The Bond of Fragmentation

On Marx, Hegel, and the social determination of the material world

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Discussions of the social impact of capitalism are often framed in terms of ‘social fragmentation’—in terms of the erosion of social bonds or the breakdown of community. Tacitly, this framing positions capitalism as a ‘negation’—as a corrosive force that strips away social bonds, generating the need to constitute some new form of bond in place of what has been eroded. It obscures the distinctive sense in which capitalism might also be conceptualised as constitutive or generative of a peculiar sort of social bond—one whose distinctive qualitative characteristics may then go unnoticed, and shielded from critique.

In this paper, I approach this question of how we might explore the distinctive form of sociality actively constituted by the reproduction of capital, by revisiting and reinterpreting Marx's complex relationship to Hegel, as this plays out in the opening chapters of Capital, Volume 1. I argue that the narrative voice and dramatic structure of these early chapters has often been misread, with the result that Marx is taken to endorse positions that should instead be understood as the targets of his critique. A close attention to the textual strategy of these opening gestures, brings to light a far more supple, relevant and contemporary social theory for conceptualising a distinctive form of social life that reproduces itself through the ongoing transformation of concrete social institutions. In the process it generates a peculiarly abstract form of social bond whose existence can be obscured by the dynamism of its own process of reproduction. In this piece, I attempt to demonstrate how closer attention to the narrative structure of the opening volume of Capital reveals a vastly richer and more sophisticated social and anthropological theory than is generally recognised in Marx's work.
Discussions of the social impact of capitalism are often framed in terms of ‘social fragmentation’, which orients political responses toward compensatory strategies through which the state or civil society are enlisted to preserve and cultivate new forms of sociality. Such responses often evoke idealised or romantic visions of community, with ambivalent or negative implications for persons or groups who might be excluded from the ideal (Devadas & Mummery 2007; Fopp 2007). Even where this romantic response is barred (e.g. Habermas 1984, pp. 341-3; 1989, pp. 352-3), capitalism is generally conceptualised as a one-sided force that exerts a corrosive effect on social relations—an effect that must be checked by something external to capitalism itself.

In this paper, I explore whether the category of ‘social fragmentation’ might be bound to a one-sided conception of capitalism that, from the outset, limits our understanding of the social resources available to us for opening spaces for the development of new forms of collective life. I argue that the category of ‘social fragmentation’ positions capitalism solely as a corrosive force, as a negation—as something that strips away social bonds. The formation of social bonds is then positioned as something that takes place in some other form of interaction, apart from the interactions constitutive of capitalism itself. I ask whether it might be possible to construct a less one-sided understanding of capitalism—whether there might be any sense in which we can grasp capitalism as generative of some particular kind of social bond, a bond with ambivalent potentials.

These questions, I suggest, carry us into the heart of Marx’s motivation for appropriating Hegel’s work. Below, I sketch some central elements of a new reading of Marx’s complex dialogue with Hegel in the opening chapters of Capital, Volume 1 (hereafter Capital). By analysing the implications of this dialogue for how Marx understands capitalism and critical theory, I can begin to sketch how Marx theorises capitalism in terms of a complex, tripartite social bond—some of whose moments intuitively appear to us as ‘social’, others of which intuitively appear ‘material’, and still others appear intangible or ideal. One consequence of this reading is that the meaning of Marx’s ‘historical materialism’ has to be rethought in light of the resources Marx’s theory provides for understanding how modern categories of ‘materiality’—intuitive conceptions of the biologically natural, the material, or the physiological—emerge within capitalism as very peculiar sorts of social determinations. This re-evaluation of Marx’s work makes it possible to appreciate the surprisingly contemporary nature of Marx’s critical theory, which mobilises resources more often associated with poststructuralism or deconstruction, than with more orthodox interpretations of Capital.

Hegel is Marx’s most consistent theoretical reference point, and Marx critically appropriates a number of Hegelian concepts in his work. In this paper, I focus on two concepts that are particularly important for the textual strategy of Capital: Hegel’s concept of ‘science’ as set out
in the *Science of Logic*; and a complex set of arguments relating to appearance, essence, and inversion, which Hegel makes in the early chapters of the *Phenomenology of Mind*. To examine Marx’s critical appropriation of these Hegelian concepts, I first analyse Hegel’s methodological reflections on the requirements for a ‘scientific’ philosophy. I then analyse how the reading of *Capital* changes if we take seriously the notion that Marx is adapting this method into a social theoretic form. I next compare the narrative structure of the first chapter of *Capital* with that of the early chapters of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* in order to demonstrate the degree to which Marx’s text can be read as a critical play on Hegel’s narrative. Finally, I return to the question of social fragmentation to sketch how Marx’s theory might provide a useful framework for a critical analysis of this phenomenon.

When Hegel talks about ‘science’, he is concerned not with our contemporary sense of this term but rather with the problem of how philosophy could appeal to no authority other than that of reason. Non-scientific philosophy, for Hegel, assumes premises that, tacitly or explicitly, fall outside the philosophical system itself, and therefore outside the workings of reason. A ‘scientific’ philosophy, by contrast, accounts for its premises immanently, through the development of its system (Hegel 1969, pp. 27-9, 31, 40-45, 67-9). In recent commentaries on Hegel, this is often described as a commitment to construct a presuppositionless philosophy (Houlgate 2005); critical social theory modelled on this approach is sometimes described as a form of immanent, reflexive critique (Postone 1993). The meaning of both terms will become clearer as we examine why Hegel thinks this issue is so central.

