

# 1 The Ontology of Labor

## *Problems of the Relationship between Philosophy and Political Economy*

... something can be changed, for something is possible  
("possible" being defined as contrary to "necessary")

—John Duns Scotus

POLITICAL ECONOMY OBSCURES the ontological ground of labor and gives the impression of constituting a totality. Yet ontology shakes the ground as well as the edifice of political economy. It then makes sense to begin not with a work of Marx in which the critique of political economy becomes thematic but with one in which the ontological ground of labor is first shown. This will allow us to stress the subjective dimension of the ontological concept of labor and show how this subjectivity, in itself an objective capacity, can unleash that elemental power of subversion whereby the concept subsumed under the categories of political economy and capital goes back to itself, its ground, and its freedom. If this is not done at the outset, that is, if labor does not posit itself in its freedom, one risks remaining prey of the very categories one wished to destroy—destroy in practice as well as in theory. By contrast, when this is done, when labor fully masters its freedom and power, namely, itself as *sensuous human activity and practice*;<sup>1</sup> in other words, when it masters its subjectivity, then the subsumptive mode in which it has fallen under capital becomes evidently its antagonistic other, which must be fought in ways similar to those employed against capital—fought not insofar as it is labor but insofar as it is labor subsumed under capital, and then already not-labor, already capital. But this is not the same fight that labor wages against capital proper, a fight to the death; rather, it is a fight that seeks liberation and a return. Or, rather, antagonistic is not the “what” which is subsumed, that is, labor, but rather subsumption proper, the modality of subsumption, the way in which the original “what” is now essentially modified.

It is in Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* that we find a clear distinction between ontology and political economy. Here, the concept of labor, understood as a category of political economy, undergoes a critique, and this critique is worked out from the point of view of ontology.<sup>2</sup> The ontology of labor recuperates all that political economy neglects: the time that for political economy does not count as labor, that is, as *economic, productive* labor. This is the time of *living labor*, of which productive labor is only an expression—and indeed an aberrant one, for productive labor is the time when living labor enters the process that will transform it into dead labor. But the

ontology of labor recuperates all social time, for it has to do with all human sensuous activity, all practice, and with subjectivity.

It also has to do, as Marx says, with *the time when the worker is not working*. But this time is not simply “leisure” time as the time during which the worker is physically away from the workplace; rather, it is present even during the labor process, at the point of production, for the attempted reduction of the subjective power of labor (living labor) to labor-power (the commodity form by and through which living labor enters the phase of its consumption and death) can never be thorough and complete. Or, rather, labor-power can never be separated from the living, human being whose capacity it is. Marx defines it as “the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being, capabilities which he sets in motion whenever he produces a use-value of any kind” (1977: 270). Thus, the expenditure of labor-power during the labor process necessitates the actual presence of the worker, but the worker is never completely and only a worker. This means that even when the worker is working, he or she is also *not working*, also *not a worker*. Concretely, during the labor process the worker may choose to spend time daydreaming, organizing the next struggle, implementing an act of sabotage against production itself. But for political economy a human being only has value insofar as he or she can work and work productively, only insofar as he or she can be reduced to the status of a worker. And the essence of the worker lies in his or her labor-power, his or her labor-time; the rest of the time is not of political economy’s concern.

Of course, the human being that political economy considers as a possible worker is not any human being, but the proletarian. Political economy defines the *proletarian* as a *worker*, and only looks at him in that respect. Here lies the origin of estrangement and alienation, the proletarian’s loss of his humanity. He loses his humanity, not insofar as he is a proletarian, but, rather, insofar as he becomes a worker. He loses his humanity *and* his subjectivity by becoming an element in the objective nexus created by capital, by changing his living labor into a commodity, into labor-power. When the proletarian becomes a worker, then all living labor takes on the form of appearance of productive labor (or its counterpart, unproductive labor.) Then there is apparently no exit, no escape, from the categories with which capital and political economy construct the world. Yet “proletarian” and “worker” are not identical concepts.<sup>3</sup>

## THE TIME OF THE PROLETARIAN

Marx says, “It goes without saying that political economy regards the *proletarian*, i.e. he who lives without capital and ground rent from labour alone, and from one-sided labour at that, as nothing more than a *worker*. It can therefore advance the thesis that, like a horse, he must receive enough to enable him to work. *It does not consider him, during the time when he is not working, as a human being*. It leaves this to criminal law, doctors, religion, statistical tables, politics and the beadle” (Marx 1975: 288; last emphasis added). This

time is social *and* institutional time; the time that later became the object of Foucault's studies on normalization, discipline, and control. In fact, even though it is of no direct concern for political economy, it is a sort of preparatory time, without which the labor process could not take place or, at least, be effective.

