ‘Power confers increased cohesion and strength on the social whole in which it is established’,¹³⁵ and through the division of labour the particular interest of societal authority becomes general, so that ‘power confronts the individual as the universal, as the reason which informs reality.’¹³⁶ The progress of that reason, demythologisation, is inseparable from the progress of substitutability, the social power objectified and made permanent in the division between rulers and ruled:

“Just as *substitutability* is the measure of domination, and that person is most powerful who can have others *substitute* for him or her in the majority of tasks, so *substitution* is at once the vehicle of progress and regression.” In this passage Adorno and Horkheimer begin to reconceive the commonplace that domination

¹³¹ *ibid.*, p.2.

¹³² *ibid.*, p.5.

¹³³ *ibid.*, p.9.

¹³⁴ This complicates any recourse to class struggle as the theoretical and practical master key. It is part of society’s predicament that the exploited owe their existence and their very selves to the whole whose victims they are, the whole that is only a unity through the class antagonism, in the same way that the thing only becomes objectified and determined through the concept that at the same time exerts power over it.

¹³⁵ *ibid.*, p.16.

¹³⁶ *ibid.*

is the power to have others do one's own work; they reformulate this idea as part of the history of sacrifice in which an object of lesser value is cunningly substituted for another of greater value.¹³⁷

The history of abstraction set out in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* contains virtually a tripartite schema of such substitution. At the primitive stage of animism and magic, in which the differentiation of the social organism is not far advanced, the shaman attempts to influence nature through making himself like it: 'The magician imitates demons; to frighten or placate them he makes intimidating or appeasing gestures.'¹³⁸ The sorcerers and tribal elders represent power but not yet in an abstracted, objectified form. At this primitive stage no sharp split between self and world, sign and signified has occurred, so that materiality still has a compelling authority and allure to it: 'Magic implies specific representation. What is done to the spear, the hair, the name of the enemy, is also to befall his person.'¹³⁹ But the sacred essence is already associated with a privileged status within the group and, in time, as the societal practice of sacrifice supersedes magic, authority and subordination diverge and hierarchy rigidifies. With the increase of power and social division comes a distancing from the object: 'if the nomadic savage, despite his subjection, could still participate in the magic which defined the limits of that world, and could disguise himself as his quarry to stalk it, in later periods the intercourse with spirits and the subjection were assigned to different classes of humanity: power to one side, obedience to the other.'¹⁴⁰ The substitution that inheres as a possibility in sacrifice, bringing the god within the reach of the humans who worship, has as its corollary the substitutional wound incised into the social body, the division between those who command and those who obey. The wielders of social power assume the authority of the gods who are overthrown through the sacrificial ritual. However, if the practice of abstraction that makes possible discursive logic can already be discerned in the substitution that occurs in sacrifice, nevertheless the sacrificial ritual as a whole remains poised between the ancient world of magic and the

¹³⁷ Hullot-Kentor 2006, p.279, fn.67. Hullot-Kentor's rendering of this passage is intended to be illustrative, in terms of understanding Adorno and Horkheimer's theory of sacrifice, of what is involved in translating the German word *Vertretung* as 'substitution' rather than 'representation'. (Both existing commercial translations opt for 'representation' at the same point.) He notes of the significance of this theme: 'The pivotal point at which myth becomes enlightenment and enlightenment becomes myth is sacrifice, and the transition from myth to enlightenment is progress in the power of substitutability' (ibid., p.38).

¹³⁸ Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.6.

¹³⁹ ibid.

¹⁴⁰ ibid., p.15.

disenchanted world of reason. The form has not yet lifted itself clear of the content, become for-itself rather than only in-itself. ‘The sanctity of the *hic et nunc* [in the sacrifice], the uniqueness of the chosen victim which coincides with its representative status, distinguishes it radically, makes it non-exchangeable even in the exchange.’¹⁴¹ The transition from myth to enlightenment, from sacrifice to exchange, leaves this behind. Where the shaman had identified himself with what was feared, in the rational exchange process, based upon value, the object is made identical to the subject. Ultimately, in the thoroughly disenchanted world, in which man is the measure of all things, everything becomes exchangeable for everything else and money, the bearer of the precious social substance, is exalted as ‘the god among commodities’,¹⁴² to be worshipped. But, as Marx perceived, universal mediation is not the dissolution of domination but the exposure of its ‘general foundation’. Capital is the complete subjectification of the world, the total reduction to identity that, in Adorno and Horkheimer’s argument, is the telos of enlightenment. It is the social form in which the outside has been entirely brought inside, nothing is any longer ‘in-itself’ and everything is ‘for-us’, so that ‘in their transformation the essence of things is revealed as always the same, a substrate of domination’,¹⁴³ value. The commodity form is the necessary endpoint of the logic of the concept, developed out of myth, and the class relation of capital, which subjects humans themselves to commodification, is the outcome of the evolutionary process of societal domination: ‘all the oppression that man has ever inflicted on man culminates in the modern age in the cold inhumanity of free wage labor.’¹⁴⁴ The historical process of the universalisation of abstraction and domination set in motion in prehistory reaches its fulfilment in modernity, which is structured by the twin systems of value and the neutral, impersonal state form, totalised systems of objective abstraction that encompass and dominate the real, material human beings who both produce these forms of ideality and cannot control them.

Dialectic of Enlightenment is a dense text, and Adorno and Horkheimer’s mode of exposition – what at first seems like simply a series of breathtaking assertions –

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*, p.7.

¹⁴² Marx 1973, p.221.

¹⁴³ Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.6.

¹⁴⁴ Adorno 2003a, p.94.

makes few concessions to ready intelligibility. The exposition here of key elements of the argument concerning the prehistory of conceptuality was designed to show how they take up the Marxian themes of the critique of idealism surveyed in the first part of this chapter and deepen them: abstract universals dominating the ‘real’ particular, the reversion of the ideal to mere nature, and the historical process of the human conquest of the material world by way of objectified ideality. What their account of the origins of identity shows is that rationality does not succeed in leaving myth behind because it is itself mythic, having the principle of domination at its core. Abstraction and the self attain objective being *against* the subject as a material, natural thing, through sacrifice and renunciation; and identity, as capital, may be able to subsume the world completely, but it only thereby creates a second mythology. So, through reason, as universality, humans are both free and unfree: abstraction and the concept separate them from nature but because they are modelled on natural domination, internalised, that separation does not produce liberation. In their sovereignty, as conquerors of the world, they remain trapped. In constructing the ur-history of the concept, these first two chapters of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* can be understood as a critique of form, and, having established some of the essential themes, the thesis now turns to the question, central to the critique of Realism in IR, of political form.

Conclusion: This chapter has focused on elaborating some of the theory central to the thesis. Taking up the question of the mythic character of capital, it has shown that a critique of abstraction as ideality that dominates and represses the material was central to Marx’s thought, both in his early writings and in *Capital*. His mature theory is one of abstraction achieving independence from and power over materiality in the money-form and then coming alive, abstraction-in-motion, as capital. It is this ‘rule of abstraction’ that gives rise to the mythic thematics of the theory of capital. The chapter then turned to Adorno’s thinking about the origins of conceptuality in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The leading idea is that abstraction, the concept, is the mimesis of the dominating universality of nature, internalised for purposes of self-preservation. This is a sacrificial process in which humans progressively deny their own natural being for the sake of identity, mastery of themselves and of the world. What Adorno shows is that the separation from nature and myth achieved thereby still remains trapped and unfree

because the escape is achieved only through the internalisation of the principle of myth, domination. Thus, identity, the inner substance of capital, is mythic from the beginning. It is now necessary to consider the implications of this argument for an understanding of the political.

Chapter 4

Sovereignty and the Exception

Introduction: This chapter addresses the issue central to the critique of Realism: the problem of political form. Again, it is constructed in two halves. The first is concerned with the inside/outside structure of political being. This is developed through an account of Carl Schmitt's thinking about sovereignty and how Schmitt's themes are taken up and developed by Giorgio Agamben. The argument, in brief, is that in thinking about political form and the exception, Schmitt and Agamben are driven towards the terminology of epistemology: subject and object, identity and non-identity. These political theories are then read through Adorno's epistemological thinking about the contradictory structure of the concept, identity and non-identity, to show that these apparently disparate theoretical enquiries are in fact identical in form: at this deep level, political theory and epistemology coincide. The conclusion is that the political should be thought of as a modality of ideation, a central structure of the creation of human self-identity through abstracting itself from nature, and that its delimited form results from the problematic structure of the concept, already touched on in Chapter 3. From this position, the second half then develops the idea of the political and myth. It begins with a brief overview of what Agamben establishes as the 'Schmitt–Benjamin Debate' and then goes on to show how Adorno took up and elaborated critical themes from this debate in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. This brings the thematics of 'the exception' and the 'state of exception' into the ambit of Adorno's thinking about ideality and myth. The intention is to explain in a new way for IR the central Realist problems of the delimited nature of the political and the international as a state of nature.

As the subtitle of his great work indicates, Marx's study of political economy is placed in the the Kantian-Idealist tradition of Critique, reflection on the context of mediation. Where German Idealism, pursuing the epistemological problematic, had rediscovered the subject at the origin of objectivity, so Marx cracked open the basic categories established by classical political economy, the hardened objectivity of

bourgeois society, revealing their subjective substance. In starting with the seemingly self-evident commodity, and unfolding its metaphysical subtleties, Marx asks the fundamental question of how exchange is possible at all. The commodity is the ‘elementary form’¹ of bourgeois society; beginning with it means not presupposing any categories as simply given and immediate, a theoretical failing for which Marx repeatedly castigates the bourgeois economists,² but developing them immanently out of the commodity form, showing them to be mediated and historical. The elaborated analysis of this societal cell-form reveals how their material circumstances – nature – are changed by humans into a reified object world in which the object’s true being, its essence, is its value character. If it is to align itself with Marx’s theorising, a critique of the political should also think through and not presuppose any categories in attempting to understand the meaning of humanity’s status as πολιτικόν ζῶον – the political existence that, so Realism’s saturnine wisdom suggests, is, in its totality as fragmented international system, as much of a block on freedom as the world-spanning, ever more integrated, system of capital. Experience of relative German backwardness, failed revolution and the necessary limitations of bourgeois society (its ideology promising more than its reality could allow) provoked the Marxian critique in the mid-19th century. Decades later, and long after the eclipse of Idealism, it was doubtless the experience of national defeat, failed revolution and the chronic instability of the Weimar Republic, which the liberalism inherited from the 19th century seemed unable to resolve, that prompted the analyses of the political of Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt. Although these point in drastically different directions, one characteristic they nevertheless both share with Marx’s theorising is a refusal to assume the givenness of the established categories of their subject, to take the political, as seemingly proper to human beings, for granted and then to concern themselves with second-order considerations relating to the organisation of decision-making, modes of conflict resolution, hierarchies of authority and so forth. Writing in a society that felt itself to be disintegrating, they ask the more profound question of how it is that the political space is constituted at all, what

¹ Marx 1990, p.125.

² There is currently within value-theory studies a controversy about whether Marx’s exposition at the beginning of Volume 1 of *Capital* really is as presuppositionless as a dialectic based on Hegel’s supposedly ought to be (see, for example, Arthur 2004, pp.157–8 and the rejoinder in Murray 2005). Adorno’s metacritique of epistemology suggests that total presuppositionlessness is congruent only with Hegel’s assumption, as an absolute idealist, of a completed subject/object identity. However, the presuppositions that epistemology despite itself opens on to are not straightforwardly given and lie outside the conceptual space.

it is that makes the political possible. It is this interest in the extreme question, the question of constitution, that Giorgio Agamben has subsequently taken up in his theorising about the political, developed as it is out of Benjamin and Schmitt. The first part of this chapter examines Schmitt's theory of sovereignty and Agamben's exploration of its implications, and seeks to open out their meaning by bringing them into relation with Adorno's abstract-philosophical critique of the concept.³

Schmitt and the Exception

In *Homo Sacer*, the first work in his ongoing investigations into the political, Agamben takes as his starting point Schmitt's discussion of sovereignty in the first chapter of the latter's 1923 volume, *Political Theology*, which opens with the famous dictum: 'Sovereign is he who decides on the exception'.⁴ Part of the difficulty of situating Schmitt's thought and reconstructing its continuity is that his *oeuvre* 'consists overwhelmingly of interventionist texts',⁵ slim volumes of polemical import that stage a contribution to a specific intellectual controversy but also reach out theoretically beyond these historical confines. *Political Theology* is, in this sense, characteristic. Against the prevailing authority of legal positivism, which sought to conceptualise and

³ The juxtaposition of Adorno with the *Kronjurist* of the Third Reich may seem provocative and perhaps requires justification. In the 'Introduction' to *Philosophy of New Music* Adorno quotes Benjamin's methodological injunction that truth is revealed through the juxtaposition of the extremes and asserts that this stricture 'can be grounded in the object itself in a philosophical analysis of new music that is essentially restricted to its two protagonists, who have no direct relation with each other. For only in the extremes does the essence of this music take shape distinctively; only they permit knowledge of its truth content' (Adorno 2006b, p.7). Schmitt's *oeuvre* has appropriately been described as a 'philosophy of the extreme' (Ojakangas 2006) and he and Adorno could be figured as the opposite poles through which the truth content of the contemporary condition of the political becomes evident: Schmitt continually seeking a form of restoration, Adorno thinking beyond the boundaries. This simultaneous proximity and distance between the two figures would place the question of the relationship of Schmitt to the Frankfurt School into a different perspective – it is telling, for instance, that in her ground-breaking article on this subject (Kennedy 1987), the only Frankfurt School figure whom Ellen Kennedy does not, cannot, bring into the orbit of Schmitt's influence is, in historical perspective, by far the most important one – Adorno.

⁴ Schmitt 2005, p.5. The interest in Schmitt here is limited to a precise aspect of his thinking: what his theory of the exception reveals about the limit of the political. The intention is neither to condemn Schmitt for corrupting politics nor to praise him for opening new modes of political being, but to explore what this aspect of his thought says about the possibility of the political *per se*. In IR, much of the Schmitt debate has of course focused on the evident international dimension of *The Nomos of the Earth*, on which see, for instance, Odysseos and Petito 2007, Teschke 2011a and Teschke 2011b, as well as the 'World Orders: Confronting Carl Schmitt's *The Nomos of the Earth*' edition of *South Atlantic Quarterly*. Additionally, Schmitt's influence on post-war American Realism, as mediated through Hans Morgenthau, has been the subject of considerable recent interest, notably the research of William Scheuerman (see Scheuerman 2007 and 2009; see also Honig 1995 and Pichler 1998). On Schmitt generally, Ojakangas 2006 provides an excellent thematic overview, Balakrishnan 2000 a useful contextual account and Rasch 2004 a provocative statement of the importance of Schmittian ideas.

⁵ Balakrishnan 2000, p.5.

expound a seamless order of legal norms regulating society, a system in which the state was reduced to the technical-formal role of a guarantor that ‘should remain in the background as *ultima ratio*’,⁶ Schmitt in this text insists that the legal system can never be a self-sustaining totality enclosed on itself because the legal form as such is not self-sufficient: ‘Every legal thought brings a legal idea, which in its purity can never become reality, into another aggregate condition and adds an element that cannot be derived either from the content of the legal idea or from the content of a general positive legal norm that is to be applied.’⁷ Central to Schmitt’s argument is the perception that the form, the legal norm, relies upon, indeed has its existence in, an element outside its own immanent sphere, something that is not wholly reducible to it.⁸ The positivists, however, in their drive to produce a coherent deductive system of law on the model of mathematics or the natural sciences, simply closed their eyes to the ineliminable question of power implied in the problem of the relation of norm to fact because ‘everything that contradicts the system is excluded as impure’.⁹ As a result, they dismissed the exception as something extra-juridical and irrational. This wilful blindness left them unable to produce a convincing explication of the concept of sovereignty, or to account for the relation between legality and power.¹⁰ It is this that motivates Schmitt’s interest in the exception. Through the crisis point of the confrontation with the exception, the true source of authority in the legal order, beyond the organised structure of norms, is revealed because it is in that instant of decision that sovereignty and fact come face to face and the force of law is applied directly to the material of life in a way necessarily unmediated by the objective norm of the juridical rule. In the moment of the exception the authority of the sovereign is revealed.

The exception is thus, in an emphatic sense, as Schmitt notes at the very outset of his discussion, ‘a borderline concept ... one pertaining to the outermost sphere’.¹¹ Theory that takes for granted the coherence of the political-legal space as a given fact has great difficulty in coming to terms with, even acknowledging, the exception and

⁶ Schmitt 2005, p.25.

⁷ *ibid.*, p.30.

⁸ As Agamben formulates it, Schmitt perceived that ‘the application of a norm is in no way contained within the norm and cannot be derived from it’ (Agamben 2005, p.40).

⁹ Schmitt 2005, p.21

¹⁰ ‘All tendencies of modern constitutional development point toward eliminating the sovereign in this sense’, i.e. as the ultimate point of unity that gives coherence to the legal order as a whole (*ibid.*, p.7).