In the first Preface to his *Science of Logic*, Hegel (1969) draws attention to what motivates his distinctive concept of ‘science’. In this text, the Enlightenment figures as a corrosive force—tearing down older forms of theology, custom, and metaphysics by appealing to the authority of experience (1969, p. 25). This corrosive critique, Hegel argues, comes at a price. Fearing myth, Enlightenment regresses into a myth of its own—the myth of the given, the belief ‘that the understanding ought not to go beyond experience’ (1969, p. 25). The Enlightenment thereby loses its critical edge. It finds itself unable to identify a standpoint from which it would be possible to criticise the rising focus on the functional and the practical—the ascendancy of what would now be called instrumental reason—the subordination of life to the means of securing a living (1969, pp. 25-6, 34, 43-5). For this reason, Hegel suggests, logic has been allowed to become a purely procedural exercise, devoid of substantive content and therefore of critical, living truth. Hegel’s task is to breathe life into the forms of reason that the Enlightenment has hollowed out—by restoring the speculative impulse in philosophy (1969, pp. 31, 39).

Hegel positions the corrosive, anti-speculative, impulse of the Enlightenment as a phase—a symptom of the rawness with which a
new movement hurls itself fanatically at what it seeks to overcome. This fanaticism, Hegel argues, confuses its attack on an outgoing system with the rejection of systematicity as such, and takes its critique of metaphysics to be a rejection of all speculative forms of thought (1969, pp. 27, 45-8). Hegel sees his work as a means to move beyond this phase, while still transcending a hollow procedural concept of reason, by developing a substantive, speculative philosophy that preserves reason’s living, critical potential (1969, pp. 28-9, 39, 48-50).

To achieve this goal, Hegel develops a distinctive methodology that he foreshadows in a section of the *Science of Logic* titled ‘With What Must the Science Begin?’. In this section, he explores the principles for constructing a philosophical system whose starting point is not dogmatic or arbitrary (1969, pp. 67-78). Interestingly, Hegel regards this question as a historically-emergent one. Earlier philosophers concerned themselves solely with an ontological question—with the question of what the first principle of a philosophical system ought to be, and what could be derived from this first principle. Contemporary philosophy, by contrast, is additionally concerned with the epistemological question of how we could be subjectively certain of any first principle (1969, p. 67). The historical emergence of this question reveals that earlier forms of philosophy treated the principle of a philosophical system dogmatically, positioning the beginning as a kind of foundational exception to the system itself.

If the beginning or principle of a philosophy cannot be rationally grasped, Hegel argues, competing philosophical systems cannot move beyond hurling dogmatic claims and counter-claims about first principles, with no rational means to adjudicate such disputes. Contemporary philosophy therefore tends to oscillate between the poles of dogmatism and scepticism—a situation that, in turn, leads some to repudiate reason altogether, in favour of frank irrationalism. Hegel understands contemporary philosophy to be trapped in a restless circuit amongst these three alternatives (1969, pp. 67, 74-5). He intends his work to break through this impasse, by unfolding a method that enables the beginning or principle of philosophy to remain immanent to reason. A philosophical system is ‘scientific’, for Hegel, to the extent that it is adequate to this task (1969, pp. 36, 40, 43-4, 53, 57-9).

With these goals in mind, Hegel proceeds to outline a method for a philosophical system that would be self-grounding and presuppositionless. Such a philosophy would not rely on any dogmatic starting point, but would rather encompass its beginning within the philosophical system itself.

In the opening moments of the presentation of the philosophical system, the principle might appear dogmatic or arbitrary. This arbitrary appearance is gradually dispelled, however, as inferences are drawn from the starting point, and the beginning is thus determined ever...
more concretely. Since these determinations are inferentially derived from the first principle, Hegel regards each layer of determination as a further development or specification of that principle. He argues that the principle is preserved as the foundation of all the developments that flow out of it (1969, pp. 70-71).

It is not sufficient, however, simply to derive a long, linear ‘chain’ of inferences from the starting point. Instead—and Hegel describes this as the ‘essential’ requirement for the science of logic—the unfolding of the system must loop back on itself, reflexively justifying its point of departure by demonstrating how the system that has been unfolded from that starting point generates that very starting point as its own product or result. What initially manifests as one-sided, immediate, and arbitrary, is thus progressively demonstrated to be the fully mediated and necessary result of the system as a whole. Hegel describes this demonstration as a process in which the philosophical system loops back on itself, forming a circle. This circular, reflexive movement ensures that the beginning remains immanent to the philosophical system (1969, pp. 69, 71-2, 74-5).

Hegel understands this method as a simultaneous response to the ontological question of what the first principle is, and the epistemological question of how that principle can be known: the principle is nothing other than the unfolded system, and this principle can be known in no other way, aside from through the process by which the system is unfolded (1969, p. 68).