But what is the proletariat? In the passage by Marx, we find a definition of the *proletarian as a worker* that defies any productivist logic, and thus any attempt to reduce Marx's theory of revolution to a past theory able to relate only to a given phase of the capitalist mode of production, that is, the phase in which the proletariat can be clearly identified with the factory worker. Today things stand differently. We hardly speak of "the proletariat," and certainly, particularly with the confusion arising from the concept of "immaterial labor" (when literally understood), the category seems untenable. Marx defines the proletariat as "he who lives without capital and ground rent from labour alone." This category is much broader than that of the factory worker. This labor is, Marx stresses, "one-sided and abstract." Today, the one-sided and abstract dimension of labor has become even more dominant than in the mid-nineteenth century, and the proletariat, far from disappearing, shows his presence everywhere. Political economy's narrow understanding of labor allows the transformation of whoever has no capital or ground rent into a worker or a potential worker. This is also the origin of the distinction between productive and unproductive labor. And, in fact, for political economy, whether labor is productive or unproductive depends only on the need capital has for it. The only labor that counts is, of course, productive labor. Unproductive labor can also be performed by the proletariat, who would in this case be an unsuccessful worker, a jobless worker. As Marx says, "In political economy *labour* appears only in the form of *wage-earning activity*" (1975: 289). This means, in the form of money; but of a specific form of its appearance: money that is immediately capital. And this again means money as the form of appearance of exchange value.

The second important moment of this passage has to do with the reproduction of the worker's labor-power: "It [i.e., political economy] can therefore advance the thesis that, like a horse, he must receive enough to enable him to work." Thus, as far as capital and its science (political economy) are concerned, the time of the proletariat is only his labor time, that is, the actual time at the point of production plus the time needed for the reproduction of his labor-power. The distinction between structure (or base) and superstructure can also be detected here. Labor time is structural time. The time that remains is superstructural time. This is "the time when [the worker] is not working."—the time when being is nothing. This time, political economy leaves to criminal law, doctors, religion, and so on; to the state and the institutions. It is the time in which he or she who has no capital or ground rent (i.e., the proletariat) is not engaged in a productive or reproductive activity.

Yet, we have seen that this time is also paradoxically present during the labor process. It is present there as the ontological void that sustains production; as

such it fills the process of production with a potentially infinite number of empty times which constitute capital's principle of ruin and destruction. In fact, capital could not be destroyed by an assimilated or subsumed living labor which valorizes it, not, in other words, by productive labor; rather, capital can be destroyed by a living labor that is present and absent at the same time, *hidden* like the God of Pascal—a labor that is inside and yet outside the production process: not by living labor as labor-power, but by the subjective power of labor, of which labor-power represents the saleable, market form. The time in which the worker is not working is the time of a paradox. However, precisely now the negation of the organic dimension of labor as human sensuous activity, as free and creative practice, that is, as *poiesis*, also becomes apparent. The return of labor to its organic dimension, that is, to a labor that is not a wage-earning activity, requires the crossing back of the territory of the totality of capital, that is, capital in its structural and superstructural forms, the factory and the state, productivity and its disciplinary preparation, the economy and culture. This is a totality that hinges on nothing and has nothing beyond; or so at least it appears. The crossing back is a going beyond that those who are less impeded by the totality of capital are closer to, because have rejected it or have been denied by it. Even though in the time of total subsumption everybody, whether employed or unemployed or, as is more often the case, employed and not-employed at the same time, whether productive or unproductive, is affected by the rules of capital, yet there still remains, there must remain, a space for rebellion and revolt.

At the paradoxical time when the worker is no longer a worker, yet a proletarian who antagonistically confronts and challenges the entire ensemble of capitalist categories and relations, the commodity paradigm enters its deepest crisis. Marx says, "Labour not only produces commodities; it also produces itself and the workers as a *commodity* and it does so in the same proportion in which it produces commodities in general" (p. 324). There could be no clearer statement against the logic of productivism. Indeed, in Marx we find a critique, not an upholding, of this logic. Here it becomes clear that it is not the economic power of production that will change things, but a subtraction from that power—itsself a power. The origin of alienation lies precisely in this form of labor: economic (or external) labor. The return of labor to itself, to its organic and creative nature, the return from political economy to ontology, can only be accomplished through the ruin of the system of estrangement and alienation. For this ruin to obtain, capitalist production, economic production, must end; and it can end by simply being left to itself. Capitalist production is in fact the production of labor as its double, its negation, and as an alien power. It produces for the worker a "*loss of reality*" (ibid.). It is only by withdrawing, by subtracting themselves from this logic that the workers will be able to effect a change, and that means, by stopping being workers.<sup>4</sup> Through the power of subtraction, the workers lose the loss itself and may, at the same time, recuperate a sense of reality. We saw in fact that the production of commodities is also the production of labor and of the workers as a commodity. It is this process that attaches and chains the workers to the loss