¹¹ *ibid.*, p.5.

therefore, so Schmitt argues, struggles to grasp the concept of sovereignty, being reduced to mouthing the empty formalism that sovereignty is the highest, underived power: ‘A jurisprudence concerned with ordinary day-to-day questions has practically no interest in the concept of sovereignty. Only the recognizable is its normal concern; everything else is a “disturbance”. Such a jurisprudence confronts the extreme case disconcertedly.’¹² In contrast to the regularity of the day-to-day, the exception is a liminal concept, the point or moment that both makes possible and defines the separation of inside and outside, and as such it is the exception that gives substance to sovereignty, for it is at the meeting point of sovereign power and the exception that the regularised societal space in which the legal norm can be applicable finds its justification and legitimacy. Only at the extreme, beyond the familiar routine of the quotidian, in the crisis of the confrontation with the unknown, is the inner truth of the juridico-political sphere revealed. In the effort to grasp the significance of the exception and the decision, Schmitt’s discussion is elaborated in terms of identity and non-identity, logical generality and the irreducibly singular:

The exception is that which cannot be subsumed; it defies general codification, but it simultaneously reveals a specifically juristic element—the decision in absolute purity. The exception appears in its absolute form when a situation in which legal prescriptions can be valid must first be brought about. Every general norm demands a normal, everyday frame of life to which it can be factually applied and which is subjected to its regulations. The norm requires a homogeneous medium. This effective normal situation is not a mere “superficial presupposition” that a jurist can ignore; that situation belongs precisely to its immanent validity. There exists no norm that is applicable to chaos. For a legal order to make sense, a normal situation must exist, and he is sovereign who definitely decides whether this normal situation actually exists.¹³

In Schmitt’s argument, the exception arises at the origin of the ordered, ‘homogeneous’ political-legal space. Only through and against ‘that which cannot be subsumed’ can the ‘normal, everyday frame of life’, the domain of juridical norms and regulations, be created. The element of the exception, branded as chaotic and irrational, defying assimilation, not submitting to mastery, must be successfully excluded for the coherent, objectified, self-identical inner space to have validity. That which can be made homogeneous can be included; that which cannot be reduced to identity must be

¹² *ibid.*, p.12.

¹³ *ibid.*, p.13.

excluded. This is the necessary and essential task of the sovereign: no juridico-political order can exist without this separation being made. The exception, on Schmitt's account, thus has a peculiar double function. It is a limit concept in that it marks the borderline of the ordered space of sovereignty, the point beyond which the inclusive capacity of sovereign power does not – in fact, cannot – reach; but it is also the element that gives life to sovereignty, which asserts and proves its power ultimately through the encounter with the exception. The sovereign must exclude the exception but also relies upon it for its own meaning, its own ordering logic. Sovereignty's sense is dependent on the element that it cannot incorporate into itself. So Schmitt writes: 'The exception is more interesting than the rule. The rule proves nothing; the exception proves everything: It confirms not only the rule but also its existence, which derives only from the exception. In the exception the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition.'¹⁴ The authority of sovereignty is therefore contradictorily bound to the exception: it cannot exist without it, but its existence has validity only in excluding it.

Agamben and the State of Exception

It is this complex topology of sovereignty and the exception suggested in *Political Theology* that Giorgio Agamben explores in the first section of *Homo Sacer* and in the subsequent volume *State of Exception*.¹⁵ Where Schmitt, despite his stress on the connection of the legal to the non-legal, nevertheless attempts to frame a comparatively straightforward duality of order and exception, with sovereign power periodically drawing the divide, Agamben reveals that the problem of the exception is more intricate than Schmitt allows. He notes that Schmitt's discussion implies that in

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p.15. Recall Marx's metaphoricality of vampiric capital surviving off living labour, which it transforms into homogeneous abstract social labour.

¹⁵ As with Schmitt, the focus here is on a very limited and specific aspect of Agamben's thinking, his investigation of the structure of sovereignty. By contrast, much of the literature on Agamben has been concerned with his ideas of 'bare life' and *homo sacer*, which are outside the scope of this thesis (although for an interesting correlating of 'bare life' with Marx's figure of the proletarian, see de Boever 2009). Similarly, commentary on the exception has usually been concerned with the extra-legal status of refugees or persons captured in war, and so on, rather than the form problem that is at issue here. On the contemporary significance of the logic of the exception, see the special 2007 issue of *diacritics*; on Agamben generally, de la Durantaye provides a good overview, including some reflections on areas of thematic overlap between Agamben and Adorno (but on that subject, see also Morgan 2007); and Calarco and DeCaroli 2007, Norris 2005a and the 'The Agamben Effect' issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* offer a variety of approaches to Agamben's thinking about the political; for a biopolitical reading of the theme of the border in Agamben, see Vaughan-Williams 2009.

the conceptualisation of political space there is no clean separation of the political inside from the non-political outside.¹⁶ The political existence of humans cannot be reduced to a straightforward binary of 'inside' and 'outside' because the sovereign, who stands at the apex of and guarantees the order of the inside space, has his most emphatic existence in deciding on the exception, which the legal norms do not reach. Through the moment of the exception, the sovereign can be seen to be both at the centre of the legal-political space and at its extremity, simultaneously inside and outside, a point that Schmitt perceives – 'although he stands outside the normally valid legal system, he nevertheless belongs to it, for it is he who must decide whether the constitution needs to be suspended in its entirety'¹⁷ – but that Agamben explores. This double position is what Agamben names 'the paradox of sovereignty', the fact that 'the sovereign, having the legal power to suspend the validity of the law, legally places himself outside the law' so that it may be said that 'the law is outside itself.'¹⁸ In being called upon and seemingly able to act in the space beyond the reach of the legal norm, but only so as to redraw the dividing line, the sovereign shows himself, as it were behind 'the everyday frame of life', to be always still within the non-political world, Schmitt's 'chaos'. If Schmitt's aim is to articulate the relation between the state of exception and juridical order, Agamben observes that 'it is a paradoxical articulation, for what must be inscribed within the law is something that is essentially exterior to it, that is, nothing less than the suspension of the juridical order itself.'¹⁹ There is and can be no clear, neat or unproblematic division of inside from outside because in creating the ordered interior space sovereignty necessarily remains always involved with the exterior, the relation that is expressed in the state of exception, and in the decision on the exception the sovereign, the origin of the juridical order as a whole, reveals himself as at the same time external to that order. Through this paradoxical position of the sovereign, inside and outside are necessarily bound together. Order and chaos imply each other.

For Schmitt, the decisive importance of the state of exception is that through it is unambiguously stated the distinction between derived, posited law and the sovereign, underived authority, *nomos* – the untrammelled source from which law issues. 'What

¹⁶ In IR terms, of the domestic from the international.

¹⁷ Schmitt 2005, p.7.

¹⁸ Agamben 1998, p.15.

¹⁹ Agamben 2005, p.33.

Schmitt wishes to establish above all is the superiority of the sovereign *nomos* as the constitutive event of law with respect to every positivistic conception of law as simple position and convention (*Gesetz*).²⁰ Confronted by the exception, which is situated on the far side of all the established positive legal norms, the sovereign *nomos*, through an act of seemingly pure will, the direct application of power to fact, makes a decision. To the extent that *Political Theology* seeks to demonstrate the necessary superiority of the decision to the mere norm – ‘the decision on the exception is a decision in the true sense of the word’,²¹ remarks Schmitt, with admiration –, the *nomos* is the essence of sovereignty. It cannot be reduced to law because it is the founding power. In the much later work *The Nomos of the Earth*, Schmitt devotes a short section of the introductory first part to setting out his understanding of the meaning of *nomos*. Again polemicising against the reduction of *nomos* to convention, norm or rule, he insists on its status as an originary, foundational, underived power:

Nomos comes from *nemein* — a [Greek] word that means both “to divide” and “to pasture.” Thus, *nomos* is the immediate form in which the political and social order of a people becomes visible — the initial measure and division of pasture-land, i.e., the land-appropriation as well as the concrete order contained in it and following from it. ... *Nomos* is the *measure* by which the land in a particular order is divided and situated; it is also the form of political, social, and religious order determined by this process.²²

Nomos is thus associated by Schmitt at its root with possession and property, with the way in which humans take hold of the world and make it their own for purposes of self-preservation, producing a stable and objectified social order, and also with the interlocked development both of abstraction and universality – measure – and of division and delimitation.²³ The power of *nomos* lies at the centre of sovereignty, the quality that summates the status of humans as autonomous, rational, self-governing political beings; it springs from the control and settlement of territory, its division and delimitation, and the specific and localised ‘concrete order’ of societal life that is established thereby. In *Political Theology* Schmitt relates but does not comment upon, perhaps does not see, the peculiar contradiction, congruent with the complex topology

²⁰ Agamben 1998, p.36.

²¹ Schmitt 2005, p.6.

²² Schmitt 2003, p.70 (emphasis in original).

²³ Schmitt here attributes to *nomos* ‘the orientational character of original words’, its status as a ‘fence-word’, citing approvingly one scholar’s assertion that ‘every *nomos* consists of what is within its own bounds’ (ibid., pp.74–5).

of the exception, produced in this way. He notes that, for practical purposes, the issue of sovereignty within any particular social order ultimately resolves into the question, ‘who is supposed to have unlimited power?’,²⁴ a question made urgent when that order experiences the disintegrative proximity of the exception, and goes on, ‘what characterizes an exception is principally unlimited authority’.²⁵ Universality, unlimitedness, is here defined and becomes evident precisely through its necessary relation to the limit, the exception: it is the capacity to decide on the exception and draw the border, the line of delimitation and exclusion, that is the defining mark of the ‘unlimited authority’ of sovereignty. Only through the exclusion of the exception can the sovereign be universal; the form of its universality is dependent upon an element that it cannot and must not know. Thus, sovereign *nomos* is universal not despite but because of its limitation, its boundedness.

Agamben explores the implications of the contradiction objectively implied by Schmitt’s account of the exception in his own analysis of the state of exception as a periodically repeated and reinscribed instance of origin, the movement through which the sovereign subject takes hold of the indeterminate flux of nature and objectifies it in a stable order. The exception, he suggests, is not simply severed from the juridical order as something wholly different but is held in a relation with that order: it is, after all, only an exception by virtue of its non-assimilation, which presupposes relationality. Through the exception, sovereignty does not just try to confine or contain that which is excessive or transgressive, as others have maintained (Agamben cites Deleuze and Guattari and Blanchot); rather, it is the mode through which its would-be absolute power is constituted:

Here what is outside is included not simply by means of an interdiction or an internment but rather by means of the suspension of the juridical order’s validity—by letting the juridical order, that is, withdraw from the exception and abandon it. The exception does not subtract itself from the rule; rather the rule, suspending itself, gives rise to the exception and, maintaining itself in relation to the exception, first constitutes itself as a rule. The particular “force” of law consists in this capacity to maintain itself in relation to an exteriority.²⁶

²⁴ Schmitt 2005, p.10.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p.12.

²⁶ Agamben 1998, p.18.

That which does not lose itself in the flux but maintains its own inner coherence in the face of everything that confronts it as disturbing and alien is self-identical, infinite in the Hegelian sense. Although he does not use the term, what is delineated in Agamben's explication of the state of exception is something like the originary movement of abstraction by which the subject withdraws itself from the 'chaotic' materiality of nature, creating the ordered, ideal, regularised inner space, governed by laws. Agamben describes the dynamic of the state of exception as 'the capture of life in law',²⁷ the '*inclusive exclusion*'²⁸ by which legality absorbs what it can of the non-legal. Through abstraction the sovereign subject creates its own infinitude, its fixed, objectified self-identity that ensures its effective self-preservation by enabling it everywhere to mediate exteriority, making it its own. The inner space is the means through which the outer world is mastered.²⁹ Once this inner space, solidifying the world as a determinate object world, coheres as a permanent and stable structure, it comes to be assumed as what is most proper to human beings, its universal validity presupposed in all cognition: no objective experience is possible other than through it because there is no longer any unmediated access to immediacy. This is the meaning, in developing the implications of the instantiation of sovereignty through the state of exception, of Agamben's numerous analogies to the self-presuppositional structure of language³⁰ – the relation of the linguistic to the non-linguistic and of the abstract organisational structure of language to concrete instances of language use, *langue* and *parole* – and also to the relation of potentiality to actuality, the withheld capacity to do and the actual doing. The universal forms and structures of abstraction that make possible human life as something separate from mere nature, as free and self-determining as opposed to the instinctual compulsions of animal existence, come into being through the modality of the state of exception.

For Schmitt, the exception demonstrates the status of sovereign power as something superior, and not reducible, to mere law as statute – as the absolute force, *nomos*, of the political domain. Agamben, by contrast, in drawing out the implications

²⁷ *ibid.*, p.26.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p.21 (emphasis in original).

²⁹ 'The "ordering of space" that is, according to Schmitt, constitutive of the sovereign *nomos* is therefore not only a "taking of land" (*Landesnahme*)—the determination of a juridical and a territorial ordering (of an *Ordnung* and an *Ortung*)—but above all a "taking of the outside," an exception (*Ausnahme*)' (*ibid.*, p.19).

³⁰ See, for example, *ibid.*, pp.20–21, 25, 30 and 50, and Agamben 2005, pp.36 and 39–40.

of Schmitt's account, develops a theory of the state of exception as something more, not just the crisis point in which the actuality of sovereignty is revealed but the liminal zone through which the human political space comes into being in the first place. Sovereign *nomos* does not just prove itself in the state of exception: it is created through it. In Agamben's account, this is thus the mode of origin of law: 'What is at issue in the sovereign exception is not so much the control or neutralization of an excess as the creation and definition of the very space in which the juridico-political order can have validity.'³¹ *Political Theology*'s interest in the exception lies in how it functions in reaffirming the vitality of sovereign power; to that extent, Schmitt, despite taking it to its boundary-concept, continues to presuppose the priority of political order, from within which the exception, however necessary its existence, must always appear as something egregious. His view of the exception remains one from within the inner space of sovereignty. Agamben deposes this hierarchical perspective in order to reveal the state of exception as a mode of relationality through which the conceptual generality of law comes into being.³² In setting aside the Schmittian interest in reinscribing the boundary and instead seeking to explore the point of indifference between the legal and the non-legal, Agamben draws discussion of sovereignty away from the assumption ultimately shared by both Schmitt and his legal-positivist enemies, that the political is inherently justified: when that prejudice is removed, the state of exception is revealed as 'the originary structure in which law refers to life and includes it in itself by suspending it.'³³ This mode of relation by which law takes hold of life through the exception is what Agamben names 'the *ban*'.³⁴ The logic of his investigation of the paradox of sovereignty is that '*the originary relation of law to life is not application but Abandonment. The matchless potentiality of the *nomos*, its originary "force of law," is that it holds life in its ban by abandoning it.*'³⁵ As 'the originary juridico-political relation'³⁶ only by means of which can the political order come into existence, the ban gives expression to the paradox of sovereignty. For the ban names the contradictory structure of the state of exception, in which the distinction between inside and outside is both drawn and

³¹ *ibid.*, p.19.

³² 'To refer to something, a rule must both presuppose and yet still establish a relation with what is outside relation (the nonrelational). The relation of exception thus simply expresses the originary formal structure of the juridical relation' (*ibid.*).

³³ *ibid.*, p.28.

³⁴ 'From the old Germanic term that designates both exclusion from the community and the command and insignia of the sovereign' (*ibid.*).

³⁵ *ibid.*, p.29 (emphases in original).

³⁶ *ibid.*, p.109.

effaced: ‘He who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather *abandoned* by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable. It is literally not possible to say whether the one who has been banned is outside or inside the juridical order.’³⁷ To bring into question this relation of the ban is to try to think beyond sovereignty and the political.

Adorno and the Non-Identical

Agamben’s identification of the ban as the modality of the inclusive exclusion by which sovereign *nomos*, the fount of law, takes hold of and regularises the wildness of life indicates that the problem of the political is one of its form: not simply the organisation of the internal legal-political space (nowadays, the difficulties of representation and accountability in complex industrial or post-industrial consumer societies, and cognate debates) but the anterior question of the very mode of constitution of the ordered social sphere *per se*. If the political comes into existence only through the contradictory structure of the ban, and the paradox of sovereignty produced thereby, then no rationalisation of the inner space can solve the intrinsic irrationality of its foundational principle. In taking it to its outer limit, its border, where the indeterminate zone of the state of exception is located, Agamben’s analysis moves thinking on the political away from questions of rights, competencies, powers, procedures of conflict resolution, and the like, which in their restriction to the immanent sphere of political organisation and contestation necessarily have a fetishistic quality. Instead, the question of the political is drawn into the ambit of the problem of conceptual generality, the way in which the subject, as the principle of order, relates to the object, the world – how it constitutes itself as a subject and the world as an object. Divested, at the borderline, of the untroubled assumption of the validity of its own domain, political thought opens out into questions that are normally thought of as falling within the technical field of epistemology (that is, examination of the nature of the concept, the instrument of abstract generality, and the justification of claims to knowledge), while, conversely, epistemology is revealed as having an intrinsically

³⁷ *ibid.*, pp.28–9 (emphasis in original).

social, political content.³⁸ In this light, the continual legal-political metaphoricity of Adorno's seemingly abstruse, intra-philosophical, critique of the concept – the 'sovereign subject, which dictates laws to nature'³⁹, 'the sovereignty of the Spirit'⁴⁰, the 'formal juridicality of thinking'⁴¹ 'the lawful synthesis through categories'⁴² performed by the subject within the 'jurisdiction'⁴³ of thought, and so forth –, a thematics that is encountered throughout his work, should be understood in an emphatic sense, if the real significance of the critique is to be grasped: thinking, conceptuality, and sovereign power, the force of law, are one and the same. It is a central thesis of Adorno's reading of the history of epistemology, philosophy's meditation on the validity and legitimacy of its own thought, that the necessary, objective structures and laws of thinking discerned in that tradition express the compulsory logic of antagonistic society in its mode of reproduction. Understood in this way, philosophical critique and interpretation become simultaneously a deciphering of the innermost truth about society, the truth that is necessarily sublimated into the rarefied conceptual discourse of philosophy. Accordingly, epistemology can be read as a form of political theory: 'Critique of society is critique of knowledge, and vice versa'.⁴⁴ The purpose, then, of this section on Adorno is to explain in more general philosophical terms why sovereignty and the political have the structure of the exception and to link back to and amplify some of the themes developed in Chapter 3.

Agamben's investigation reveals the question of sovereignty, the constitution of the political, as being that of the relation of law to life, how law captures life within itself. In the section of *Negative Dialectics* entitled 'The Juridical Sphere', Adorno writes:

³⁸ It is symptomatic, in this context, that in his discussion of the power of the sovereign, *nomos basileus*, Agamben cites Hölderlin's translation of Pindar's fragment and his commentary, in which 'with one of those corrections so characteristic of his last translations, Hölderlin ... displaces a juridico-political problem (the sovereignty of law as the indistinction of law and violence) into the sphere of the theory of knowledge (mediation as the power of distinguishing)' (ibid., p.33).