One important implication of this approach is that the form and content of the philosophical system are understood to be unified: the form in which the system is presented is itself the system’s substantive claim (1969, pp. 67-8). Hegel thus insists that the presentation of the text ought to be set out according to the order required to render explicit the necessary relationship of each moment of thinking to other moments and to the whole (1969, pp. 71-2). The beginning of the system must be what comes first in the process of thinking—not in the sense of whatever immediately comes to mind when a philosopher personally begins thinking, but in the sense of what necessarily must come first in thinking, in order to derive the system (1969, pp. 68-9). The process of thinking then structures the order of presentation within the system, such that it becomes impossible to describe this process adequately, other than by presenting the system in full. As Hegel argues:

> to want the nature of cognition clarified prior to the science is to demand that it be considered outside the science; outside the science this cannot be accomplished, at least not in a scientific manner and such a manner is alone here in place. (1969, p. 68, italics in original)

One consequence of this method is that the beginning—because it is preserved and determined in increasing detail over the course of the work—is not truly known at the outset—even though the immediate
starting point appears to be plainly stated in the text (1969, pp. 70-72). Instead, the beginning can be recognised for what it is only when it can finally be situated in the network of relationships that determine it and give it a substantive character. As the system is unfolded, each new relationship that is derived alters our understanding of all the relationships analysed before. Not until the final step in the analysis do we have a sense of the whole network. Only with the whole network in view, do we fully understand all the moments that, ultimately, are what they are, only in and through their relationships with one another and the whole. It is at this point that we finally grasp what the beginning always already was—and why the system had to be unfolded in this specific order, from this particular starting point (1969, pp. 71-2).

Marx hints at a relationship between *Capital* and Hegel's method very early, when, in the Preface to the first German edition, he warns:

> Every beginning is difficult, holds in all sciences. To understand the first chapter, especially the section that contains the analysis of commodities, will, therefore, present the greatest difficulty. (Marx 1990, p. 89)

This subtle reference to the method discussion in Hegel's *Science of Logic* escaped the notice of many early interpreters of Marx's work. The eventual publication of Marx's draftwork for *Capital*—in particularly the explicitly Hegelian *Grundrisse* notebooks (Marx 1973)—has made the Hegelian influence much more difficult to ignore (cf. Dunayevskaya 1973, p. 62). So many recent reinterpretations of Marx's work assume the centrality of Hegel's 'systematic dialectic' for Marx's work that a loose tradition of 'new dialectics' (Arthur 2004, pp. 1-16) has come to dominate recent scholarly interpretation of Marx's work.

At the same time, in spite of this increased attention to Hegel's influence, the opening of *Capital* remains extremely difficult to parse. Marx's reluctance to discuss his own method in any explicit way bears no small part of the blame for this continuing difficulty. On another level, however, interpretations of *Capital* struggle under the weight of a too-serious approach to Marx's relationship to Hegel. Once the publication of Marx's draftwork made it clear that *Capital* in some sense references Hegel's method, interpreters leapt too quickly to the assumption that Marx was somehow *applying* this method in earnest—albeit with modifications meant to correct Hegel's idealist tendency to turn the dialectic 'on its head' (Marx 1990, p. 103).

In the section below, I take a different tack. I suggest that, while Marx is indeed in constant dialogue with Hegel's method in *Capital*, his interaction with Hegel is much more playful and irreverent than the 'new dialectical' Hegelian Marxists tend to assume. In doing this, I develop the critiques of scholars such as Seery (1990, pp. 243-53), LaCapra (1983, pp. 332-3), Kincaid (2005), and Sutherland (2008), who have drawn attention to the role of irony, parody, and
déétournement in Marx’s work, but who have not fully explained the social theoretic stakes in Marx’s stylistic strategies. In the following analysis, I open a window onto the special interpretive challenge posed by the way in which Capital overtly presents a narrative—especially in its opening passages—that is actually the target of Marx’s critique. To do this, I need to draw attention to a tacit subtext—which is almost tempting to read as a complex, playful joke that Marx plays on Hegel in the first chapter. This subtext becomes visible when the movement of the first chapter is considered in light of the methodology discussed above, and also when it is compared to the movement of the early chapters of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Mind. Before I discuss this subtext, however, I want first to take a quick look at what the opening passages of Capital appear to be arguing, if this playful subtext is not taken into account.