of their being, to nothingness. And yet this attachment, qualitatively different from the one experienced by the medieval serf, gives at the same time the illusion of freedom—for freedom there is, to either accept the conditions of a new form of enslavement or disappear. Marx adds that “the more objects the worker produces the fewer can he possess and the more he falls under the domination of his product, of capital” (ibid.). The truth of domination is then production itself. Domination cannot cease unless production, as the production of capital, also ceases.

## THE LOGIC OF NEITHER/NOR AND THE MEANS OF LIFE

This domination presents two fundamental moments. They are both moments of negation, whose co-presence yields a double negation; the same double negation that, in *Capital*, Marx identifies as the “double freedom” of the workers. This double negation can be understood as a logic of *neither/nor*, which essentially defines the condition of workers under capitalism. However, the logic of neither/nor should not be understood only in a negative sense. On the one hand, it serves as a descriptive term. As such, it describes the condition of those who no longer belong, or whose belonging is a nonbelonging, those who are attached to nothing but themselves; for instance, the condition of migration and exodus, of those whose traditional ways of life have been disrupted or destroyed by the emergence and constant expansion of capital. In this sense, it represents a tragic condition. Yet, on the other hand, it also has a programmatic, thus fully positive, dimension to it. It is, in fact, the logic of resistance and desertion, the necessary condition for the constitution of an alternative.

This is not to say that the alternative is easily constituted. The logic of neither/nor allows us to avoid both a too pessimistic and a too optimistic view of revolutionary praxis. Marx says, “The more the worker *appropriates* the external world, sensuous nature, through his labour, the more he deprives himself of the *means of life* of his labour; and secondly, it becomes less and less a *means of life* in the immediate sense, a means for the physical subsistence of the worker” (p. 325). A paradoxical situation: “The culmination of this slavery is that it is only as a *worker* that he can maintain himself as a *physical subject* and only as a *physical subject* that he is a worker” (ibid.). The worker produces himself as a worker; he uses his power to bring about his own powerlessness. Under the subsumption of all labor under capital, there seems to be no escape from this situation; it becomes more and more difficult, virtually impossible, for the proletarian (i.e., he or she who has neither capital nor ground rent) to make a living unless the logic of capital, with all its threatening offers, is accepted and entered into. Work becomes a necessity—and a necessity posited by capital. This double condition of negation is seen in the first volume of *Capital* as the “process which operates two transformations, whereby the social means of subsistence and production are turned into capital, and the immediate producers are turned into wage-labourers” (1977: 874).

Workers are then free “in the double sense that they *neither* form part of the means of production themselves, as would be the case with slaves, serfs, etc., *nor* do they own the means of production, as would be the case with self-employed peasant proprietors” (ibid.; emphasis added). In order to find a *means of life*, they have to become workers; but they can become workers only because they can dispose of labor as a *means of life*.

The twofold meaning of the expression “means of life” is related to the two senses of the concept of labor: organic (or creative) and estranged (or external or alienated) labor. The latter is forced labor, labor as a wage-earning activity, thus productive labor. The former is not unproductive labor, or better unproductive labor is neither the determinate opposite of productive labor nor is it really different from it, for both of them have productiveness as their measure; rather, this labor that we call *organic* is labor in its totality (a true totality) as against the fictitious totality of capital;<sup>5</sup> it is labor that returns to itself, a labor that also will be referred to as *neither-productive-nor-unproductive*. It is not merely opposed to external labor; it is, rather, in a Spinozian sense, different from it. And the difference must be understood here as essential and radical.

Labor is a *means* whether we consider it as a category of ontology or political economy. It is a means because it is a measure<sup>6</sup> and a mediation; it is a dialogue between one part of nature (man) and nature itself (man’s inorganic body). However, this mediation can have a universal character or not. When it has a universal character, man appears, says Marx, as a *species-being*, that is, “a being which treats the species as its own essential being” (1975: 329). This is different from the animals, which “produce only for their immediate needs or those of their young; [and thus] one-sidedly,... man produces universally” (ibid.). This universality has the form of freedom, for “man produces only in freedom from such need” (ibid.).