³⁹ Adorno 2001b, 'Peephole Metaphysics'.

⁴⁰ ibid., 'Materialism Imageless'.

⁴¹ ibid., 'Rhetoric'.

⁴² ibid., 'Objectivity of the Antinomy'.

⁴³ Adorno 1982, p.23.

⁴⁴ Adorno 2005b, p.250. Correlatively, it is an obvious implication of Marx's theory of capital, modelled on Hegel's logic, that, in capitalist society, the most abstract thing, value, is also the most real thing, and therefore that the truth about society can only be discovered through the theoretical pursuit of the workings of abstraction. Schmitt is not so far away from these perceptions when he says that a society's metaphysics is reflective of its political structure (Schmitt 2005, p.46).

Law is the Ur-phenomenon of irrational rationality. In it the formal principle of equivalence becomes the norm, everyone is measured by the same standard. Such equality, in which differences perish, gives a secret impetus to inequality; persisting mythos in the midst of an only apparently demythologized humanity. The norms of the law cut short what is not covered, every experience of the specific which is not preformed, for the sake of the seamless systematic, and then raises instrumental rationality to a second reality. ... The entire juridical realm is one of definitions. Its systematic commands, that nothing shall pass into it, which could escape from its closed circle. ... This enclosure, ideological in itself, exerts real violence through the sanctions of law as the socially controlling authority, particularly in the administered world.⁴⁵

This passage on law draws together a number of the themes of Adorno's wider critique of the concept:⁴⁶ the domination of the general over the particular, of identity over non-identity (the former fixing, reifying as far as possible, through the rigidifying force of definition), the inequality that dwells within formal equality, the compulsion of equivalence towards system and self-enclosure, and the link between identity, law and violence. The mischief that Adorno describes at work in law lies not in the fact that it is so frequently employed as an instrument for the exertion of social power and injustice, but in the being of the abstract legal norm itself: 'Even according to its very form, before class-content and class-justice, it expresses domination, the yawning difference of individual interests from the whole, in which they are abstractly conglomerated.'⁴⁷ It is not that the force of abstract generality is used one-sidedly and deplorably for instrumental purposes of domination, but that domination and instrumentality exist within, structure, the form of abstraction. The legal form, like the form of the concept, is not something neutral, usable as is for good or ill, but has a power claim inscribed within it. Herein lies the problem of the concept that Adorno continually presses upon. For, as the medium of identity and order, the concept is, in the first place, inseparable from thought: there simply is no thinking other than through concepts because only through their universality is the determination of the particular possible. As Adorno remarks in admitting the truth of Kant's claim that the mind is structured so that it is incapable of thinking in the absence of the universality of reason, 'without concepts, without abstraction, that is, without the mechanisms that [Kant] ascribes to universality,

⁴⁵ Adorno 2001b, 'The Juridical Sphere'.

⁴⁶ The term 'the concept' has for Adorno much of the range of meaning that it had for Hegel (on which, see the relevant entry in Inwood 2003), but with the ontological element decisively negated.

⁴⁷ Adorno 2001b, 'Law and Fairness'.

thinking is in fact not possible ... we really would be faced with “blind intuition” ... with non-conceptualized givens, from which concepts were absent and on which no light could be thrown.⁴⁸ The concept is the means of enlightenment because through it the subject is freed from blind submersion in nature. The tendentially universalising mediation of the concept enables the human creature to break the immediate power of natural forces over it, to abstract itself. As such, the concept is inseparable from the subject’s assertion of itself, as the emergent principle of order, against nature – Agamben’s ‘life’ –, solidifying the flux into a coherent object world. However, because its very form expresses domination, the concept simultaneously obscures that which it illumines. It is, as it were, slid in front of the actual object of which it is a concept. ‘The immanent claim of the concept is its order creating invariance as opposed to the change in what it analyzes. ... The concept in itself, before all content, hypostasizes its own form against the content. Thereby, however also the identity principle: that what is solely postulated in thought-practice would be a matter-at-hand in itself, something solid, something proper. Identifying thought concretizes by means of the logical identity of the concept.’⁴⁹ Because the object is only determined through the generality of the concept, the latter becomes the measure of knowledge, the truth of the object as what is ordered and stable as against the ephemerality of the merely ontic, the transient individual thing: it is what survives, while the object passes away. The concept both makes the specific thing determinable and substitutes itself for the thing thought: as Marx perceived in relation to value, the means of mediation becomes the real in-itself of the object.⁵⁰

The immanent motivation of the concept is to perfect its own universality, to leave nothing unknown and unmediated to the subject. The purest and most extreme model, at least since Plato, of this ideality is number. In the ‘Introduction’ to his metacritique of epistemology,⁵¹ a text in which he came as close as he ever did to a programmatic statement of the principal thematics of his philosophical thought, Adorno observes of number: ‘The difficulty of defining the concept of number arises from the fact that its peculiar essence is the mechanism of concept construction, which must then

⁴⁸ Adorno 2001a, p.143.

⁴⁹ Adorno 2001b, ‘Outset from the Concept’.

⁵⁰ It is ‘the hypostasis of order with which spirit so thoroughly weaves a cover over dominated things, until it seems as though the fabric were itself what is concealed’ (Adorno 1982, p.9).

⁵¹ The volume translated under the misleading title, not Adorno’s own, *Against Epistemology*.

help in defining number. Concepts themselves involve subsumption and thus contain numerical ratio. Numbers are an arrangement for making the non-identical, dubbed ‘the Many’, commensurable with the subject, the model of unity. They bring the manifold of experience to its abstraction.’⁵² Number is the most powerful and efficient means by which the disparate and multifarious Many are arrayed in the serried order of identity, being organised and articulated to one another through the unifying point of the One; just so, the abstraction mechanism of the concept unifies and determines the multiple particulars subsumed under it. The conceptual One, as the point of origination, makes possible thought as method, coherent and lawful orderliness, a *logos* that is not rhapsodic, does not lose itself powerlessly in the object, but remains with itself, secure and self-possessed in all that it encounters. By faithfully following the laws of thought, the thinking subject can be sure that it will not go astray, falling into the errors of exaggeration and contradiction, but will stay always safe amongst the known. Thought as method means that, in principle, the same minimum number of logical categories can be used to grasp everything, making otherwise disparate multiplicity easily available and usable: ‘spirit confiscates what is unlike itself and makes it the same, its property. Spirit inventories it. Nothing may slip through the net. The principle guarantees completeness. The accountability of the stock becomes axiomatic.’⁵³ The inexorable momentum of methodical thinking towards surveyability and orderliness gives it the character of systematics, an inner logical organisation of hierarchy and subordination in which, ideally, all parts are co-ordinated with one another to form a totality, Schmitt’s homogenous medium. Such systematics, brought to a culmination only in modernity, are inherent to the subject’s conceptual mastery from the very beginning. ‘The structure of immanence as absolutely self-contained and all-inclusive is necessarily always already system, irrespective of whether it has been expressly deduced from the unity of consciousness or not.’⁵⁴ On Adorno’s account, the drive for system in thought is inherent in philosophy from the moment of its birth in the transition from mythological to rational thinking, ‘the first two system builders in the grand manner’⁵⁵ being Plato and Aristotle, and the architectonic philosophical structures of Kant and Hegel are the modern successors to the grand tradition. What is expressed in the historical

⁵² *ibid.*, p.10.

⁵³ *ibid.*, p.9.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p.28.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

development of that tradition is the abstract subject's will towards universal mediation, making itself, its *logos*, the organising principle of the world: to conquer the unknown by means of the identifying power of the concept and to overcome all forms of merely immediate, heteronomous power, thereby making itself free.⁵⁶

But the sovereign subject's self-created universality is achieved only at a price. Modelled upon mythic domination, the abstraction mechanism of the concept elevates the universal at the expense of the particular. As number expresses most perfectly, abstraction 'always comes into being through the elimination of qualities, through the reduction of qualitative distinctions to quantitative forms.'⁵⁷ Conceptual order and the determinacy of the object are made possible only through the disqualification of the world: in becoming for-us, the world is stripped of its in-itself. For law to grasp life – for nature to be made conceptual – there must, therefore, be a moment of loss, in which the unruly and disruptive qualitative element of the object, the specificity that resists abstraction, is excluded for the sake of order and stability. That which, in Schmitt's terms, cannot be subsumed, cannot be made homogenous, must be rejected and cast outside for the inner space to achieve the logical identity and universality that is its telos. This is the locus of the central term of Adorno's thought, around which all else revolves, the consciously aporetic marker 'the non-identical', a conceptual designation of that which resists conceptuality. The non-identical can only be gestured towards in this deliberately inadequate way because it is precisely the element that is not directly accessible through the conceptually discursive dimension of language. It arises through the delimiting form of the concept. When the object is subjected to identity, 'the concept is always simultaneously its negative; it cuts short what it is itself and yet cannot immediately be named, and replaces it with identity.'⁵⁸ The power claim inherent in the form of the concept, as the instrument of the mastery of sovereign subjectivity, ensures that what in the object cannot conform to identity is repressed or cut away: 'it is

⁵⁶ As Hegel articulates the logic of identity in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: 'In pressing forward to its true existence, consciousness will arrive at a point at which it gets rid of its semblance of being burdened with something alien, with what is only for it, and some sort of "other", at a point where appearance becomes identical with essence' (Hegel 1977b, pp.56–7).

⁵⁷ Adorno 2001a, p.173.

⁵⁸ Adorno 2001b, 'Particularity and the Particular'. The non-identical is thus not the same as the Marxian terminus 'use value' – use value is what identity makes of the object; the non-identical is what is suppressed in the object in its becoming a use value.

eliminated from thought, exiled from the latter's home domain.⁵⁹ The form of conceptual generality is such that it cannot tolerate or abide with the specificity of the particular but must cut it short for the sake of its own immanent order.⁶⁰ In being determined through the concept, the object is at the same time reduced for the sake of the identity claim, so that what is known is increasingly only a damaged or mutilated simulacrum. The identifying capacity of the concept determines the thing as something specific, but at the same time denies the specificity of the thing, its qualitative difference. The concept is thus simultaneously the medium of knowledge and the medium of alienation from the world: it is both what enables the subject to know the object, to bring it to determinacy, and what blocks the object off from the subject, preventing the latter from really knowing the former.⁶¹ In this sense, the concept has the form, as Agamben claims of the political, of an inclusive exclusion: it is at once the mode of the subject's universality and inherently limited and particularistic.

The contradictory structure of the concept is the flaw that, in Adorno's reading, continually brings idealist epistemologies to ruin: their subjection to 'Anaxamander's curse',⁶² under which they all labour and from which none of them can escape.⁶³ Because the ordering power of the concept is the means by which the subject, by doing violence to its own instinctual nature, learns to control both itself and the fearsome forces of nature, to attain stability and security in its self-preservation, it is almost compelled, for the sake of the maintenance of identity, to transfigure it into the ground of being itself, as what is secure and constant. 'After the unspeakable effort which it must have cost the human species, in order to establish the primacy of identity even against itself, it rejoices and basks in its victory, by turning this latter into a determination of the vanquished thing: what this last experienced, it must present as its

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, 'Indissolubility of the Something'.

⁶⁰ The concept thus reiterates 'one of the primal images of mythic violence: it amputates the incommensurable' (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, pp.8–9).

⁶¹ Following Hegel, Adorno understands the identifying capacity of the subject as something that follows a progress of historical development. This movement towards, simultaneously, universal mediation and unbridgeable distance from the world is expressed most acutely for modernity in the antinomies of Kant's ur-bourgeois philosophy. Adorno and Horkheimer comment: 'Kant combined the doctrine of thought's restlessly toilsome progress toward infinity with insistence on its insufficiency and eternal limitation. The wisdom he imparted is oracular: There is no being in the world that knowledge cannot penetrate, but what can be penetrated by knowledge is not being' (*ibid.*, p.19).

⁶² Adorno 1982, p.25.

⁶³ For commentary on the intricacies of Adorno's thinking about Kant, Hegel and idealism, see Jarvis 1997, 1998 (esp. Chps.6 and 7) and 2004, Bernstein 2004, O'Connor 2005, Martin 2006 and Coyle 2011.

in-itself.’⁶⁴ Hence, what Adorno denounced as an originary fallacy of *prima philosophia*, that what is stable and permanent is true, what is ephemeral and transient untrue.⁶⁵ Once the ordering capacity of the concept is presumed as the staging-ground of truth, then everything else must be derived from it. Pre-Socratic philosophy, the transition from mythic to rational thought, expresses a decisive moment in this formation of identity: the irrevocable break between thought and being, method and matter, and the elevation of the eternal above that which changes. And, so Adorno argues, the trajectory of all philosophy since then, from Plato onwards, has been to try to mediate that break through the primacy of the concept: so to control the object in the subject that ultimately the subject is conceived of as producing the object out of itself. But such attempts are doomed to failure – ‘the advancing *ratio*, however, has as an advancing mediation ever more ingeniously hidden that break without ever coming to master it’⁶⁶ – because the split that produces the mediation cannot then be seamlessly repaired by that same mediation. Philosophies of the primacy of the concept are condemned by their own principle: ‘Their inclusiveness *is* the break’.⁶⁷ The narrative of this failure is what Adorno finds written in the history of epistemology: a series of ever more sophisticated attempts to generate the object from the subject, to conclude a final identity of subject and object. But, despite the enormous efforts they make to deduce the world from subjective immanence, such systematic conceptual constructions always and again, at their borderline, run up against an element that defies subsumption, that, in Schmitt’s term, cannot be made homogenous because it resists total articulation through the concept.⁶⁸ Through the consistency of their own systematics, epistemologies are inexorably led up to what cannot be incorporated into the system, the exceptional element of the non-identical.

Thought that assumes the primacy of the concept inevitably finds itself caught in a bind. As Adorno puts it in his lectures on Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, on the one hand, ‘every theory of knowledge must, if it is to be a theory, that is, a coherent body of ideas, resolve the problems of identity and non-identity, subject and object, in such a

⁶⁴ Adorno 2001b, ‘On the Dialectics of Identity’.

⁶⁵ What he termed the residual theory of truth (see Adorno 1982, pp.17–20).

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p.13.

⁶⁷ *ibid.* (emphasis in original).

⁶⁸ This debilitating flaw is discerned in detail by Adorno in Husserlian phenomenology as much as in the consciously subject-centred philosophies of Kant and Hegel, but extends at least as far back as the difficulties of the mediation of form and matter evident in Aristotelian metaphysics (see Adorno 2000).

way as to shift the entire emphasis ... into the subject and draw knowledge purely from the analysis of the subject',⁶⁹ but because the object in the end cannot be wholly reduced to the subject they struggle in vain to produce a definitive, closed system. Non-identity perpetually undermines the longed-for security of stability, coherence and order.⁷⁰ Through its structure as an inclusive exclusion, the sovereignty of the concept, as with Agamben's analysis of political sovereignty, is continually dependent for its meaning on an element it can never actually know, that it must exclude, since, as they themselves demonstrate, the systematics of epistemology crumble without the support of a moment of sheer materiality, something that is not identical with thought.⁷¹ The concept thus produces a dualistic structure: like the exception in Schmitt and Agamben, the non-identical is 'exiled' from the inner space of the concept and remains held in a relation of antagonism to the concept. It is necessary for the construction of the system, hence must be included, but fatally threatens its systematic character, hence must be excluded. What is banished outside as inessential ends up being rediscovered at the centre because the conceptual system cannot exist without it. This agonised, self-defeating structure, by which thought can only constitute itself by shutting itself off from the world, the very thing it would know, gives the lie to the sovereign subject's claim to mastery, its self-glorification as possessing, in Schmitt's words, 'unlimited authority'. It is suggestive in this context that the most insistent term in Adorno's writings for naming this condition of the subject's self-entrapment through self-glorification is *der Bann*, the ban.⁷² Through the concept, the subject frees itself from nature and at the same time casts a spell over itself and nature, so remaining trapped: 'The subject – itself only a limited moment – was locked for all eternity in itself, as punishment for its deification. It gazes into the darkened heavens, in which the star of the idea or that of being would arise, as through the embrasures of a tower.'⁷³ The sovereign subject's power is also its own imprisonment. If the ban is the originary juridico-political relation, through which law takes hold of life, it is also the originary epistemological relation, through which the

⁶⁹ Adorno 2001a, p.218.

⁷⁰ Perhaps it would not be too speculative to say that international theory, as a result of the delimited form of the political, is also subject to Anaximander's curse: so long as the political has the inside/outside form it does, no closed, stable international order is ever possible.

⁷¹ As Adorno puts it apodictically in *Negative Dialectics*: 'No being without existents' (Adorno 2001b, 'Indissolubility of the Something'). That is, no conceptuality without what is irreducibly material. Epistemology has struggled to construe the ineliminable moment of the material, to make it conceptual despite everything, under the heading of 'the given', on which see Adorno 1982, Ch.3.

⁷² Usually translated as 'the spell' or 'the bane'.

⁷³ Adorno 2001b, 'Peephole Metaphysics'.

subject takes hold of the object. In both cases the subject's sovereignty, its achievement of a stable, ordered juridicality, is attained only through an inclusive exclusion, a delimitation, within its own borders, that cuts it off from the world that it dominates.