If you open Capital and read its early passages at face value, you are confronted with what looks like a fairly straightforward, empiricist sociological narrative. The narrative voice seems to stand outside the context it is analysing, offering objective observations about social realities as if from a third person omniscient perspective. The starting point to the text looks arbitrary:

The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as ‘an immense collection of commodities.’ The individual commodity appears as its elementary form. Our investigation therefore begins with the analysis of the commodity. (1990, p. 125)

This elementary form possesses a dual character. On the one hand, it is an ‘object outside us’ that possesses many different intrinsic material properties, which can be discovered by humans who investigate these properties over time. These material properties satisfy various human needs, and therefore provide the basis for the use value of the commodity (1990, p. 125). Use value, we are told, is the transhistorical substance of wealth, whatever the social form of that wealth might be:

In the society being analysed here, use values are also the bearers of a particular social form of wealth – exchange value. Exchange value expresses a relationship between goods – the quantitative proportion in which goods trade on the market. This proportion varies constantly and is always in flux, and has nothing to do with the material properties of the goods exchanged, but instead appears to express only arbitrary social convention. (1990, p. 126)

The text presents us, then, with a set of dichotomies: use values are connected with material properties that are timeless, substantive, essential, and intrinsic; exchange values are abstracted from material properties and are historical, arbitrary, and contingent. At this moment in the text, you would expect Capital to unfold a critique of exchange value—as the arbitrary social form—from the standpoint of more essential, transhistorical ‘materialist’ principles. Nothing about this
opening content or its style of presentation appears particularly ‘Hegelian’ or suggests that the commodity is the starting point of a complex ‘science.’ As Marx suggests at this point in the text: ‘Let us consider the matter more closely’ (1990, p. 126).

One of the first implications of viewing *Capital* as a Hegelian ‘science’, is that we realise that the beginning will not be fully understood at the outset. The beginning in its immediacy, in the form in which it appears at the opening of the system, has not yet been situated within the network of relationships that alone will allow us to grasp why this particular beginning is necessary—or, indeed, to know what the beginning actually is, since the beginning is only fully determined once it has been situated in the network of relationships constitutive of the whole.

A second, related, implication is that the course of the analysis must demonstrate that the beginning is also a product—the necessary product of the system as a whole. In this light, Marx’s choice of a beginning looks almost playful, for *Capital* begins—quite literally—with a product: the commodity. Initially, the commodity seems to be a simple object, a thing—an unpromising opening category from which to build the complex, relationally-determined entity that anchors a Hegelian ‘science’. This beginning cannot be what it seems, if it is intended to serve as the starting point for such a system. And, indeed, Marx soon tells us that the commodity is more complex than it initially appears. In the famous passage on commodity fetishism, Marx declares:

> A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties… (1990, pp. 163-4)

The nature of this complexity, however, is only gradually revealed as more concrete determinations are unfolded from the starting point. As we would expect in a Hegelian ‘science’, these determinations react back on our understanding of the opening passages, fundamentally transforming our sense of what was happening in these early moments of the text. I can illustrate the manner in which new determinations react back on our understanding of the beginning, by examining how our understanding of the commodity radically alters, once Marx derives the category of labour power.

Working immanently, with reference to categories that express the perspective of commodity circulation, Marx unfolds an impasse that appears unresolvable with the categories explicitly available to that perspective. How is it, Marx asks, that commodities can be traded at their full value (which is the assumption operative from the perspective of commodity circulation), and yet expanding amounts of money can crystallise out of the process of circulation? Individual commodity owners, of course, may violate the principle of commodity circulation, cheating one another by buying commodities below, or
selling them above, their value. Collective theft, however, cannot explain the quantitative expansion of the entire system. How then is it possible to explain the quantitative expansion, assuming that, across circulation as a whole, commodities are bought and sold at their value (1990, pp. 268-9)?

Marx uses this impasse to illustrate how commodity circulation necessarily presupposes a category that cannot be explicitly grasped in the terms available to circulation. This impasse opens the way for Marx to derive a new category—what he calls the ‘peculiar commodity’ of labour power (1990, pp. 270, 274). This category enables Marx to resolve the impasse by distinguishing the value of labour power—which, like the value of all commodities, is determined by its costs of production—from the use value of labour power—which, as it turns out, is to produce... value (1990, p. 270). The use-value of this ‘peculiar commodity’, therefore, turns out not to be based on an intrinsic material property, but instead on a distinctive social property that labour power possesses in capitalism alone—the property of constituting value. Marx then argues that, in order for the wealth of a society to take the form of an ‘immense collection of commodities’, labour power must have become a commodity. This ‘peculiar commodity’ is therefore not a trivial exception to the norm of commodity production. Instead, Marx argues, it is an essential historical condition before the commodity could become, as it is presented in the opening of the text, the socially general form of wealth (1990, pp. 273-4). The opening discussion of the commodity therefore already presupposes the category of labour power. Yet only once the category of labour-power has been explicitly derived, does it become clear how the dichotomies that seem firm and fixed at the beginning of the text, come to be destabilised and undermined as the analysis moves to other dimensions of the reproduction of capital.

As outlined above, the empiricist perspective with which the text opens strictly separates use value from exchange value, treating them as categories formed of fundamentally different substances—one material, one social. For the ‘peculiar commodity’ of labour power, however, use value and exchange value are not connected only arbitrarily or externally to one another: instead, the use value of labour power is constitutive of value. This distinctive use value, moreover, does not derive from the discovery of some intrinsic material property that labour power always possesses, but instead relates to a distinctive social property that labour power possesses uniquely in capitalism. Further, the commodity labour power is not, as commodities are presented in the opening passages, an ‘object outside us’: it is part of us, a form of being-in-the-world that we perform while engaging in one of the most mundane practices in capitalist society—offering to work for a wage. Deriving the category of labour power—and showing how this category is the unacknowledged precondition for the development of generalised commodity production—allows Marx simultaneously to demonstrate why the perspective with which Capital opens is socially plausible, while also reflecting critically on the limitations of that opening, by
illustrating dimensions of the reproduction of capital the opening perspective cannot grasp.