Sovereignty and Idealism

Bringing Adorno together with Schmitt and Agamben, it may be said that the problem of the political is, at root, the same as the problem of the concept: in fact, the political is – has the objective form of – a concept. In Marxian terms, it is a real abstraction.⁷⁴ This implies that the unreason of political reason, the problem of its form, is the same as the irrationality of the rational concept. In Adorno's work the critique of idealism and of the primacy of identity is articulated through the critique of the concept, as the medium of ideality, and such critique may be extended also to the political, as a keystone of what might be termed the civilisational structure of identity. Thus, when regarded from the perspective afforded by the Adornian critique of the concept, it becomes evident that, for all its rejection of the immanence of positivism and despite its interest in the exception, Schmitt's thinking on sovereignty in *Political Theology* remains very much within the ambit of the charmed circle drawn by idealism – under the spell. For Schmitt is emphatic that, while the juridico-political sphere cannot attain closure, and so must always encounter the exception, it is the true task of the sovereign, at the point of crisis in which the systematic order of society is threatened with dissolution, to make a decision, and thereby once again to separate the inside from the outside. If the state of exception is the moment at which law takes hold of life, or, in epistemological terms, the moment at which the subject takes hold of the object, it is at that moment that sovereign *nomos* demonstrates its power by cutting short the object, literally deciding – cutting, severing –, ⁷⁵ for the sake of re-establishing conceptual order: 'He decides whether there is an extreme emergency as well as what must be done to eliminate it.'⁷⁶ For Schmitt, the exception serves to reaffirm order and the authority of the sovereign subject. The decision is, must be, unmediated by the legal norm; it is a moment of sheer, immediate power, in which the force of law shows itself, where law

⁷⁴ Adorno comes close to saying as much in *Negative Dialectics*: 'society, the objective determinant of the Spirit, is just as much the epitome of subjects as their negation. In it they are unknowable and disempowered; that is why it is so desperately objective and a concept' (ibid., 'The Antagonistic Whole').

⁷⁵ The German term *entscheiden* has a similar complex of meaning.

⁷⁶ Schmitt 2005, p.7.

no longer exists, as ‘in the true sense absolute’,⁷⁷ in being applied directly to the object, grasping it and dividing it at the same time.

As the crisis that serves to reveal the sovereign’s unlimited power, the state of exception in Schmitt takes on a metaphysical significance: not only does it serve to prove the priority of sovereign power over the legal norm, but it reveals the former’s intrinsic creative, formative capacity. Sovereign *nomos* is primary because without it, without the power of the concept, there is no human world, only, in Schmitt’s words, ‘anarchy and chaos’.⁷⁸ The importance, for Schmitt, of the power named in the term sovereignty is that it in fact constitutes an objective, ordered world in which it is possible for civilised human life to take place: ‘There exists no norm that is applicable to chaos. For a legal order to make sense, a normal situation must exist, and he is sovereign who definitely decides whether this normal situation actually exists.’⁷⁹ In Schmitt’s thinking, only through sovereignty does rational sense exist in the world, which is otherwise simply chaotic. This is a quintessentially idealist trope. In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno notes that, ‘the dawning consciousness of freedom nourishes itself on the memory of the archaic impulse, not yet directed by a solidified ego. The more the ego curbs this, the more questionable pre-temporal freedom becomes to it as something chaotic.’⁸⁰ As, for the sake of order and control, meaning is increasingly located within the rationality of the subject, so the object is progressively denuded of its qualitative determinacy, its own substantiality. The model for this in modern philosophy is Kant’s conception of the activity of cognition as ‘an investment of subjectivity in non-qualitative multiplicity’,⁸¹ the object reduced to ‘something chaotically abstract’⁸² that has to be constituted by the form-giving power of the subject, and which as a result is only a mere hollowed-out shell, its in-itself being unknowable. The reduction of the pre-categorical world to chaos is, in Adorno’s reading, a historical achievement of the growing power of the sovereign subject as it masters the world: ‘sheer chaos, from which reflective spirit disqualifies the world for the sake of its own total power, is just

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p.12.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, p.13.

⁸⁰ Adorno 2001b, ‘The Pre-egoized Impulse’.

⁸¹ *ibid.*, ‘Peephole Metaphysics’.

⁸² *ibid.*

as much spirit's product as the cosmos which it establishes to revere.⁸³ The greater the identifying power of the subject, the more what is not proper to it appears as irrational and chaotic, a threat to the security of its order. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer succinctly encapsulate the result of this developmental process: 'The world becomes chaos and synthesis salvation.'⁸⁴

In the Schmittian account of the exception, the synthesising power of the sovereign is revealed as something transcendent and self-constituting, a sort of floating absolute subjectivity that can dispose over the world, in a way not dissimilar to the productive capacity of Kant's synthetic unity of apperception or Hegel's Spirit.⁸⁵ The superiority of sovereign *nomos* to posited legal norms, which is made manifest through the decision on the exception, is so important to Schmitt because thereby all the potentially destructive and centrifugal pluralism characteristic of politics in developed capitalist society is set aside and the essential unity of the ordering, creative capacity of sovereignty is demonstrated: *in extremis*, all discussion is terminated and only one person can decide on the exception. It is the great merit, in Schmitt's eyes, of Bodin's theory of sovereignty, 'what is truly impressive'⁸⁶ about it, that in the age of the breakdown of feudalism and the rise of the absolutist state he succeeded conceptually, through an emphasis on the importance of the exception, in reducing the question of sovereignty to that of unity, the One: 'by considering sovereignty to be indivisible, he finally settled the question of power in the state.'⁸⁷ Only through an ultimate principle of unity, the focal point at which sovereignty is located, can homogeneity and coherence be guaranteed in the inner space of the political, the Many reduced to the One. The systematic order of law and power within society must be attached to a unified sovereign authority or it is liable to collapse or become unworkable through the conflict of organised social forces. That supreme site of sovereign power proves itself and is, as it were, reinvigorated, rejustified, in the state of exception. The exception and the category of the decision are thus understood and conceptualised in *Political Theology* entirely from the perspective of their importance for the assertion of the order-giving

⁸³ Adorno 1982, pp.19–20.

⁸⁴ Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, pp.2–3.

⁸⁵ In *Political Theology* Schmitt asserts of the transcendence of the sovereign: 'Looked at normatively, the decision emanates from nothingness' (Schmitt 2005, pp.31–2).

⁸⁶ Schmitt 2005, p.8.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

authority and unifying power of the sovereign, and the reaffirmation of the validity of the inner, political space. The point of Schmitt's theory of sovereignty is to justify, idealistically, the power of the concept.

Inextricable from sovereignty is the idea of freedom: an individual or a political community may be said to be sovereign to the extent that it has emancipated itself from heteronomy, the compulsions of external authority (natural or social); yet, so Agamben and Adorno suggest, sovereignty is achieved only through the paradoxical, inside/outside structure of the state of exception and the non-identical. Sovereignty also suggests autonomy: for an individual, the capacity to control one's behaviour oneself; for a political community, to be self-governing, deciding on a collective mode of existence unhindered by outside power; yet, so Realism suggests, at the level of the whole no state, no matter how powerful, is ever really autonomous and free because all are caught up in the fateful condition of the international, ensnared by the irresistible requirements imposed by anarchy and its objective logic of the balance of power, which it is beyond anyone's capability to control. The sovereignty of each individual 'unit', to use the Waltzian term, produces only the international state of nature. The first part of this chapter concentrated on developing an account of sovereignty that could explain Realism's conception of political form as inherently delimited and particularistic. It demonstrated sovereignty to be a mode of ideality, aligning Schmitt's and Agamben's thinking on the political with Adorno's on the concept to show the problematic structure of sovereignty as a mode of relation between subject and world, concept and object. The second part takes this further, exploring what lies behind Realism's perception that the rationality of political sovereignty remains always ensnared in an enveloping condition of irrationality. This is done first through a summary overview of what Agamben frames as the 'debate' between Schmitt and Walter Benjamin over sovereignty, law and the state of exception, and then a reading of how Adorno takes up the thematics of this debate in his construction of the philosophy of history. In doing so, it returns to motifs from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* already broached in Chapter 3 and uses them to throw light on the Realist idea of the international state of nature.

The Schmitt–Benjamin Debate

This was conducted only obliquely. The ‘exoteric dossier’⁸⁸ consists of just a small handful of citations or allusions.⁸⁹ The ‘esoteric dossier’⁹⁰ is, however, on Agamben’s account, more substantial, constituting a ‘gigantomachy’⁹¹ over fundamental questions of political theory. In this latter sense, the Schmitt–Benjamin debate, as Agamben reads it, starts with Benjamin’s 1921 essay ‘Critique of Violence’, continues through Schmitt’s response in *Political Theology* and Benjamin’s counter in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, and culminates in the Eighth Thesis of Benjamin’s celebrated theses ‘On the Concept of History’. What is at stake in the debate as a whole is the status of sovereignty and of the juridico-political sphere as modalities of human existence: where Schmitt seeks to inscribe the exception within the ambit of sovereignty, as the element through which supreme authority imposes and justifies itself as the originary principle of the legal order, Benjamin attempts to bring the connection between sovereignty and law to nought and to shape a figure of sovereignty that is freed from law and is thereby released from the logic of the exception. If Schmitt’s account of sovereignty is idealist in its exaltation of the constitutive capacity of the sovereign as the principle of human order and rationality in a chaotic, fallen world, Benjamin’s challenge can be recognised as a subversion of idealism, a type of materialism despite its sometimes theological mode of expression.⁹² Benjamin’s approach to the question of sovereignty in these texts thus accords with what Adorno discerned as being fundamental to his intellectual sensibility: ‘From the very start his thought protested against the false claim that man and the human mind are self-constitutive and that an absolute originates in them. ... His target is not an allegedly over-inflated subjectivism but rather the notion of a subjective dimension itself.’⁹³ If sovereignty may be regarded as the hallmark of human autonomy and self-determination as against natural existence, in the debate with Schmitt, Benjamin’s ‘Medusan glance’⁹⁴ petrifies this achievement of

⁸⁸ Agamben 2005, p.52.

⁸⁹ Most famously, Benjamin’s reference to Schmitt’s theory of sovereignty in the book on the German *Trauerspiel* and his short, 1930, letter to Schmitt, in which he expresses his interest in the latter’s method of theorising sovereignty.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*

⁹¹ *ibid.*, Ch.4.

⁹² Or, if one follows Adorno’s criticism of Benjamin’s work after the latter’s Marxist turn, *because of* the theological mode (see, for example, Adorno and Benjamin 1999, p.108).

⁹³ Adorno 1983, p.235.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*

the subject into mere nature, opening a space for a human existence that would be beyond the self-delusion and self-entrapment of sovereign autonomy: ‘He reduces this autonomy to a moment of transition in a dialectical process ... and the reconciliation of men with the creation has as its condition the dissolution of all self-posed human existence.’⁹⁵

*‘Critique of Violence’*⁹⁶

The question Benjamin poses in this notoriously elusive text⁹⁷ is: what would be legitimate force? The central idea of the essay is that the objectified authority of law cannot be justified because law’s origins lie in a form of violence that has domination, conquest and self-preservation as its aim. The order and regularity of the legal sphere claim their authority from superior capacity for force, stretching back to primeval combat and victory: after war, the ‘necessary sanctioning ... of every victory ... consists precisely in recognizing the new conditions as a new “law,” quite regardless of whether they need *de facto* any guarantee of their continuation.’⁹⁸ The contradiction between the particularist origin of law in the violence of conquest and the immanent universality of its form is expressed in the fact that, having established its domination, the force that becomes law must deny its historical origin, presenting itself as something static and ever-same in its generality, as nature. Legality, Benjamin argues, has the ineluctable appearance of ‘an order imposed by fate’,⁹⁹ and law-preserving violence is cloaked in the character of a threat, the continual possibility of doom that minatory fate holds within its power.¹⁰⁰ Further, such is the problematic nature of law that neither natural nor positive law can be used to legitimate means and ends because, so Benjamin argues, legal thought fundamentally misconstrues this relation: ‘it is never reason that

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, p.236.

⁹⁶ ‘Violence’ is the usual English translation of the German term *Gewalt* in the context of Benjamin’s essay. *Gewalt*, however, has a greater range of reference than the English word is apt to convey: it may mean violence, but also force or power, with the connotation of the legitimacy thereof.

⁹⁷ One recent commentator simply throws his hands up in despair, describing the work as ‘much cited but incredibly opaque and inconclusive’ (Norris 2005b, p.281). The intention here is not to try to provide another reading of it, but only to pick out certain crucial themes. On ‘Critique of Violence’ generally, see Derrida 1990 (probably the most influential reading), Hamacher 2000 and Hanssen 2000, Ch.8.

⁹⁸ Benjamin 2004, p.240.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, p.241.

¹⁰⁰ A threat rather than ‘the deterrent that uninformed liberal theorists interpret it to be’ because ‘a deterrent in the exact sense would require a certainty that contradicts the nature of a threat and is not attained by any law, since there is always hope of eluding its arm.’ Through its existence as threat, the legal order reproduces ‘the uncertain, ambiguous sphere of fate’ (*ibid.*, pp.242 and 248).

decides on the justification of means and the justness of ends: fate-imposed violence decides on the former, and God on the latter.’¹⁰¹ This is explained by Benjamin (to be sure, somewhat elliptically) in terms of the relationship of universal and particular: the generality of law, its power over the particular, does grievous violence to the specific object that is subsumed beneath it. Law’s origin in conquest and force means that it cannot express the fullness of the particular, cannot do justice to it, but must always cut it short, forcibly curtailing it to its own abstract norms. Law and justice are therefore in irreconcilable opposition:

An insight that is uncommon only because of the stubborn prevailing habit of conceiving those just ends as ends of a possible law—that is, not only as generally valid (which follows analytically from the nature of justice) but also as capable of generalization, which as could be shown, contradicts the nature of justice. For ends that in one situation are just, universally acceptable, and valid are so in no other situation, no matter how similar the situations may be in other respects.¹⁰²

If the fateful violence of legality is irreconcilable with just ends, this throws a decisive light, in Benjamin’s text, on the origins of law: myth. The violence of mythic gods, a non-mediate violence that is ‘primarily a manifestation of their will ... establishes a law far more than it punishes the infringement of a law’.¹⁰³ Benjamin instances Niobe, who is punished not because her boastfulness contravenes the law but because it challenges the power of the gods, of fate, and so she must suffer retribution. This ‘immediate violence in mythic manifestations proves closely related, indeed identical, to lawmaking violence’.¹⁰⁴ The violence that establishes the ordered political space of legal regulation is of the same type as natural, mythic violence,¹⁰⁵ and so the juridico-political sphere is hopelessly entangled in the closed, violent world of myth, guilt and retribution. Human law is immanent to the natural order and reproduces it. So, law-making violence, in the moment of its instantiation ‘specifically establishes as law not an end unalloyed by violence but one necessarily and intimately bound to it, under the title of power. Lawmaking is powermaking, assumption of power’.¹⁰⁶ Sovereignty,

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, p.247.

¹⁰² *ibid.*, pp.247–8.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, p.248.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Benjamin explicitly associates myth with the drawing of boundaries: ‘the establishing of frontiers, the task of “peace” after all wars of the mythic age, is the primal phenomenon of all lawmaking violence’ (*ibid.*, pp.248–9).

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*, p.248.

as the principle of human autonomy and law-making, is thus necessarily implicated in ‘the gravely problematic nature’¹⁰⁷ of law, its origin in myth. Whatever else may be said of the endlessly vexed question of Benjamin’s figure of an authentic sovereignty in this text, ‘divine violence’¹⁰⁸ it is certain that it is intended to have broken not with force but with myth, to be a form of universality that expresses rather than dominates the particular: ‘Mythic violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake; divine violence is pure power over all life for the sake of the living.’¹⁰⁹

Response and Counter Response

Agamben reads *Political Theology* as, thematically, a riposte to ‘Critique of Violence’.¹¹⁰ Where, ‘as a critic of force, Benjamin as it were revokes the unity of the subject to mythic turmoil in order to comprehend such unity as itself being only a natural condition’¹¹¹ and seeks to uncouple force from myth to make possible a different conception of sovereignty, in *Political Theology* Schmitt attempts to re-establish an inseverable link between sovereignty and law and to cut off the possibility, raised by Benjamin, of a force or authority separate from legal order. This, Agamben suggests, is the polemical function of the state of exception in *Political Theology*: ‘The state of exception is the space in which [Schmitt] tries to capture Benjamin’s idea of a pure violence and to inscribe anomie within the very body of the *nomos*. According to Schmitt, there cannot be a pure violence—that is, a violence absolutely outside the law—because in the state of exception it is included in the law through its very exclusion.’¹¹² In the state of exception the sovereign operates, *a fortiori*, beyond the limits of the legal order; in this space sovereign power is therefore anomic in that its action cannot be governed by posited statute law but is rather immediate and direct. Thus Schmitt seeks to claim anomic, pure violence for law; indeed, to attach it necessarily to law. Agamben also suggests that the metaphysical significance attributed

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, p.247.

¹⁰⁸ Adorno notes that ‘Critique of Violence’ belongs to a period of Benjamin’s intellectual career in which he still ‘sought to conjure up “essences” directly’ (Adorno 1983, p.233).

¹⁰⁹ Benjamin 2004, p.250.

¹¹⁰ Schmitt does not refer directly to Benjamin’s essay, but it was published in a journal, the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaften und Sozialpolitik*, that Schmitt contributed to frequently at the time and Agamben plausibly suggests that it is highly unlikely that, as a regular reader of the journal, Schmitt was not aware of it (Agamben 2005, pp.52–3).

¹¹¹ Adorno 1983, p.236.

¹¹² Agamben 2005, p.54.

by Schmitt to the sovereign decision is a response to Benjamin's text. For if Benjamin proposes a 'pure' violence that lies outside the dualism of constituting power and constituted power, the category of the decision reconnects anomic violence to law: Schmitt counters Benjamin 'with the figure of a power that neither makes nor preserves law, but suspends it. Similarly, it is in response to Benjamin's idea of an ultimate undecidability of all legal problems that Schmitt affirms sovereignty as the place of the extreme decision.'¹¹³ Against Benjamin, the decision is elevated as a moment of surpassing significance.

Benjamin's famous citation of Schmitt in the book on the German baroque *Trauerspiel*¹¹⁴ is then, in Agamben's reading, a counter to this reformulation of the theory of sovereignty. Schmitt considered 17th-century thinkers to be exemplary in their appreciation of the interconnection of sovereignty and the exception¹¹⁵ and Benjamin in his study of baroque drama also gives central importance to questions of sovereignty and the exception, but to quite different effect. Where for Schmitt's political theology the transcendence of the sovereign in relation to legal order and of God in relation to creation stand in analogy, Benjamin shows that while the sovereign is the focus of the German baroque *Trauerspiel*, what characterises its conception is the loss of a perspective of transcendence: 'The level of the state of creation, the terrain on which the *Trauerspiel* is enacted, also unmistakably exercises a determining influence on the sovereign. However highly he is enthroned over subject and state, his status is confined to the world of creation; he is the lord of creatures, but he remains a creature.'¹¹⁶ It is the task of the sovereign to exclude¹¹⁷ the state of exception, but in the absence of possible transcendence this produces not the absolute authority of the decision, but a near perpetual crisis of indecision: 'The prince, who is responsible for making the decision to proclaim the state of emergency, reveals, at the first opportunity, that he is almost

¹¹³ *ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Hanssen 2000 provides a good introduction to some of the issues of time, nature and transcendence involved in this famous text.

¹¹⁵ Schmitt 2005, p.9.

¹¹⁶ Benjamin 1977, p.85.

¹¹⁷ Samuel Weber suggests that in citing Schmitt here Benjamin at the same time subtly alters him: for the former, the meaning of the state of exception is that it must be 'removed' in each particular instance, whereas Benjamin argues that the function of the baroque sovereign is to 'exclude' the state of exception totally, i.e. not simply to reinscribe the inside/outside borderline periodically but to produce immanence because, with the crisis of the theological view of the world, there is no more transcendence (Weber 2008, p.186).

incapable of making a decision',¹¹⁸ and so becomes split, veering between the character poles of tyrant and martyr. The state of exception, which for Schmitt reveals the majesty of sovereignty, in Benjamin's reading exposes only the crisis of subjectivity, as the sovereign subject is cut off from anything beyond itself and, in its immanence, is reduced to helpless arbitrariness. Bereft of transcendence and confined to the state of creation, the guilt-context of mythic nature, the glorification of the sovereign is experienced by the baroque as at the same time a sort of historical disaster, 'in which the sphere of creatures and the juridical order are caught up in a single catastrophe'.¹¹⁹

The Eighth Thesis

The final text in Agamben's dossier is Benjamin's last rewriting of Schmitt, in the theses 'On the Concept of History' from 1940.¹²⁰ The opening of the Eighth Thesis reads: 'The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that accords with this insight. Then we will clearly see that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against fascism.'¹²¹ Characteristic of the Theses as a whole is an emphatic rejection of historicism and of any conception of history as linear progress, a complacent belief that, so Benjamin argues, seduced the social-democratic left, rendering it incapable of understanding the rise of fascism and helpless against it. If the political space, once considered the scene of the pursuit of the good life, does not trace a historical path of movement towards rational perfection but rather descends into the vortex of violence unleashed by fascism, then the meaning of history as a whole must be rethought. What the Hitlerian state of emergency¹²² reveals is what in any case 'the tradition of the oppressed teaches', that history has never escaped from being a state of emergency. The state of exception may be the modality through which the rationality of the political sphere comes into being, but it is also what condemns it to irrationality, domination and oppression. In this way, all the movement of history in fact takes place within stasis. From the perspective

¹¹⁸ Benjamin 1977, p.71. The exemplar in the English *Trauerspiel* would be the proverbial indecision of Hamlet.

¹¹⁹ Agamben 2005, p.57.

¹²⁰ For two especially insightful readings, see Tiedemann 1989 and Hamacher 2005.

¹²¹ Benjamin 2006, p.392. 'State of emergency' is another possible translation of *Ausnahmezustand*, or 'state of exception', one with a more obviously situational slant.

¹²² Agamben notes that the Nazi Reich proclaimed a state of emergency in 1933 that was never repealed (Agamben 2005, p.57).

afforded by the latest, extreme state of emergency, history is to be understood as still prehistory. So long as it is tied to the dynamic of the state of exception, no actual change, no real bettering of human existence is possible; only once history is recognised as a continual state of emergency, the subject's glorification of its sovereignty as its self-destruction, will it become possible to begin to think what might be really different, 'a real state of emergency':¹²³ 'The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are "still" possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.'¹²⁴

Adorno and the Exception

Where for Schmitt it is through the state of exception that the human absolute of sovereignty is affirmed, for Benjamin it leads to fascism. Where Schmitt seeks to articulate sense and order to the sovereign subject, Benjamin sees the latter as itself mythic: only through its downfall could freedom, a true sovereignty, come about. For Benjamin, sovereignty, as myth, remains always caught within the fallen sphere of mere nature. The principle thematics of this debate find their continuation in Adorno's thought. The importance of Benjamin for the development of Adorno's thinking was considerable:¹²⁵ the latter's move away from Neo-Kantianism, rejection of Heideggerian ontology and assimilation of Marxian materialism during the 1920s were all, in various ways and to varying degrees, mediated through the prism of Benjamin's thought and writings, and nowhere was this more significant for Adorno than in the construction of the philosophy of history.¹²⁶ Benjamin's deposing of the sovereign subject was the medium of Adorno's rethinking of the Hegelian teleology of the absolute subject and of the meaning of the critique of political economy, as well as of the decisive criticism of socialist convictions that the movement of history was on the side of the proletariat. The philosophy of history elaborated in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* stands at the confluence of several very powerful currents of thought, and not the least of these is the motif of

¹²³ Benjamin 2006, p.392.

¹²⁴ *ibid.* (emphasis in original).

¹²⁵ For a useful general account of the significance of Benjamin for Adorno's thought and of their correspondence, see Buck-Morss 1977, *passim*. For a perspective from the Benjaminian side, see Wolin 1994, Ch.6. For a typically trenchant insight into what is at issue in the so-called Adorno–Benjamin debate of the 1930s, see Hullot-Kentor 2006, pp.169–79.

¹²⁶ Evidenced as early as Adorno's 1931 lecture 'The Idea of Natural History' (Adorno 1984).

the identity of the archaic and the modern that was thematic in Benjamin's thinking. His 'Medusan glance', the ability to divest historical materials of their subjective intentionality and to read them as ur-historical, second nature, served as a model for Adorno's thought on the history of constitutive subjectivity and idealism. Where Benjamin revoked the unity of the subject to mythic turmoil, Adorno interprets idealism, subjectivity, identity and the concept, as themselves mythic, so that the break between myth and rationality marks both reflective difference and speculative identity.

Robert Hullot-Kentor notes that Adorno's first ideas for the thematics of the 'Excursus' on Odysseus were developed around the figure not of the wandering Ithacan but of Oedipus. However, he 'ultimately focused this study on Odysseus rather than Oedipus because, while both are classical figures of heroic intellect, Homer stands on the border of Western civilization between history and prehistory in a way that Sophocles does not.'¹²⁷ On this historical borderline, the point where the darkness of the ancient mythical world and the luminous clarity of the ordered, rational one touch, the desperate struggles of Odysseus, the proto-bourgeois and the first sovereign subject, are played out.¹²⁸ Odysseus's subjectivity is formed at the extreme and as the epic demonstrates, the hero's self-identity, the division between inside and outside, is created by way of the continual encounter with non-identity. The multiplicity of the scattered and diffuse is essential to the formation of the One of identity:

the knowledge which makes up his identity and enables him to survive has its substance in the experience of diversity, distraction, disintegration; the knowing survivor is also the man who exposes himself most daringly to the threat of death, thus gaining the hardness and the strength to live. ... Odysseus ... throws himself away, so to speak, in order to win himself; he achieves his estrangement

¹²⁷ Hullot-Kentor 2006, p.36.

¹²⁸ Adorno and Horkheimer suggest that the thematic of the coming into being of conceptual unity that they read in the *Odyssey* 'is already true in a profound sense of the *Iliad*. The anger of the mythical son of a goddess against the rational warrior king and organizer; the hero's undisciplined inactivity; finally, the enlistment of the victorious, doomed hero in a cause which is national, Hellenic, and no longer tribal, an allegiance mediated by mythic loyalty to his dead comrade—all these reflect the entwinement of history and prehistory' (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, pp.37–8). If the two epics, one of adventure, the other of war, are connected in this way, then Agamben's assertion that the relation of the sovereign ban 'is more original than the Schmittian opposition between friend and enemy, fellow citizen and foreigner' (Agamben 1998, p.110) must be rejected. Rather, they should be seen as co-temporal and co-extensive moments of one unfolding historical process. This would provide a way of linking the inside/outside theory of the political Schmitt develops in *Political Theology* with the friend–enemy distinction he elaborates in *The Concept of the Political*.

from nature by abandoning himself to nature, trying his strength against it in all his adventures.¹²⁹

Through repeatedly throwing himself away, casting himself into the crucible of circulation, upon the sea, Odysseus's self-identity crystallises. The archaic forces that he encounters are the material on which his self-preserving will is tested and gains form, as he tries to overcome the oppressive power of that which simply is and always has been, and which must be accepted because it cannot be escaped. If it is indeed the case that, in their ineluctability, the mythical monsters and demons that oppose him 'represent, as it were, petrified contracts and legal claims dating from primeval times',¹³⁰ then what is preserved in them is the origin of law in the hopeless, closed structure of the endless cyclicity of nature, the domination of blind nature over all the individual things it subsumes. The primeval powers embody the immemorial entanglement of fate, law and guilt. They are 'constituted by repetition',¹³¹ and, as such, like the punishment myths of Tantalus, Sisyphus and the Danaids, are 'figures of compulsion'¹³² who live under a curse. 'Mythical inevitability is defined by the equivalence between the curse, the abominable act which expiates it, and the guilt arising from that act, which reproduces the curse. All law in history up to now bears the trace of this pattern.'¹³³ Law as the perpetual inheritance of guilt continually reinscribes mythic timelessness. The conflict that takes place at the edge of the world is thus one between this dark, archaic, irrational legality, experienced by prehistoric society as enveloping, and the emergent ordering power of Odysseus's rationality. Through his own reason, Odysseus struggles to free himself from archaic unreason, to liberate himself from the senseless compulsions of nature. Only by doing so can he be sovereign and self-determining. But the only way out he finds, in his extremity, is really no way. 'In myth each moment of the cycle pays off the preceding moment and thereby helps to establish the continuity of guilt as law. Against this Odysseus fights. The self represents rational universality against the inevitability of fate. But as it finds the universal and the inevitable already

¹²⁹ Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.38.

¹³⁰ *ibid.*, p.45.

¹³¹ *ibid.*

¹³² *ibid.*

¹³³ *ibid.*, p.46.

inextricably entwined, its rationality necessarily takes a restrictive form, that of an exception.¹³⁴

The struggle against myth can only take the form of an exception because the principle of Odysseus's success is the same as that of the mythic world that encompasses him: domination and force. As he tests his strength against the ancient powers of nature that threaten his existence, confronting the 'old demons' at the 'distant margins'¹³⁵ of the world, Odysseus is ever and again compelled to acknowledge his own weakness: nature is too strong to be conquered directly by the enfeebled, shipwrecked, abandoned human. Recognising the superior might of nature and conceding defeat in advance, Odysseus wins his survival through internalising the dominating legality of the powers of myth that he confronts, subduing the disintegrative impulses of his instinctual nature through the emergent unity of that masterful self in the course of his adventures. Because he cannot defeat the monsters in open combat, he escapes them by taking into himself the power they represent, making himself akin to what he fears in order to survive it; his universal rationality, which the epic celebrates, is an extorted homage to the irrational force of law of the mythical powers, 'the inevitability of fate'. His own self becomes the dominating power, the giver of law. As the terrified mimesis of the superior force of mythic power, Odysseus's rationality can never properly escape myth or transcend it, but can only except itself from it, ensuring its own self-preservation while remaining trapped. What is dramatised in the wandering of Odysseus is the process of the formation of the unified, sovereign self as a repeated state of exception, the life-and-death encounters with the destructive forces of nature as a series of states of emergency. Again and again, at the outer margins of the known, Odysseus is thrown into extreme situations in which his very survival is at stake and in which, for the sake of the preservation of himself and his companions, he must decide and act.¹³⁶ What Odysseus decides is to negate the power that nature has over him by imperiously cutting himself off from it, rejecting its diffuseness and sensuality as irrational and chaotic. The episode of the lotus eaters exemplifies the fateful historical dynamic unleashed thereby.

¹³⁴ *ibid.* 'An exception' could be translated (as it is in Adorno and Horkheimer 1992, p.123) as 'the exception'. In the German original the crucial last sentence reads: 'Weil er aber Allgemeines und Unausweichliches ineinander verschränkt vorfindet, nimmt seine Rationalität notwendig beschränkende Form an, die der Ausnahme' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1988, p.66).

¹³⁵ Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.38.

¹³⁶ 'The exception, which is not codified in the existing legal order, can at best be characterized as a case of extreme peril, a danger to the existence of the state, or the like' (Schmitt 2005, p.6).

‘Whoever tastes their food is as much in thrall as those who listen to the Sirens’ song or are touched by the wand of Circe. ... Self-preserving reason cannot permit such an idyll ... among its own people.’¹³⁷ Intoxicated by the lotus flower, Odysseus’s men lose their objectifying reason and regress to a more archaic condition, supine and passive, ‘an illusion of bliss, a dull aimless vegetating, as impoverished as the life of animals. At best, it would be an absence of the awareness of unhappiness. But happiness contains truth within itself. It unfolds from suffering removed.’¹³⁸ Self-abandonment in blind nature is not truth but subjection to heteronomy. Odysseus’s decision, however, contains within it the contradiction of the dialectic of enlightenment and of the state of exception as the modes through which humans think to gain freedom and autonomy for themselves:

The enduring Odysseus is ... right not to endure life among the Lotus-eaters. Against them he asserts their own cause, the realization of utopia through historical work, whereas simply abiding within an image of bliss deprives them of their strength. But in being exerted by rationality, by Odysseus, this right is inevitably drawn into the realm of wrong. His immediate action is one which reasserts domination. Self-preserving reason can no more tolerate this bliss “near the rim of the world” than the more dangerous form it takes in later stages. The indolent defectors are fetched back to the galleys: “I had to use force to bring them back to the ships, and they wept on the way, but once on board I dragged them under the benches and left them in irons.”¹³⁹

In the land of the lotus eaters, as in the domains of Circe, Polyphemus and the Sirens, where rational law does not reach, Odysseus learns to hold himself together, maintaining the unity of his self through the denial of the seductive fascination of diffuse nature, and achieving the all-important aim of self-preservation. Those who have been enticed beyond the limits by the promise of sensual bliss, at the cost of the destruction of their own reason and self-consciousness, are forcibly brought back within the bounds of the little, vulnerable floating ship of state of which Odysseus is sovereign. The line that divides the inside, safety and reason, from the outside, dissolution and myth, is drawn by force, the principle of myth. Odysseus’s sovereign *Gewalt* is thus both legitimate and illegitimate: legitimate because it breaks humans free of helpless

¹³⁷ Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.49.

¹³⁸ *ibid.*

¹³⁹ *ibid.*, pp.49–50. Odysseus’s actions are thus the ur-form of Schmittian decisionism, which only repeats the contradiction that the hero himself could not escape: ‘he makes sacrifice the formal condition of his own rational decision. This decision is always carried out within the terms of the primeval judgment on which the sacrificial situation is based’ (*ibid.*, p.44).

enthralment to the power of nature; illegitimate because in doing so it reinstates dominating violence as the ordering principle of human freedom, establishing myth at the centre of reason and cutting humans off from the utopia that the lotus also represents, 'the promise of a state in which the reproduction of life is independent of conscious self-preservation, the bliss of satiety uncoupled from the utility of planned nutrition',¹⁴⁰ the experience of the object as more than the drudgery of use value. In separating humans from nature, sovereign violence forbids them to know it, definitively placing the wildness and disordered materiality of the world beyond the border. The universality of abstractive reason denies and blocks off the fulfilling experience of the particular. Where, as in Polyphemus's cave, Odysseus cannot use force directly, he escapes through cunning, adapting himself and overthrowing the power of the archaic monster with the trick of the name, a ruse of self-denying reason. In both cases, Odysseus's all-encompassing rationality is created only through self-delimitation and estrangement from the nature that it seeks to master. By the very principle of its being, it can never know the whole, the absolute, but is condemned only to be an exception. The philosophy of history developed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* thus fulfils the Benjaminian injunction, from the Eighth Thesis, to develop a conception of history in which the state of exception is understood not as a passing, momentary phenomenon in a linear progression, but as the rule. As Adorno and Horkheimer construe it, in the epic the diverse myths of Odysseus's wanderings are unified into a coherent narrative in which is enacted the movement by which human rationality frees itself from subjection to the repetitive cycles of overpowering nature and becomes its own master, sovereign and self-determining. What their reading reveals is that this freedom, the security of the rationalised inner space, is no such thing because it comes about only through the modality of the state of exception; that in setting himself apart from nature Odysseus remains captive to it. Ever since the cunning Odysseus, history has been a permanent state of exception.