This form of argument is not something Marx uses only with the category of labour power: Marx derives new categories throughout the text, each of which also reacts back on our understanding of the commodity and all of the other derived categories (including labour power itself). Later sections in _Capital_ often use the perspectives made available by newly-derived categories to contradict—or, in Marx’s vocabulary, ‘invert’—the claims put forward in earlier sections. Marx perceives this form of argument to be necessary to express his substantive claim that capitalism is a contradictory social form—one that immanently destabilises itself and thus generates potentials for its critique and political contestation. I’ll return to this point in a moment. First, I want to explore a few further implications of this reading for how we perceive the opening passages of the text.

One of the most significant implications of the derivation of the category of labour power is how it reveals that the text has always been not simply an analysis of ‘objective’ phenomena but also, and simultaneously, an analysis of distinctive forms of subjectivity: ways of being in the world, practices of self, habits of perception and thought.

When the opening passage therefore tells us that the commodity is a thing—an object outside us whose intrinsic material properties are then covered over with more arbitrary social conventions—we can now reinterpret these passages as an argument that, in at least one dimension of social practice, this is how we enact and experience part of ourselves. As indigenous inhabitants of capitalist societies, we have everyday, mundane opportunities to practice a split or dual form of subjectivity—to enact both an objectivating and a relativising relationship to self—to practice ourselves as material, physiological objects and simultaneously as social subjects projecting what we experience as our contingent socialised desires onto that objectivated ‘material’ self. We perform ourselves as material beings onto which historically contingent interests are projected. We split our selves into moments that are intuitively experienced as social, and other moments that are experienced as material or physiological, and that are taken to exist, in and of themselves, outside the process of socialisation. The objective, third-person perspective that speaks in the opening passages of _Capital_ expresses, I suggest, a form of analysis symptomatic of this distinctive enactment of self.

Note that both sides of this enactment of self figure as equally social—not only the side that presents itself to us intuitively as social, but also the side that presents itself to us intuitively as material. In this respect, Marx’s frequent references throughout _Capital_ to concepts like ‘physiological’ labour (1990, cf. pp. 134-5, 137, 164) should not be interpreted as distinguishing an underlying ‘material’ reality from a more contingent social form: this sort of dichotomy, set out in the opening pages as how the commodity initially ‘appears’, is
destabilised or deconstructed by Marx’s subsequent demonstration that these opening categories presuppose later categories that undermine any fixed opposition between the material and social. This destabilisation is meant to react back on our understanding of the opening categories, such that what initially appeared to be an asocial ‘material’ dimension—of the physical body, of society, of ‘material production’ itself—is revealed, as the text unfolds, to be a very peculiar kind of social determination. The ‘material’ or ‘physiological’ categories in *Capital* appear, in this light, not as categories that are constituted by stripping away social determinations to reveal an underling material substratum, but rather as categories of a very distinctive form of socialisation. Through this analysis, Marx can attempt to cash out a form of critical materialism that moves beyond what he characterises as the ‘abstract materialism of natural science’, by reflexively grasping the ways in which distinctive forms of collective practice can render historically available the concept of the ‘material world’ as a social category (1990, pp. 493-4). This point will become important when we return later to the question of whether capitalism might generate, as well as erode, social bonds.

Before we move to that question, it is worth thematising explicitly some of the tacit undercurrents in Marx’s method. Although I cannot fully support this point textually here (see Pepperell, forthcoming), I suggest that Marx deploys what might today be called an argument about embodied cognition. Underlying Marx’s analysis is a tacit metatheory that our explicit theoretical concepts are first enacted in practice—that our everyday behaviour involves the performance of practical dispositions, which may then become the subject of more self-conscious theoretical reflection at some later point (Marx 1990, pp. 166-9). When Marx breaks the process of the reproduction of capital into moments, he analyses the forms of embodied cognition enacted in the performance of each moment. He thereby draws attention to ways in which forms of cognition are quintessentially social and performative, because they are enacted in collective practice. This practice-theoretic analysis of how forms of cognition emerge as moments of concrete practices is a large part of what Marx means, I suggest, when he argues that his method stands Hegel back on his feet (1990, pp. 103).

Second, Marx’s goal in appropriating Hegel is an essentially practical one. Marx uses Hegel, not primarily to address ontological or epistemological questions, but instead to demonstrate that his own critical ideals are not utopian, because these ideals can be demonstrated to derive from practical potentials suggested by the reproduction of capital. Marx thus finds, in Hegel’s method for a presuppositionless philosophy, a means to demonstrate how capitalism ‘presupposes’ the possibility for its own emancipatory transformation, by generating both the subjective and objective conditions of possibility for overcoming its own reproduction. In this sense, Marx’s ‘science’ of the logic of capital is a circle, only to the degree that capital continues to be reproduced; Hegel’s method is here relativised as the adequate means to grasp a distinctive form of
constraint. Marx’s goal is to overcome this constraint—and, in the process, to render this form of ‘science’ obsolete. The working out of this argument takes the better part of Capital, and so falls outside what I can discuss here.