State of Nature

Odysseus's mimesis of death, his rejection of the substantiality of nature in favour of the unifying power of the abstract self, is emblematic of the development of

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p.50.

the generality and order of the concept. The sovereign becomes the sovereign because, without shrinking back in fear, he is able to take into himself the negative power of death and make himself a self through it, sacrificing his natural being and objectifying himself.¹⁴¹ If the concept – abstraction, the self, the political –, is the means of escape from nature, it arises through natural violence, internalised to produce ordered rationality. In *Homo Sacer* Agamben traces this conjunction back to sources almost as ancient as the Homeric narratives, citing passages from Hesiod, Solon and Pindar. Of the Pindaric verse on sovereign *nomos* he comments: ‘What is decisive is that the poet ... defines the sovereignty of the *nomos* by means of a justification of violence. The fragment’s meaning becomes clear only when one understands that at its center lies a scandalous unification of the two essentially antithetical principles that the Greeks call *Bia* and *Dike*, violence and justice. *Nomos* is the power that, “with the strongest hand,” achieves the paradoxical union of these opposites.’¹⁴² These early Greek poets and law-givers articulate what the *Odyssey* describes, the implication of order and justice with violence. For Agamben, ‘Pindar’s fragment on the *nomos basileus* contains the hidden paradigm guiding every successive definition of sovereignty: the sovereign is the point of indistinction between violence and law, the threshold on which violence passes over into law and law passes over into violence.’¹⁴³ The contradiction contained within this paradigm is what, in Agamben’s account, animates the controversy between Plato and the Sophists over the priority of *nomos* or *physis* and then reappears, unresolved, in the modern epoch in Hobbes’s theory of sovereignty, so influential within IR. In Hobbes’s contractarian conception, all the members of the commonwealth, for the sake of their survival and the possibility of leading a civilised life, cede their own particularity, their own natural violence, to the sovereign, who stands both above and within them all.¹⁴⁴ In this way, the citizens are removed from the dreadful condition of the state of nature and given a regularised, lawful and determinate existence. The logic of sovereignty in the Hobbesian account is that of exception or exclusion: one is set apart so that all others,

¹⁴¹ Adorno and Horkheimer’s account of the development of the self and of conceptuality in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* obviously plays on Hegel’s Master–Slave dialectic in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel 1977b, pp. 111–19) but it is also developed beyond Hegel’s intersubjective context.

¹⁴² Agamben 1998, p. 31.

¹⁴³ *ibid.*, pp. 31–2.

¹⁴⁴ Hobbes is emphatic that ‘this is more than consent, or concord; it is a real unity of them all, in one and the same person’ (Hobbes 1994, p. 109). The citizens of the commonwealth are constituted as such only through the sovereign: ‘in him consisteth the essence of the commonwealth’ (*ibid.*). At this central point in his account of the constitution of political being, Hobbes, for all his nominalism, is objectively driven towards dialectics: the universal is not merely external and classificatory but is *in* the particular, which does not become determinate other than through the power of the universal.

by being identical to him, may be identical to each other.¹⁴⁵ In the sovereign, as the fount of law, is summated all the natural violence of society, which in the course of history is not overcome or left behind as archaic so much as massively concentrated into a single point of unity. Agamben observes: ‘It is important to note that in Hobbes the state of nature survives in the person of the sovereign, who is the only one to preserve its natural *ius contra omnes*. Sovereignty thus presents itself as an incorporation of the state of nature in society, or, if one prefers, as a state of indistinction between nature and culture, between violence and law, and this very indistinction constitutes specifically sovereign violence.’¹⁴⁶ The Hobbesian logic of exception means that the sovereign both stands at the centre of the ordered space of identity, the scene of the progressive movement of history, and is external to it, still within the timeless and anarchic condition of the state of nature. The clear distinction between inside and outside, subject and object, marked by the border, can only come into being through the figure of the sovereign, in whom precisely that distinction is blurred or rendered meaningless because he exists simultaneously in both spheres. The historical attempt of society to separate itself off as a secure inner space decisively distinguished from disparate nature is thus continually brought to ruin because through its own principle of constitution it remains caught within the state of nature. Try as it may to free itself, to

¹⁴⁵ Exactly the same logic of exception is at work in Marx’s development of the value form in the opening chapters of Volume 1 of *Capital*. As the network of exchanges widens, so a single commodity is progressively precipitated out, excepted, as the general equivalent, money – the pure identity of the money form crystallises through the continual encounter with non-identity in the process of circulation. All commodities are identical with one another and may be exchanged against one another because they are all identical to the one set apart, the money form of value. Through the general equivalent the infinite variety of the world of commodities is unified and articulated into a systematics, and only if one commodity is excluded as money can an objective and coherent world of continual, lawful exchange come into being. An instinctive recognition of the connection between the development of the sovereignty of money and the logic of political sovereignty is evident in the metaphoricity Marx employs in exploring the mysteries of exchange and of money, ‘the guardian of the commodities’ (ibid., p.189): ‘An individual, A, for instance, cannot be “your majesty” to another individual, B, unless majesty in B’s eyes assumes the physical shape of A, and, moreover, changes facial features, hair and many other things, with every new “father of his people”’ (Marx 1990, p.143); and ‘Determinations of reflection [*Reflexionsbestimmungen*] of this kind are altogether very curious. For instance, one man is king only because other men stand in the relation of subjects to him. They, on the other hand, imagine that they are subjects because he is king’ (ibid., p.149). A further, proleptic, awareness of the Adornian idea of the ‘spell’ of conceptuality and sovereignty is suggested by Marx’s contemplated alteration of this famous footnote: ‘In “Supplements and amendments to the first volume of Capital” it is noted that Marx replaced the word “king” with “witch”. “An old woman’s witch-like character exists only in her relationship to superstitious peasants, but the old woman is only valid as witch for the peasants because she appears to have the character of a witch without their help”’ (Reichelt 2007, p.19). Everything can be exchanged for money, but money, the ultimate principle of unity, cannot be exchanged for itself (‘money has no price’, ibid. p.189). Money constitutes the context of immanence of exchange and is therefore, like the sovereign, the borderline element of the system; it is also, as the general equivalent, the original locus of fetishism, in that value appears to inhere in it intrinsically, by nature.

¹⁴⁶ Agamben 1998, p.35.

harden itself against the outside, it remains trapped. ‘Insofar as it is sovereign, the *nomos* is necessarily connected with both the state of nature and the state of exception’.¹⁴⁷

The account of the development of identity given in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and developed throughout Adorno’s work, explains this paradoxical, inside/outside position of the sovereign and the continued existence of political being within the state of nature. Because Odysseus’s self-preserving reason is created through the imitation of what threatens him, repressing diffuse nature within himself and compelling his companions to do likewise, it cannot truly free itself from the encompassing power of nature that it only mimics. Hence the combination in Odysseus of force and cunning, the two modalities of his success, neither of which is able to liberate the hero permanently from what is experienced as the prevailing disintegrative or destructive threat of non-identity. As Hobbes’s theory of sovereignty so compellingly suggests, the constituting principle of political reason is the same as that of the unreason against which it was created. It can therefore only be a limited exception, because as parts of nature humans cannot break nature. It is too powerful. For so long as the universal, abstractive rationality of sovereignty results from the hostile and antagonistic rejection of the material specificity of the world – the attempt to dominate nature –, it can only take a delimited, bounded form.¹⁴⁸ And for so long as the order of society is founded upon power and domination, the internalisation of mythic violence, it remains caught within the state of nature, necessarily attached to that from which it attempts to seal itself off. The sovereign, as the fount of unity, may be able, through the force of identity, to guarantee the ordered and restricted political space that seemingly removes the citizens from the state of nature, but he cannot free himself from it: he is fixed paradoxically athwart the divide, both inside and outside. Sovereignty, the condition of

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p.37.

¹⁴⁸ This is why a world state, perennial object of speculation in IR (Hans Morgenthau was particularly interested in the idea – see Morgenthau 2006, pp.505–20, Craig 2007 and Scheuermann 2009, pp.122–34), is not merely empirically impracticable (the world is too large, too disparate and uneven to be conquered by any one state or for a global federation to transform itself into a global union) or morally undesirable (world government would inevitably turn into world despotism and then into world civil war), but a theoretical impossibility. It is in the concept of the political, just as it is in the concept of the concept, to have an outside: the inside space is formed *against* the outside. A world state would posit that the object would go completely into its concept, without remainder, that there would be a final identity of object and concept, something that Adorno demonstrates is impossible, ultimately for the simple reason that the world is not conceptual and cannot be made completely so – it is material.

freedom, is also the condition of continued entrapment.¹⁴⁹ As much is suggested by the episode of the Sirens in the *Odyssey*. The call of the Sirens' song is inescapable; their 'allurement is that of losing oneself in the past.'¹⁵⁰ However, Odysseus is intent upon securing his survival through separating himself from the world of the Sirens, establishing 'a fixed order of time ... to liberate the present moment from the power of the past by banishing the latter beyond the absolute boundary of the irrecoverable and placing it, as usable knowledge, in the service of the present.'¹⁵¹ To listen to the Sirens' song is inimical to this striving for stable order. To do so would be to lose one's identity, 'suspending ... the boundary between oneself and other life'. But not to listen to it would also be fatal, because the song contains something that may not be definitively lost or denied, something in the absence of which the self-posed human systematic order is rendered senseless: the substantiality and compelling meaningfulness of the materiality of nature, the non-identical that contains 'a promise of joy which has threatened civilization at every moment.'¹⁵² Odysseus's reason is contradictorily tied to what the Sirens represent – to establish itself it must both break itself free from the fascination of nature and remain in connection with it.¹⁵³ His solution combines cunning and power. He blocks the ears of his companions with wax, stunting their sensory capacities and cutting them off from the allure of nature so that they may be removed from temptation, from what threatens their identity. Submitting in this way, they are kept safe, in their restriction, fixated on rowing in unison with all their might: 'Workers must look ahead with alert concentration and ignore anything which lies to one side. The urge toward distraction must be grimly sublimated in redoubled exertions. Thus the workers are made practical.'¹⁵⁴ Himself, as the only one who is permitted to listen, he has lashed tightly to the mast, so that he may hear the Sirens' song but escape

¹⁴⁹ Agamben observes that, 'what has been banned is delivered over to its own separateness and, at the same time, consigned to the mercy of the one who abandons it—at once excluded and included, removed and at the same time captured. The age-old discussion in juridical historiography between those who conceive exile to be a punishment and those who instead understand it to be a right and refuge has its root in this ambiguity of the sovereign ban' (Agamben 1998, p.110). This precisely expresses the situation of the subject under the spell, banned from nature and at once inside and outside it. He also notes the 'semantic ambiguity' by which "banned" in Romance languages originally meant both "at the mercy of" and "out of free will, freely", both "excluded, banned" and "open to all, free" (ibid.).

¹⁵⁰ Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.25.

¹⁵¹ ibid.

¹⁵² ibid., p.26.

¹⁵³ Although the epic does not say so, if this is correct it perhaps suggests that Odysseus does not merely choose to listen to the Sirens but must do so. As a natural being, he cannot separate himself totally from nature, but the form of relation he finds reproduces entrapment.

¹⁵⁴ ibid., p.26.

its destructive spell, experiencing, longingly and at a distance, the bliss of non-identity that is at the same time rendered forever unattainable.¹⁵⁵ Forcibly delimiting himself, held secure by the bonds that physically draw the boundary, as the sovereign, he is situated both inside and outside the state of nature. Through such desperate measures, he and his men survive, as an exception.

The Turn to Non-Identity

For Hobbes the awful power of the sovereign makes him a ‘*Mortal God*’,¹⁵⁶ in Schmitt’s political theology, looking to the 17th century, the sovereign, with his ‘unlimited power’, is God secularised, the decision a miracle. Although, as Adorno and Horkheimer note, he was ‘regarded by many as a deity’,¹⁵⁷ Odysseus’s wanderings suggest something less exalted. So far from being the majestic, self-constituting locus of meaning and truth, the sovereignty of Man comes into existence solely through violence and cunning. Only over agonising millennia was freedom, laboriously and with infinite pains, wrested from nature: ‘Humanity had to inflict terrible injuries on itself before the self—the identical, purpose-directed, masculine character of human beings—was created’.¹⁵⁸ Reflection on the character of that freedom, the inclusive exclusion of the concept, shows it to be a fraud, the desperate transfiguration of the self-violence needed to produce the break from subjection to the natural context. Viewed thus, the philosophical tradition’s abstract systems of metaphysics and ontology are the reflection forms, unaware of themselves, of the drive to dominate nature.¹⁵⁹ The truth of the sovereign self is blind and terrified self-preservation, the compulsion of identity the will to survive at all costs.¹⁶⁰ ‘Without the act of violence of method, society and spirit, substructure and superstructure would hardly have been possible. And that subsequently

¹⁵⁵ Something of the unresolved, ongoing nature of Odysseus’s predicament can be discerned, handed down through the centuries, even in the structure of Kant’s epistemology. On the one hand, as Adorno noted (Adorno 2001b, ‘Preponderance of the Object’), Kant refused to allow knowledge to seal itself off in meaningless tautology and acknowledged inalienable non-identity in the form of the thing-in-itself, the cause of all appearances. On the other, for the sake of the sovereignty of conceptual order and systematics, he drew the bonds of identity, the permitted limits, so tightly that non-identity is rendered virtually powerless and unknowable.

¹⁵⁶ Hobbes 1994, p.109 (emphasis in original).

¹⁵⁷ Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.40.

¹⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p.26.

¹⁵⁹ Indeed, the principle of idealism, that the subject creates the object and is the latter’s truth, precisely expresses this historical dynamic of society’s control and mastery of nature.

¹⁶⁰ Schmitt is explicit on this ultimate motivation, asserting in *Political Theology* that ‘the state suspends the law in the exception on the basis of its right of self-preservation’ (Schmitt 2005, p.12).

grants it the irresistibility which metaphysics reflects back as trans-subjective being.¹⁶¹ In the section of *Negative Dialectics* entitled 'On the Interpretation of the Transcendental', Adorno incisively formulated, in natural-historical terms, this critique of the means of freedom as perpetuating entrapment, the status of sovereignty as only an exception:

that which is solidified, persisting, impenetrable in the I is the mimesis of the impenetrability of the external world, as perceived by primitive consciousness. ... In the intellectual supremacy of the subject, its real powerlessness has its echo. The ego-principle imitates its negation. ... The primacy of subjectivity spiritually perpetuates the Darwinian struggle for existence. The subjugation of nature for human ends is a mere natural relationship; that is why the superiority of the reason which controls nature and of its principle is appearance.¹⁶²

In imitating brute nature, out of fear, the sovereign subject remains part of it, still caught within the struggle for survival, Realism's law of the jungle in the anarchic condition of the international. The sovereignty of the self, like political sovereignty – and, if the *Odyssey*, in its narrative of the development of the self, is 'the basic text of European civilization',¹⁶³ so all Western political concepts derive from ancient Greek thought – ultimately bespeaks the weakness and vulnerability of humans not their strength, mastery as subjection. The order-giving power of the subject in its various modes – the self, the concept, the political, metaphysics –, written in the history of philosophy and perpetuated, in his way, in Schmitt's thinking on sovereignty, leads not to a self-aware humanity in control of its own existence but to one trapped within objective structures of its own making that it cannot control and that perpetuate bondage in myth. Sovereign freedom remains under the spell of nature: 'In the exertion of its domination it becomes part of what it intends to control. ... What comes to light in it is, how very much it is in thrall to the object, by consuming this latter. What it does, is the bane of that which the subject imagines to be under its bane. Its desperate self-exaltation is the reaction to the experience of its powerlessness, which prevents self-reflection; absolute consciousness, unconscious.'¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ Adorno 1982, p.12.

¹⁶² Adorno 2001b, 'On the Interpretation of the Transcendental'.

¹⁶³ Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.37.

¹⁶⁴ Adorno 2001b, 'On the Interpretation of the Transcendental'.

All this changes the meaning of the exception. For Schmitt, for whom political order has absolute primacy, the exception appears as a disturbing element at the border, and through the decision that reinscribes the division of inside from outside, in the state of exception, the sovereign guarantees the security of the juridico-political space. Adorno turns this inside/outside structure itself inside-out. What his metacritique of epistemology shows is that thought that assumes the priority of the concept is forever incapable of producing a coherent and non-contradictory systematics out of itself. It cannot resolve the mediation of subject and object from within the subject. Rather, the more consistently it follows the logic of its own matter-at-hand, the more it is ineluctably brought up against the element that simply cannot be brought within conceptuality, an element with which it remains in hostile antagonism. It is this aporia that Schmitt seeks to exploit with his arbitrary and authoritarian gesture of banishment, the decision. But that only perpetuates the delusion, the bondage to brute natural, Darwinian existence.¹⁶⁵ The truth of epistemology and the logic of sovereignty, as Schmitt himself perceived but immediately cut short, is that conceptual order has its being only in and through the non-conceptual. Non-identity is essential to identity, which does not exist without it. The concept, like Schmitt's sovereign, lives off and denies non-identity.¹⁶⁶ This implies the solution to the problematic that epistemology labours in vain to resolve: it is the presumption of the priority of the concept that blocks the truth that, as the philosophy of history in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* makes evident, it is in fact the subject itself, the concept, that is the exception.¹⁶⁷ Insistence on the primacy of the concept, on what is derived as what is originary, inevitably involves the violence exercised in the state of exception, in which it is revealed that the subject is perpetually at war with the object. However, in continually exposing the break, despite itself, epistemology shows that the concept, born of force and cunning, nevertheless possesses the key to freedom from its self-imprisonment, through its self-critique: 'It is rationally cognizable, where a detached rationality which has run away with itself

¹⁶⁵ This perhaps explains why, in seeking to secure transcendence in the figure of the sovereign, Schmitt committed himself to the political regime that more than any other returned society to mere nature.

¹⁶⁶ Value is homogenised socially necessary abstract labour time; it has its existence only in living labour. It is at the borderline of these two that the sovereign violence of bourgeois class domination operates: living labour must be incorporated into the system because the latter cannot exist without it, but it must at the same time be excluded *qua* something living, non-identical and non-assimilable. Bourgeois disciplinary and ideological power constantly patrol this border.

¹⁶⁷ 'That which appears as the conceptual mediation from the inside, the preeminence of its sphere, without which nothing could be known, may not be confused with what it is in itself. Such an appearance of the existent-in-itself lends it the movement which exempts it from the reality, within which it is for its part harnessed' (Adorno 2001b, 'Disenchantment of the Concept').

becomes false, turns truly into mythology.¹⁶⁸ Through reflection on itself, the concept can understand its own limitation and the self-defeating delusion of its ‘unlimited power’. *Negative Dialectics* is Adorno’s sustained attempt to induce thought to do that, to think against itself for its own sake – the critique of conceptual generality out of the consciousness of the necessity of non-identity as what is substantial. This is Adorno’s materialism, the attempt to bring the concept, the means of ideality, to awareness of its dependence on what is other than itself. If the concept has always been hypostatised as the instrument of subsumption and homogeneity, ‘to change this direction of conceptuality, to turn it towards the non-identical, is the hinge of negative dialectics. Before the insight into the constitutive character of the non-conceptual in the concept, the compulsion of identity, which carries along the concept without the delay of such a reflection, dissolves. Its self-determination leads away from the appearance ... of the concept’s being-in-itself as a unity of meaning, out towards its own meaning.’¹⁶⁹ If the concept were to fulfil its own concept, as a generality that did justice to the object rather than cut it short, the spell might at last be broken and release achieved – from the paradox of the sovereign ban, from the violence of the state of exception and from entrapment, as a mere exception, within the mythic, anarchic international state of nature.¹⁷⁰

Conclusion: This chapter has sought to develop a theory of political form that could account for the Realist conception of the necessarily delimited nature of the political, and thus the existence of the international. Bringing Carl Schmitt’s and Giorgio Agamben’s thinking about the inside/outside structure of sovereignty into a constellation with Adorno’s thinking about the contradictory structure of the concept, it sought to show that the political should be understood as a basic form of ideality, an objective abstraction. Then, turning to the ‘debate’ on sovereignty between Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt, it demonstrated how the thematics of law, sovereignty, myth and the exception at issue there were subsequently taken up by Adorno in the

¹⁶⁸ *ibid.*, ‘Self-reflection of Thought’.

¹⁶⁹ *ibid.*, ‘Disenchantment of the Concept’.

¹⁷⁰ As Raymond Aron recognises, for humanity to be properly liberated from nature would also be the end of the international: ‘States have not emerged, in their mutual relations, from the *state of nature*. There would be no further theory of international relations if they had’ (Aron 2003, p.7. Emphasis in original).

account of the origins of conceptuality given in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: because the concept is modelled on natural domination, it can never escape the context of nature that encompasses it, but can only be an exception. This theorisation of the constitution of political being explains both its necessarily delimited nature, its inadequacy to the whole, and why it remains trapped within the Realist state of nature.

Conclusion

It is now possible to return to the research aims of this thesis and state some conclusions. First, the critical theory of political form and its relation to capital. The overall argument of this thesis – bringing together Marx’s theorisation of capital as abstraction-in-motion with Schmitt’s, Agamben’s and Benjamin’s thinking about sovereignty and the exception, mediating these two through Adorno’s critique of conceptuality – has been intended to show that what underlies them all is the problem of ideality and the contradictory structure of the concept. A plausible way to read the opening two chapters of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is to understand the first as the ur-history of capital – how the subject makes the world identical to itself – and the second as the ur-history of self-identity – how the subject makes itself identical to itself. These two processes go together: the subject’s identifying of the object is identical to the creation of self-identity, the latter being the movement by which the subject-as-object, a material thing, becomes the subject-as-subject, an ideal thing. They are two moments of the same, single movement of the making ideal of the world. The first moment is one of incorporation, bringing the outside inside so that there is nothing left that is subject-alien. The second is also a process of universalisation, but one that is achieved through delimitation and exclusion: the subject’s self-identity, its extrication from the natural context, is formed through the reflective split between self and world, reflection-into-self and reflection-into-other, to use Hegel’s terminology. The subject becomes determinate by virtue of the boundary between it and the world, and it is through this split that it is able to conceptualise the object, in the dialectic of reflection and speculation.¹ Only by way of the subject–object division can the absolute subject–object be produced; the limit is integral to the unlimited power of the subject, so that the infinite self must be bounded and finite. If the political space is the human sphere of self-determination decisively separated from nature, and such separation is intrinsic to the autonomy and freedom of the sovereign self, then the boundary line is necessary for the constitution of political being. The inside/outside dichotomy is therefore inalienable

¹ On the logic of reflection and speculation, which really underlies the themes of this thesis, see Hegel 1977a and, for concise commentary, Gasché 1986, Chs.2, 3 and 4.

from the political.² Further, if capital, as the generalisation of the commodity form, represents the completion of the historical development of the subject's identifying of the world with itself, then the seamless global capitalist system, the world-spanning web of exchange, is tied to localised, delimited political existence: capital's world of subjective immanence can come about only through the subjective mastery, the capacity to dominate the world through identity, that is constituted by bounded political being. For the object to be a commodity, it is necessary for the subject to be political. This is, at least conceptually, the answer to the many-states problem that Marxist IR has posed, the question why capital does not produce a unified global political authority corresponding in its reach to the world market but instead exists through a fragmented global political space composed of a multiplicity of discrete entities.³ Many further mediations would be required to demonstrate the necessity of precisely the modern nation-state form to capital's existence, more than there is space to develop here, but if this theoretical argument holds, it can be said that delimited political space is in no sense contingent or accidental to capital but is, to the contrary, intrinsic to its concept. Nor should political form be thought of, in the manner of orthodox, 'classical' Marxism, as somehow functional to or derivative of capital, as if the economic had ontological priority over the political. Although in IR such thinking rightly wants to break through the Realist autonomy of the political, the latter's insulation from the wider field of the social, it nevertheless not only fails to account for the specificity of the political but cannot help but reduce capital, in the end, to 'economics' as an apparently natural determination of human existence, the base as opposed to the superstructure, and thereby remains trapped by fetishism.⁴ If, however, the political and the economic are

² The perspective developed here on the limit or border could perhaps provide a point of contact between materialism and the emerging field of critical border studies in IR (see Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2009).

³ As a consequence, it is also the reason why it is wrong to assert that 'it is perfectly possible to imagine one universal state on the basis of a generalized private property regime' (Teschke 2003, p.31). Not merely is the meaning of capital disastrously obscured by its reduction to 'a generalised private property regime', but it is only possible to imagine 'one universal state' on such a basis by entirely failing to enquire what a state, or the political, actually is.

⁴ Trying to escape economic fetishism, IR Marxism periodically gestures towards the young Marx's reflections on the metabolism between man and nature as the 'deep structure' of social being (van der Pijl 2007, p.621), but seldom in a way that goes beyond platitudes that any theoretical approach would accept – who is really going to dispute that at some profound level social life is constituted by the interaction of humanity with nature? – to consider more stringently what ideality is and what a materialist critique of it would be. Typically, such recourse to early Marx remains, at best, caught within the limits of Marx's own criticism of idealism insofar as it was formulated in the 1840s. Part of the argument of this work is that the critique of political economy implies a much more far-reaching critique of idealism than Marx ever set down in conscious epistemological reflections.

grasped as modalities of ideation, forms of abstraction through which the subject masters nature, both internal and external, then it becomes possible to understand them as truly dialectical, identical in their difference. To the extent that the object becomes an economic thing, the subject becomes a political being. Logical or causal hierarchy thus becomes unnecessary, in fact misleading, and each moment can be comprehended in its determinacy without occluding the other. This perspective is at least implicit in Marx, especially when he is read in the context of his idealist forebears, but is brought closer to theoretical consciousness in Adorno.⁵

Secondly, the materialist critique of Realism. The theoretical perspective developed here, in which the political is understood as an objective form of ideation, opens a different view of the meaning of Realism for IR. Through Adorno's critique of the concept, the truth content of Realism can be grasped without the danger of critical thought's falling prey to Realist essentialising. If the political is intrinsically idealist, then Realism's understanding of the limits of political form, and thus of the necessity of the international, has distinct critical elements that should be recuperated for radical, in particular materialist, thought. These critical aspects, though, are the very elements of Realism that Marxist IR, and in fact much radical thinking in the discipline, has always tended to reject as regressive. The implication of the Realist discourse is that the political *per se* is irrational, in that, while it may be the medium of human self-determination and sovereignty, at the highest level each political entity finds itself caught within the ungoverned and ungovernable state of nature of the international, a heteronomous condition that it cannot master. Because of its delimited and particularistic form, the universality of political being is never adequate to the whole and, as a result, the totality of humanity's political existence, what should be the scene of its freedom, has always been and remains blind, uncontrolled and riven by conflict. According to the argument developed here concerning bounded political form, the exception and the state of nature, these Realist themes are exactly congruent with a materialist critique of the political and should be taken up and pushed further. If

⁵ This is why the standard Marxist criticism of Adorno that he concerned himself with philosophical and aesthetic matters to the exclusion of economics and politics (and for that reason, whatever his other interest, can only really be marginal) is mistaken. Adorno's philosophical thinking, the critique of idealism, destroys the appearance character of economics and politics. His critical epistemological texts say something much more profound about the being of the economic and of the political than orthodox Marxist analyses recognise.

materialism reveals idealism as mythical, still trapped within oppressive nature, then there is a whole side of Realism that can be wrested for critical theory. In truth, Realism's philosophy of history has in any case always had a deep affinity with Marx's perception that bourgeois society is the ultimate development of class society,⁶ and that capital, along with all the history that leads up to it, is still nothing but prehistory because the realm of freedom can only be attained by transcending social being based upon class exploitation. It is fundamental to Marx's understanding of capital as an objective system of mythic entrapment, as it is for Realism's thinking about the international, that the mode of bourgeois society's self-reproduction is anarchic, uncontrolled and unconscious, that the individual is not yet free and self-determining within the universal, and that the reason of the society that is enthralled to the movement of value is unreason. Doubtless Marx never fully reconciled or brought to theoretical consciousness the contradictions between the static and dynamic elements within his thinking, but from this historical distance it is the thematics of stasis, of the continuity of prehistory, that stand out most strikingly and demand reflection. They have survived what history has done to Marx and the contemporary radicalism of his thought lies in this Marx, the one in fact closest to Realism.

In IR theory, Marx after Realism, therefore, is the Marx of modernity as ur-historical, capitalist society as myth. This is how, in the mid-20th century, after the First World War put an apocalyptic end to the liberal European age, and after fascism, Stalinism and Auschwitz, Adorno, acutely sensitive to the way in which the meaning of great intellectual works unfolded and changed through time, read Marx. Adorno's speculative identification of myth and modernity, together with his critique of the structure of the concept, unlocks the puzzle of Realism, before which radical thought in IR has so often foundered: its combination of spareness and import – 'if so thin, why so powerful?'⁷ According to the argument of this thesis, the political is, literally, a concept; society becomes specifically political when it attains a certain degree of conceptual, ideal determinacy over and against nature; and the political-as-concept, a mimesis of

⁶ 'By extending the concept of class to prehistory, theory denounces not just the bourgeois, whose freedom, together with their possessions and education, perpetuates the tradition of the old injustice. It also turns against prehistory itself. ... To recognize the catastrophic violence in the latest form of injustice, that is to say, the latent injustice contained in fair exchange, means simply to identify it with the prehistory that it destroyed' (Adorno 2003a, pp.93–4).

⁷ Rosenberg in Callinicos and Rosenberg 2008, p.97.

mythic universality, is inextricably tied to the exception and the state of nature. Thus, it may be said that what Realism firmly grasps is that the political, through its very form, remains entangled in myth. In IR, Realism, although far away from him in most respects, shares something of the Benjaminian revocation of subjectivity to mythic turmoil. It recognises that the universality and sovereignty of the bounded political space are false,⁸ just as it instinctively perceives the falseness of the universality of capital, which does not overcome but rather lives through the antagonistic fragmentation of the states-system. The strength of Realism is the strength of the chain that keeps political reason tethered to mythic unreason. If, in IR, the relationship between liberalism as dynamics and Realism as stasis ‘is somehow more complex—and more paradoxical—than any simple contrast of “rich” and “thin” implies’,⁹ then to understand Realism is to grasp, as with static and dynamic, the identity of ‘rich’ and ‘thin’. Realism’s continual return, the impossibility of vanquishing its stubborn, timeless and abstract, sparseness with the seemingly limitless abundance of historical movement and material, means that the richness should itself be conceived of as thin, that all the wealth of history is still just poverty and that through all its change history stays the same, the continuity of prehistory. This, in essentials, is the materialist philosophy of history that Adorno developed through the critique of the Hegelian-Idealist one.¹⁰

Viewed in this light, Realism’s conception of the past as nothing but an enormous storehouse of empirical illustrations of its invariant principles – history as a gigantic analytic judgement – can be seen to have an important element of truth to it:

Within the sphere of influence of the system, the new—progress—is, like the old, a constant source of new disaster. Knowing the new does not mean adapting oneself to it and to the movement of history; it means resisting its inflexibility and conceiving of the onward march of the battalions of world history as marking time. Theory knows of no “constructive force” but only of one that lights up the contours of a burned-out prehistory with the glow of the latest disaster in order to perceive the parallel that exists between them. The latest

⁸ Although, as a result of undeniable theoretical deficiency, it is ever inclined, in the manner of E.H. Carr, to reduce this to a trivial relativism, overlooking the universality of the political, the dialectic of infinitude and delimitation (see Carr 2001, pp.62–83).

⁹ Rosenberg in Callinicos and Rosenberg 2008, p.97.

¹⁰ Reflections of this sort concerning the structure of history permeate Adorno’s writings. The most concerted statements of his philosophy of history are Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, the ‘Excursus’ on Hegel (‘World Spirit and Natural History’) in Adorno 2001b and the related lecture series, Adorno 2006a.

thing is always the old terror, the myth, which consists in that blind continuum of time that continually retracts itself, with patient, stupidly omniscient malice, just like Oknos's ass, which eats the rope as fast as he twines it.¹¹

Admittedly, Realism tends to conceive this as an abstract identity rather than one achieved through difference, but the identity itself is real enough. If enlightenment has never escaped myth, then the new is always really just repetition of the same old thing. Adorno suggests that Marx's theory of capital, the analysis of the first truly universal social form, affects the meaning of the totality of history: 'by exposing the historical necessity that had brought capitalism into being, political economy became the critique of history as a whole'.¹² After Marx, history must be viewed through the prism of *Capital*. In the same way, it could be said that contemporary Realism's perception of the international as an invariant state of anarchy becomes the critique of the history of humanity's political development. Much of IR theory, not least Marxism, appalled at the implications of Realism's sober and impassive depiction of the invariance of an 'empty, meaningless struggle for power',¹³ has turned away from the shocking thinness of anarchy towards the apparent vitality of the stuff of history. But this recourse both falls short of Realism and fatally misrecognises the combination and contradiction of static and dynamic in history. The theory of capital already irresistibly suggests the truth of Realism's vision. Humanity's immemorial struggle for self-preservation in the face of nature culminates in the absolutisation of the empty abstraction-in-motion of value; and the corollary to the infinite self-expansion of value is the anarchic global system of abstract, neutral political states. Both are equally senseless, and each denounces the history of which together they are the culmination as only empty and meaningless.¹⁴

These considerations also throw a different light on the internal development of Realist thinking in IR. From the beginning, neo-Realism has been reviled by radical critics as a sterile horror, ahistorical and lifeless, a betrayal of everything intellectually compelling in the older, more humanistic, classical Realist tradition.¹⁵ Recently, within Realism itself a similar rejection of the Waltzian reformulation has developed, with the

¹¹ Adorno 2003b, pp.95–6.

¹² *ibid.*, p.93.

¹³ Rosenberg 1996, p.6.

¹⁴ The necessity for materialist theory of conceiving of history as meaningless is a leading theme of Adorno's lectures on the philosophy of history (Adorno 2006a) and of the concluding 'Meditations on Metaphysics' in *Negative Dialectics*, the construction of history as meaningful being inherently idealist.

¹⁵ See Ashley 1984 and Cox 1986 for classic critiques to this effect.

explicit intention of a return to and rearticulation of venerable Realist virtues.¹⁶ However, the intellectual cry of ‘back to ...!’ can only understand neo-Realism, in nominalist fashion, as a subjective aberration, the misguided result of scientistic hubris, without being able to perceive any historical necessity in it. This ahistoricism, of an approach that purports to return historical sensitivity to Realism, fails to grasp the significance of the evolution of Realist thought and cannot account for the suggestive force of Waltz’s paradigm, why it has maintained an almost hypnotic hold over IR theory (even theory that is actively hostile to it) for so long. In fact, neo-Realism precisely bespeaks the historical epoch. The rise of globalising neo-liberalism, which dissolved the semi-independence of the Second World and fully integrated the Third into the international circuits of capital, creating for the first time a truly unified global system, the New World Order proclaimed in triumph at the end of the Cold War, can be dated from the 1970s. So, Waltzian neo-Realism, developed during that decade and placed before the public in 1979, is the enunciation of the political existence of the neo-liberal order – an abstract, frozen theory for an abstract, frozen world. In its way, neo-Realism is confirmation at the level of the political of Adorno’s assertion that the fixated inner drive of the concept is ‘the extirpation of animism’.¹⁷ the compulsion of identity is to nullify the substantiality of the object, its qualitative in-itself, because such intrinsic meaningfulness is experienced as mythic and subject-alien, provoking fear. Identity seeks to make the world the same as its own abstract self in order to control it for the sake of security. This sacrificial process encompasses both the external world and the subject’s own being, as a part of material nature, and reaches its culmination in the wholly abstract world of capital. Just as the limitless explosion of financialisation that has accompanied neo-liberalism signifies the fulfilment of ideality’s dream of the world stripped of qualitative specificity and turned into numbers,¹⁸ so Waltz’s drastic reduction of political existence to qualitative sameness – so many hardened, abstract, identical ‘units’, mere empty shells – precisely expresses what has become of the political through the historical unfolding of its own principle, the relentless ‘corrosive

¹⁶ See Forde 1995 for an early statement of this tendency, and Lebow 2003 and Molloy 2003 for subsequent contributions.

¹⁷ Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.2.