Moving back to the first chapter of Capital, we can now read the text with these points in mind: the perspectives expressed in the text are the targets of Marx’s critique; Marx’s goal is not to dismiss, but to appropriate, the insights of the perspectives he analyses, by demonstrating the social conditions and limits of their validity; Marx demonstrates the conditions of their validity, by revealing how specific forms of thought express practical dispositions that are enacted in the performance of concrete practices associated with specific moments in the reproduction of capital (1990, pp. 167-9).

Shifts in perspective are particularly rapid in the first chapter of Capital, making this chapter a rich source for illustrating Marx’s analytical techniques. The text opens, as I have discussed above, with an ‘empiricist’ perspective that limits itself to material and social phenomena that can be directly perceived by the senses (1990, pp. 125-6). This empiricist perspective is adequate to introduce the opening categories of use value and exchange value, which pick out phenomena that can be directly perceived by the senses. The text must then shift to a different perspective—a ‘transcendental’ one—to derive the ‘supersensible’ categories of value and abstract labour, which name intangible social structures that cannot be directly observed, but must be intuited by reason (1990, pp. 127-37). Finally, the text shifts to a ‘dialectical’ perspective in order to derive that there is a necessary relationship between the sensible and supersensible categories, which are redetermined in this section as antinomic aspects of the same underlying social relation (1990, pp. 138-63). A quick sidestep to Hegel’s Phenomenology of Mind will illustrate how these shifts in perspective in Capital express a subtle critical appropriation of Hegel’s work.

The early chapters of Hegel’s Phenomenology recount how consciousness assumes a series of shapes in its quest to achieve certainty of its object. In each shape, however, consciousness attempts to apprehend its relationship to its object dualistically, positing the separation of itself from its object, essence from appearance, form from content—and treating such dichotomies as fixed, oppositional extremes that separate fundamentally different substances or worlds. These dualistic commitments, however, create impasses that undermine consciousness’ certainty of its object and drive consciousness from one dualistic form to the next.

In Hegel’s account, Perception is an empiricist sensibility that consciousness adopts when it takes its object to be an external sensible ‘thing with many properties’ that can be perceived or discovered through the senses (Hegel 2003, p. 64). Perception takes the sensible object as ‘essential’, and attributes everything inessential
to the perceiving consciousness, which engages passively with the object in an attitude of pure apprehension (2003, p. 66). The chapter on Perception thus analyses the same sort of sensibility that Marx expresses in the opening passages of *Capital*, which presents the commodity as a ‘thing’—an ‘external object’ that possesses many sensible material properties that we can discover when we approach the object in a contemplative stance (Marx 1990, p. 125). This empiricist sensibility takes the materiality of the commodity—its use value dimension—to be essential; everything inessential is attributed to the contingent social dimension of exchange value (1990, p. 126).

For Hegel, the shapes of consciousness associated with Perception prove inadequate as an anchor for the certainty consciousness seeks, and consciousness assumes a new shape that Hegel calls Understanding. Understanding takes as its object universals that are unconditioned by sensuous experience (Hegel 2003, p. 62).

Marx makes an analogous move in *Capital* when he shifts from the empiricist perspective with which *Capital* opens, to the ‘transcendental’ perspective that derives the categories of value and abstract labour. This section of *Capital* mimics Descartes' critique of sense-certainty, and spoofs the type of deduction through which Descartes infers the existence of a supersensible property, a property not detectable by empirical sense perception, but nevertheless discernible by reason (Descartes 1984, pp. 20-21). Marx spoofs this argument when he introduces, ‘behind’ the empirically-perceptible categories of use value and exchange value, the supersensible category of value (Marx 1990, pp. 127-8).

The process of exchange, the text tells us, could not take place unless commodities possess some common property. This property cannot, however, be a material, sensible property: exchange abstracts away from commodities’ sensible properties and, in any event, the sensible properties of commodities are diverse and there is no single material property that all commodities share. From these reflections, the text ‘infers’ the existence of a supersensible property that is not empirically discernible through the examination of commodities’ sensuous forms, but can be intuited by reason. Marx names this supersensible substance ‘value’, and then quickly ‘deduces’ that the quantity of value must be measured by the labour time expended in commodity production—and that the labour ‘counted’ in this measurement is ‘human labour in the abstract’ (1990, pp. 127-9). These supersensible categories inhabit a realm of lawlike universals that subsists behind the flux of sensible phenomena, and figure as something like transcendental conditions of possibility for commodity exchange.

Marx intends the reader to be in on the joke here: he does not expect readers to be persuaded by this ‘transcendental’ argument for the existence of value, or by the subsequent ‘deduction’ of the determination of value by labour time. Even in the first chapter, Marx hints that he does not believe that exchange requires commodities to
share some common supersensible property (1990, cf. pp. 151-2). This section of the text is instead intended to express a form of thought that becomes socially plausible under capitalism—and that is therefore valid, in a limited and bounded way, for this social context alone (1990, p. 167). This bounded validity arises because social actors are behaving in a way that brings ‘value’ and ‘abstract labour’ into existence, simply by collectively acting out such entities. I’ll return to this point in a moment—but I first want to draw attention to a few further parallels between the opening chapter of *Capital* and Hegel’s *Phenomenology*.