¹⁸ ‘Availability establishes the bond between philosophy and mathematics that has lasted ever since Plato. ... His later doctrine that ideas are numbers is no simple orgy of exotic speculation. One may almost always read off what is central from the eccentricities of thought’ (Adorno 1982, p.9). What was once eccentric, the furthest reaches of idealist speculation, has become emphatically central: financial speculation rules a world whose Idea really is number.

rationality'¹⁹ of enlightenment. Waltz is explicit that his theory makes only one assumption about the motivation of the units: that they pursue their own survival.²⁰ But that one is fateful enough. The rigidity of Waltz's theory and its cancelling of living, human subjectivity are true to the endgame of the logic of self-preservation. For, as Adorno's theory of sacrifice shows, the compulsive will to survive turns against itself 'because the substance which is mastered, suppressed, and disintegrated by self-preservation is nothing other than the living entity, of which the achievement's of self-preservation can only be described as functions—in other words, self-preservation destroys the very thing which is to be preserved.'²¹ What Adorno identifies as compulsive self-preservation through self-denial leads, in advanced capitalism, to a situation in which the subject, in order to survive, is forced to nullify itself in adapting its being to the increasingly overwhelming weight of objectified dead labour, such that 'the will to live finds itself dependent on the denial of the will to live: self-preservation annuls all life in subjectivity.'²² This self-destructive pursuit of survival through self-sacrifice is what drives the seemingly unstoppable process of the hollowing-out of the state, the voiding of the substance of political being, a tendency that has become unmistakable even to non-radical theory during the neo-liberal decades. The self and the political eviscerate themselves through the ruthless and inexorable pursuit of their own logic.²³ This latest development of the concept indeed 'lights up the contours of a burned-out prehistory' and reveals the truth of Realism's understanding of history as an 'empty, meaningless struggle for power':

With the denial of nature in human beings, not only the *telos* of the external mastery of nature but also the *telos* of one's own life becomes confused and opaque. At the moment when human beings cut themselves off from the consciousness of themselves as nature, all the purposes for which they keep themselves alive—social progress, the heightening of material and intellectual forces, indeed, consciousness itself—become void, and the enthronement of the means as ends, which in late capitalism is taking on the character of overt madness, is already detectable in the earliest history of subjectivity.²⁴

¹⁹ Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.4.

²⁰ Waltz 1979, pp.91–2.

²¹ Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.43.

²² Adorno 2005a, p.229.

²³ It is therefore not the case, as so much broadly left-wing commentary has it, that economics has, regrettably, subsumed politics, the state becoming cravenly subservient to global capital; rather the globalisation of capital and the state's self-emptying are two sides of a single process.

²⁴ Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, pp.42–3.

In its unflinching setting-out of the extreme results of the drive for self-preservation, the senselessness that ensues when sheer survival takes precedence over what is to survive, neo-Realism has its historical validity.²⁵ Cold, abstract, ahistorical and rebarbative it may be, but Waltz's theory is the contemporary world.

The force of Realism's understanding of the condition of the international, the continued contradiction between inside and outside, is in itself virtual proof of Adorno's thesis that the escape from nature fails. The concept remains trapped in what it can only except itself from. The form of the modern international also confirms Adorno's contention that 'Enlightenment is totalitarian'²⁶ because it 'tolerates nothing outside'.²⁷ Through the iteration of the nation-state, a standardised form mass produced and stamped on the material, political space has expanded to encompass the entire territorial extent of the world. The boundaries go right up to each other.²⁸ The current, neo-liberal era succeeded the long 20th-century process of the break-up of the European empires and the collapse of the communist partial exception, which left behind them a series of formally established, albeit more or less fragile, states. As such, what the recent decades have witnessed is the completed totalisation of the world – there is now only one identical, political form everywhere,²⁹ and seemingly nothing left outside. This situation is historically unprecedented, and perhaps provides an answer to the question posed long ago by Martin Wight: why is there no international theory?³⁰ For so long as the world remained to be conquered, so long as there was an outside that was yet to be brought inside, and identity was not complete, the medium of conquest, the concept, was held to

²⁵ To insist upon the substantiality of agency, in horror at the systematicity of capital and of neo-Realism, as though people were really already free, already 'themselves', in the midst of absolute unfreedom, thus can only serve to retard theory and perpetuate the context of delusion and blindness. Marx's praise of Ricardo in regard to economic theory applies equally to Waltz in IR: 'What other people reproach him for, i.e. that he is unconcerned with "human beings" and concentrates exclusively on the development of the productive forces when considering capitalist production – whatever sacrifices of human beings and capital *values* this is bought with – is precisely his significant contribution' (Marx 1991, p.368. Emphasis in original).

²⁶ Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.4.

²⁷ Adorno 2001b, 'Mediation Through Objectivity'.

²⁸ 'The modern territorial map of the world is a perfectly fitting jigsaw in which all the separate, interlocking pieces are clearly marked in different colours' (Rosenberg 1994, p.130).

²⁹ With residual partial exceptions – most notoriously Iraq, Iran, and North Korea – being subjected to attempted 'regime change', by one means or another.

³⁰ Wight 1966b.

be an absolute good, the space through which freedom and security become possible.³¹ As against the priority given to the perfection of the inner space, itself an expression of the urgency of identity and self-preservation, the international could only be marginal. Further, just as the concept of society only really came into being in the bourgeois world,³² within whose social form all members are formally identical as bearers of equal rights, so the concept of the international, in the strong sense, coalesced only once every political entity could be recognised as intrinsically the same, a historical situation that arose on a global scale for the first time during the course of the 20th century, and to which Waltz's theory gives the fullest testimony. 'Society' became conceptualisable as such through being thoroughly and objectively bound together by way of the generalisation of the exchange relationship, and perhaps solely as a result of the functional interconnection that came about with the globalisation of capital could 'the international', in turn, become an object of theory. Hence International Relations is a 20th-century discipline. Indeed, the emergence of IR as a subject in its own right is itself a symptom of what has happened to the political. Concluding a recent volume celebratory of Waltz's work, Ken Booth argues forcefully that no political theory now that does not fully acknowledge and think through the problematic of the international can be taken seriously, and that within the social sciences IR should in fact be accorded an 'architectonic position',³³ as the discipline that encompasses all others. What this recognises is the achievement on a global political scale of a principle that Adorno, in a letter to Walter Benjamin, spelt out as basic to the social form of capital: that everything is mediated through the totality.³⁴ No political issue is in any meaningful sense narrowly domestic anymore; the lines all lead back to the whole. In these circumstances, theory that, on principle, limits itself to the space within the borders necessarily falls short. The substantiality of the individual political entity has been ceded to the international.³⁵ Through the achievement of its own principle of enlightenment, the continual extension of rationalisation, order and sovereign power, the political has gone into eclipse. At the

³¹ So, as Adorno noted (Adorno 2001b, 'Synthesis'), the entire tradition of philosophy, from Plato through to Hegel, assumed the inherent validity and justification of the One. Unity, systematics and order have been as essential to political theory as to epistemology and metaphysics.

³² Adorno 2000, pp.29–30.

³³ Booth 2011a, p.338, the position that, as Booth notes, Aristotle accorded to politics.

³⁴ Adorno and Benjamin 1999, pp.282–3.

³⁵ There is not space to develop the point here, but, in brief, this accords with Adorno's insight that in the condition he designated, synecdochically, 'the administered world' the tension between the singular subject and the whole that sustained the ideology of individual independence throughout the high bourgeois epoch has evaporated. The whole is now so powerful that it allows no mediation but, rather, directly overwhelms the individual. (See Hullot-Kentor 2006, pp.210–19.)

same historical moment in which the subject's mastery of the world reaches fulfilment and political space comes to subsume the earth totally, it loses its meaning, and as a result, it becomes impossible to believe any more, as traditional theory always did, that the pursuit of the good life is viable within the delimited, singular political arena.

Yet, as Realism insists, the international remains anarchic and uncontrolled, a scene of clashing power and the unreason of *raison d'État*. The bounded political entity has been superseded as the site of freedom, but the whole that takes its place remains ungraspable and unfree. This is the contemporary circumstance that Realism has delineated with the most compelling force, and Booth pays it due tribute.³⁶ Radical theory in IR, thinking that will not rest content with the dismal Realist certainties, is thus caught in Limbo, stuck 'in the waiting chamber of the present':³⁷ social being has developed beyond the assumption of freedom within the political as bounded entity, but what might transcend it is shrouded in obscurity. The border at the same defines the sphere of political reason, its identity, and keeps it confined within the irrational sphere of the international; it is what makes the political both possible and impossible, free and unfree. This is the seemingly irresolvable dilemma that confronts critical thought:

how to rethink the concept of community without thereby simply reproducing a particularistic social ontology? Since most of our inherited conceptions of community carry implicit connotations of boundedness and homogeneity, attempts to project these conceptions onto a world which lack [*sic*] those characteristics are likely to generate paradoxes that cannot be resolved within the same conceptual framework. ... But getting rid of the core connotations of boundedness and homogeneity leaves us with little else. What could possibly constitute a multitude of people into a community in the absence of both borders and shared attributes among its prospective members?³⁸

These reflections show critical thought catching up with what Realism has in any case always said: that traditional political form, space as ordered, sovereign generality produced through delimitation, cannot be made rational.³⁹ Through the medium of the boundary, the rationalised inside always implies the irrational outside. This problem of

³⁶ Although the 'pointers' he proffers as essential for thinking beyond Realism – pluralism, history, wholes and parts, change, reflexivity (Booth 2011a, pp.339–40) – mostly have a shop-worn feel to them, familiar nostrums that everybody has heard before and few now really believe in.

³⁷ Balakrishnan 2005, p.6. This article contains some interesting and pointed reflections on the depth of the contemporary crisis of the political.

³⁸ Baker and Bartelson 2009, p.204.

³⁹ This is really the meaning of, for instance, Waltz's 'second image' considerations (Waltz 1959, Ch.4).

the border truly becomes urgent at a historical borderline.⁴⁰ Just as Odysseus, wandering at the rim of the world, stood on the limit between myth and enlightenment, so the all-conquering process of ideality that Odysseus set in motion has reached its terminal point: the world has become wholly political, the object totally subsumed to the commodity form. But freedom has not come about. The progress of Spirit has reached its limit, the identity of identity and non-identity has been achieved, but it has not resulted in Absolute Knowledge. The groping confusion of contemporary IR theory before the question of the political is just the reflection of a wider historical bewilderment, the sensation of reaching the end of a line that has turned out to lead nowhere.⁴¹ As a result, radical theory is at an impasse, in that it is absolutely unclear, now, what a political practice would be that was not ultimately the reaffirmation of liberal democracy, as it is equally unclear what would be a social practice that was not just the reproduction of capital.⁴² The crisis of practice extends into its very concept. At the origins of enlightenment, Odysseus's practice was the conquest of fear, of the outside, through the creation of sovereign identity by way of the exception, and the practice of civilisation since has always been identity, which in turn has always been the contradictory combination of universality and limitation, the abstractly general and the narrowly particular. When the infinite subject reaches its limit, the totalisation of identity leaves it objectless, floundering in its own empty arbitrariness. If Adorno was right that the telos of enlightenment, as the extirpation of animism through mythic universality, is neutralisation, its reduction to a hardened, reified thing, then it is futile to imagine it possible to reanimate the political when its own principle, identity, compulsively drives towards objectified neutrality, deadness. The political, like everything else, has been subjected by enlightenment to relentless demythologisation and cannot be compellingly reauthorised, any more than pre-capitalist society can be

⁴⁰ Adorno's own in-between, identical and non-identical, existence as of half-Jewish parentage (Wilcock 2000) and as an emigré (Claussen 2011) was exemplary of this historical borderline condition. On Adorno's biography generally, see Müller-Doohm 2005 and Claussen 2008.

⁴¹ Rob Walker is a theorist who has long been interested in questions of boundaries and limits (Walker 1993), and the contemporary quandary of being stuck in-between is manifest in the title of his most recent book: *After the Globe, before the World*. Indeed, one might recognise Walker's frustratingly opaque prose, with its interminable circlings and repetitions, its continual retractions, hesitations and qualifications as the agonised product of entrapment in a liminal condition, unable to go back or forward with any confidence, although the reader, exhausted from chewing his way through so indigestible a text, would be forgiven for concluding that Walker tends simply to re-enact the problem. (For assessments of Walker 2010, see Prozorov, Bartelson et al. 2011.)

⁴² Cf, for example, the admission of one IR theorist that for radical theory 'in the current conjuncture, human rights is "all we have"' (Odysseos 2010, p.768). Such is the power of liberal capitalism that, as if in mockery, it even obligingly supplies the few apparently plausible critical concepts.

reconstituted, or the long-overthrown gods reinstated.⁴³ To suppose otherwise is to fail to recognise the objective logic of the historical process that has produced Realism, which itself has anyway always had the correct critical insight: that the rational intentionality of the political is also unreason, myth, and irredeemable as such.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, Realism in IR, for all its critical elements, is still spell-bound by the fetish character of the political in that the limit of its imaginary is generally a knowing, world-weary acceptance of fallenness and inevitable insufficiency, accommodation to irrationality as the best that can be achieved. It may be able to perceive the problematic character of political form with greater clarity than any other theoretical tradition in IR, but still it can conceive of nothing else and so, in the end, remains enthralled to idealism, clinging to the limited security of the concept no matter what. To escape idealism, though, as Adorno well knew, is much more difficult than critical thought has generally understood. The challenge of thinking beyond the bounded form of the political is that, if the political is a foundational structure of human identity, its critique is the critique of what it has always meant to be a rational creature, *πολιτικόν ζῶον* as opposed to nature.⁴⁵ The difficulty that Realism poses, and that capital poses with it, is thus that of the critique of reason, the philosophical problematic opened by Kant. If the twin systems of entrapment, the modern international and global capital, represent the totalisation of identity, and identity is constitutive of human reason, then the only escape would be through the transformation of the concept. This is the single ambition of Adorno's thought.⁴⁶ His critique of epistemology calls a halt to the totalising direction of thought. Where traditional philosophy had always sought to demonstrate the priority of the subject, the ontological primacy of the order-giving concept, Adorno shows that that very structure of subjective priority in fact relies upon

⁴³ What Adorno says with regard to the historical development of music is equally applicable here: the purpose of critique is 'above all, to bar the easy way out, one that would conclude that, if the logical progress of music leads to antinomies, there would be something to hope for from the resurrection of the past, from the self-conscious abrogation of music's own *ratio*. No critique of progress is legitimate save one that names the reactionary element in the ruling unfreedom and thus unapologetically precludes its misuse in the service of the status quo. The return in positive guise of what has collapsed is revealed as more fundamentally complicitous with the destructive tendencies of the age than what has publicly been branded destructive. A self-proclaimed order is nothing but a mask for chaos' (Adorno 2006b, p.4).

⁴⁴ To this extent, Realism has always taken the most extreme position in IR, one that critical thought is only just appropriating for itself.

⁴⁵ Cf. Bartelson 2001 on the difficulty of thinking beyond the state concept.

⁴⁶ And it is why that thinking is politically much more far-reaching than that of any of the radical critics who denounced Adorno as a pessimistic quietist. Adorno grasped the depth of the current impasse decades before it became unmistakable, and always measured his thought against it.

an element of materiality it cannot absorb. Idealist thought is thus always caught in a contradiction, striving to incorporate what cannot be incorporated because the form of the concept is itself based upon exclusion. The self-critique of idealism thereby implies its own resolution: the inside/outside structure that keeps the subject trapped within myth is to be dissolved, and freedom achieved, through the renunciation of the compulsion to identify the object, to make it the same as the abstract subject. Sovereign mastery gives up its mastery for the sake of sovereignty. If the intention of the concept is to know the object, this, Adorno argues, is the real telos of thought, what it wants to achieve. So he writes in *Negative Dialectics*: ‘What is urgent for the concept is what it does not encompass, what its abstraction-mechanism eliminates, what is not already an exemplar of the concept.’⁴⁷ The non-identical is the element through which the concept can be made rational, and through the breaching of the magic circle of identity the nature of the boundary itself would change: ‘The utopia of cognition would be to open up the non-conceptual with concepts, without making it the same as them.’⁴⁸ The subject would be neither split off from the world nor always seeking to subsume it. In the modern international the borders may go right up to each other, but there are still borders, so something, some element, no matter how marginal, is still excluded for the sake of conceptual-political order.⁴⁹ Identity, the subsumption of the world, is complete, and yet not complete; something still glimmers beyond the boundary markers. How to experience this something, this exceptional, non-identical element? In the second Concluding Corollary to *The Nomos of the Earth*, Schmitt asserts that the legitimacy of a concrete order, of a bounded political space, is achieved only when the land taken has been brought within discursive rationality: ‘A land-appropriation is constituted only if the appropriator is able to give the land a name.’⁵⁰ The right of seizure of the world, turning it into property, is sealed through the act of naming, the sacralisation of the subject’s power over the object. What Schmitt beholds with reverent awe, Adorno sees through as delusion. For the latter’s speculative materialism,⁵¹ the true task of thinking is not to bestow names upon the world as insignia of sovereign mastery, a self-

⁴⁷ Adorno 2001b, ‘Interest of Philosophy’.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ The residual extent of what is now outside, its almost vanishing existence, may be a reason why Adorno, in the mid-20th century, was driven to use the aporetic term ‘the non-identical’ to designate the objectivity that does not go into the concept.

⁵⁰ Schmitt 2003, p.348. See also Ojakangas 2009. In this Schmitt follows Odysseus, whose ‘adventures bestow names on each of these places [he is washed up on], and the names give rise to a rational overview of space’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.38).

⁵¹ On Adorno and speculation, see Adorno 2001b, ‘Speculative Moment’ and Jarvis 2004b.

exaltation that can only remain trapped within myth-making, but to release its own compulsive grip, opening itself to what falls outside discursivity and has no name, ‘to say what cannot be said’.⁵² Freedom can only be achieved, the concept as ordered political space made legitimate and rational, through reconciliation with what it does not encompass, the non-identical, a nameless no-man’s land, a non-place – utopia.

⁵² Adorno 2001b, ‘Interest of Philosophy’. On this motif in Adorno’s thought, see Foster 2007, esp. Ch.2.

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