In the chapter on ‘Force and Understanding’, Hegel argues that Understanding initially separates out essence and appearance into two substances or worlds, which are taken to have opposing qualitative characteristics. The world of essence initially figures as a timeless realm of universal laws that subsists behind the flux of the sensible world of appearance (Hegel 2003, pp. 74, 90). As Hegel’s narrative develops, however, this initial understanding of the relationship between essence and appearance comes to be reversed through consciousness’ encounter with what Hegel calls an ‘inverted world’. In the inverted world, the realm of essence figures as the realm productive of flux and change, while the realm of appearance comes to be seen as generative of timeless laws (2003, pp. 90-91).

In Hegel, it is the confrontation with the inverted world that drives consciousness finally to recognise that its object does not reside in some separate substance or world outside itself, but is rather consciousness itself. Consciousness comes to recognise its own implicatedness in its object—comes to see that it has, in fact, been its own object all along. At this point in Hegel’s text, consciousness becomes reflexive—becomes self-consciousness (2003, p. 96).

Importantly, Marx traces a similar sort of narrative in his analysis of the genesis of the money form, a narrative that culminates in a series of inversions of the distinctions with which the analysis begins. Significantly, after drawing attention to these inversions, Marx opens the concluding section of the chapter, where he discusses commodity fetishism (Marx 1990, pp. 150-51, 158-63). In this section, Marx argues explicitly that the forms of thought presented earlier in the chapter are valid for a specific, bounded social situation, but fail to grasp their own social conditions of possibility, and therefore naturalise the contingent features of capitalist society (1990, pp. 167-9).

By breaking into a more explicitly critical voice at this point in the text, Marx hints that, like Hegel, he believes that critical forms of thought can arise immanently, through the confrontation with the contradictions and ‘inversions’ generated by the reproduction of capital. Marx then structures *Capital* such that later categories ‘invert’ the conclusions the text had derived from earlier ones. As with Hegel’s argument about the ‘inverted world’, Marx’s ‘inversions’ do not
suggest that the 'inverted' conclusions are 'true' and the original conclusions are 'false'—this dualistic move would inappropriately allocate 'appearance' and 'essence' to separate substances or worlds. Instead, the point is to illustrate that the same social context generates opposing potentials—that the process of the reproduction of capital is contradictory—and therefore that critical reflexivity arises as an immanent possibility because capitalism destabilises and deconstructs itself implicitly, at the level of everyday practice.

At this point, I want to break with the analysis of textual parallels between *Capital* and Hegel's work, to return briefly to the questions with which I opened this paper. To do this, I need to examine one of the pivots of Marx's discussion of commodity fetishism: his argument about the social character of labour in capitalism. Marx claims:

> As the foregoing analysis has already demonstrated, this fetishism of the world of commodities arises from the peculiar social character of the labour which produces them. (1990, p. 165)

What Marx seems to have in mind here is the way in which, in capitalism, what gets to 'count' as social labour is determined by a coercive process that culls a much larger set of efforts that have been empirically expended in production, winnowing down to a smaller subset of labouring activities that 'succeed' in being included as part of the labour of society from the standpoint of the reproduction of capital. This winnowing process is manifested by the exchange of goods, which reveals to social actors how much, and what kinds, of the empirical effort privately thrown into production, succeeds in becoming incorporated into 'social labour'. Social labour is thus the eventual result of a coercive, blind judgement effected unintentionally by the combined practices of social actors who are not deliberately attempting to achieve any specific vision of 'social labour', but whose collective actions nevertheless do reduce empirically-undertaken labouring activities, down to a smaller subset whose products are validated through market exchange (1990, pp. 129, 164-8, 174-5).

Marx is trying to distance us from this process—to denaturalise it—to get us to see it anthropologically, in its alienness and exoticism. His evocative analogies to supernatural objects (1990, p. 163) and religious beliefs (1990, p. 165) are attempts to recapture the sense of strangeness we lose in taking our own context for granted. Our collective behaviour, he argues, is equivalent to acting as though there is some supersensible world of social labour—'human labour in the abstract'—that is not identical with the sum total of the empirical productive activities that we collectively undertake. We create this supersensible world—as a social reality—by making practical distinctions in our collective behaviour between forms of productive activity that we treat as partaking in the supersensible essence of abstract labour (such as wage labour), and forms of productive activity that we treat as not partaking in this essence (such as domestic work, volunteer activities, or leisure pursuits), and then by collectively treating different forms of empirical labour as though they possess
greater or lesser quantities of abstract labour, by rewarding the products of different sorts of empirical labours to different degrees, once their products come to be exchanged.

Marx presents this supersensible world as haunting our empirical activities—exerting a coercive force that generates certain lawlike effects, including pressures to conform to an ever-shifting, coercive social benchmark for productivity, quality of production, and types of goods produced. These effects, which can be traced in non-random transformations of concrete practices that unfold over time, allow us eventually to deduce the presence of this otherwise intangible realm. Its presence must be deduced because we are not consciously trying to enact such a realm, and because it does not align directly with the empirical activities we are consciously setting out to conduct: ‘social labour’ is not the sum total of all labouring activities that private individuals empirically carry out; ‘value’ cannot be discerned by examining the empirical labour process or the physical object produced. The supersensible realm thus possesses a counterfactual character, and its presence is therefore initially easy to miss in the apparently random flux of individual decisions, empirically diverse productive activities, and the ever-fluctuating proportions in which goods exchange (1990, pp. 167-9).

Hegel somewhere comments that the great joke is that things are what they are (Hyppolite 1974, p. 125). Marx’s analysis of the fetish follows a similar insight. Marx does not attempt to dismiss the fetish—he does not believe the fetish derives from some sort of cognitive error that can be cast aside by shining the cold light of objectivity on capitalist society (Marx 1990, p. 168). Instead, he sets out to account for the social plausibility of forms of thought that attribute a fetish character to aspects of capitalist society—to account for how aspects of social experience can possess—in reality—the attributes ascribed by political economic theory. Note Marx’s phrasing in the following passage:

To the producers, therefore, the relations between their private labours appear as what they are, i.e., they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material [dinglich] relations between persons and social relations between things. (1990, pp. 165-6, italics mine)

Marx’s criticism here is therefore not that social actors are operating under an illusion that things have entered into social relations, and persons into material ones, but rather that political economy does not grasp how we have collectively constituted the situation that generates our social relations in these distinctive forms (1990, pp. 169, 173-5).

Marx suggests that we are collectively enacting a situation that renders it plausible to experience our selves and other entities in our world as material receptacles, onto which socially and historically contingent desires are projected, that partake in a supersensible
essence and are governed by supersensible laws. This entire complex structure of experience is social, for Marx—acted out in distinctive forms of social practice that reproduce capital.

This complex structure, however, is prone to being misrecognised, such that only some of its moments are typically grasped as social. This distinctive form of misrecognition does not arise due to a conceptual error, but rather reflects the determinate qualitative characteristics of the social structure itself. Capitalism, for Marx—and I can only sketch this point in a very preliminary fashion here— involves a complex trifurcation of social practice, in which an historical pattern, whose characteristics Marx is only beginning to capture in this first chapter through the categories of value and abstract labour, is reproduced in and through the transformations of material nature and of other concrete social practices and institutions. In such a context, certain dimensions of social practice—those that are contingent with respect to the overarching historical pattern—are relativised in social practice: they become overtly social, and are treated in at least one dimension of social practice as contingent and subject to transformation. Our practical experience of these dimensions of social practice tends to form our intuitive gestalt of ‘the social’, such that the qualitative characteristics of this single dimension of social practice come to be taken as definitive of the social as such. At the same time, the structure itself—the long-term historical pattern reproduced in and through the transformations of ‘overtly social’ institutions and practices—comes plausibly to be perceived as asocial. The qualitative characteristics of this pattern then tend to shape our expectations of the qualitative characteristics we anticipate finding in asocial environments. This distinctive form of misrecognition thus tends simultaneously to naturalise elements of our social practice, to lead to unrecognised projections of the determinate characteristics of capitalist society onto the natural world, and to render us hypersensitive to the contingency of ‘overtly social’ dimensions of social practice.

This argument would require development in considerable detail to draw out the full implications of Marx’s analysis. For present purposes, I must leave this more complete exposition to one side. Before I close, however, I want to suggest how this analysis links up to the questions I asked at the start, about whether capitalism can be understood as constituting some distinctive kind of social bond. The analysis above suggests that capitalism does constitute a distinctive form of social bond—but that this bond consists in the complex and multifaceted social connections generated by our unintentional collective cooperation in reproducing this unusual structure of social experience. One aspect of this complex social bond is that the dimension of social experience that we most intuitively recognise as social, constantly undergoes a process of transformation and is treated as contingent in at least those practices associated with the reproduction of capital. One plausible—but, I suggest, not entirely accurate—articulation of this ongoing transformation, would be to describe it as a process of ‘social fragmentation’. Such a description,
however, focuses our attention one-sidedly on the dimension of a more complex process that we most easily recognise as 'social', and fails to thematise the coercive social bonds generated by other dimensions of this same dynamic process. Thematising the complex historical dynamic of capitalism in terms of 'fragmentation'—in terms of the breaking apart of social bonds—grasps one level of social 'appearance', without fully grasping the equally contingent, contestable, and transformable social 'essence' reproduced in and through this flux. Even through what we experience as a corrosion of the current configuration of our 'overtly social' bonds, we remain bonded—through our unwitting cooperation in reproducing the historical trajectory that is capital.

The question that Marx attempts to address, via Hegel, is how we can stop treating the various dimensions of our social world as though they are formed out of separate substances—material, social, supersensible. If we instead recognise the intrinsically social character of each of these dimensions, the potential for intervening in the reproduction of capital itself is prised open. Marx maintains that capitalism generates 'inversions' and contradictions that bring these insights to the surface. The question, then, is how to find and draw attention to such inversions today.

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