Fundamentally, this shows that labor can be conceived of as forced or free labor; that free labor is a real possibility. This would of course be a real freedom, not the one posited by capital as a double freedom. It is also the freedom that accounts for artistic production. In this sense, labor becomes a fundamental category of esthetics, and esthetics, rather than being a complement to the general modality of doing characteristic of everyday life, can be equated with practical ontology.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, “man is capable of producing according to the standards of every species;... [and] in accordance with laws of beauty” (ibid.). For Marx it is in the nature of man (also a problematic concept) to treat the species “as its own essential being or itself as a species-being” (ibid.). It is also in his nature to produce *in freedom from* physical needs and thus reproduce, as culture, the whole of nature (ibid.).

Of course, Marx’s argument is *essentialist* and linked to the philosophy of the Enlightenment. However, in the passage we are reading it is hard to find a justification of the domination of man over nature; rather, we find an indictment of it, and this precisely when the universal character of the concept of labor is lost, being transformed into a merely particular, or particularistic, and

individual means of life. Again, the universal character of labor is such that, through it, man appears as a creator: "nature appears as *his* work and his reality" (ibid.). Estranged labor, on the other hand, takes nature away and transforms its product into an alien power. Estranged labor "reduces spontaneous and free activity to a means, [and] it makes man's species-life a means of his physical existence" (ibid.).

When it is considered in its universality, labor is a univocal concept. The concept of labor, in its universality, has in Marx a function similar to that which, in the philosophy of John Duns Scotus, pertains to the univocal concept of being, that is, to the most common concept. In fact, labor *is* being; its mediating activity has the form of the synthetic moment which in Scotus's ontological syllogism unites two otherwise unrelated extremes.<sup>8</sup>

It is in this sense that we can call this labor *organic*, for it mediates between and unites, *instrumentally*, what otherwise would be left in the separateness of its immediacy. Yet, true immediacy belongs, precisely, to labor itself, to its ontological power of affirmation. Without this power, immediacy would be a scattered inorganic presence, and it would never become *life* and *a world*. To be sure, the instrumentality of organic labor has nothing to do with the external concept of instrumentality, typical of estranged labor and geared toward the domination of nature. The immediacy of labor is not the immediacy of the human will, for the human will, with its rational and reflective determinations, distinguishes itself from that immediacy: "The animal is immediately one with its life activity. It is not distinct from that activity, it *is* that activity. Man makes his life activity itself an object of his will and consciousness. He has conscious life activity. It is not a determination with which he directly merges" (Marx 1975: 328). Thus labor is instrumental and conscious life activity. It depends on the effort of the human will to direct this instrumentality toward its fundamental and original organicity, or to let it open to external forms of estrangement and alienation.

## LABOR AS NOTHING

Even in its estranged form, however, labor does not lose its fundamental creative power, but this creation has now the character of narrow economic production, that is, production for the sake of profit. This means that ontology still precedes and grounds political economy, or that political economy is an episode in the history of the social, practical ontology of labor. The class struggle itself, which as is made clear at the outset of the *Communist Manifesto*, well precedes the capitalist mode of production, takes on, under capital, a particular and extreme configuration, for the antagonism between labor and capital becomes irreducible. This irreducibility is the direct consequence of the estrangement and alienation to which capital reduces the natural and organic *appropriation* of the fruit of labor. Private property is the form and substance of this reduction: "*Private property* is therefore the product, result and necessary consequence of *alienated labour*, of the external relation of the

worker to nature and to himself” (Marx 1975: 331–332). What the workers lose in the labor process is not merely an economic advantage. As Marx says, they lose reality itself. And to lose reality means to lose ontological status and grounding. Yet what labor produces is not without ontological qualities, for labor, however estranged, remains there as a fundamental creative power. This is why Marx asks the question: “If the product of labour is alien to me and confronts me as an alien power, to whom does it belong?” (1975: 330).

Labor and the product of labor belong, says Marx, to “man himself,” but this *man* is an “*alien being*” for the worker who, during the whole process of production, has lost his humanity. If the alien being is *man*, the worker is its negation, *nonman*. Labor and the product of labor belong to “*a man other than the worker*” (ibid.). The word “other” here establishes a difference brought to the point of irreducible antagonism. Other than the worker is man himself, for the worker has lost his humanity, or he has transferred it, directly with his labor, to this *other*. It is precisely by and through the appropriation under a regime of estrangement and alienation that this *other*, this *alien being*, acquires the ontological status of *being-man* as such. The ontological power is labor itself; those who can appropriate this labor and the product of this labor enjoy the status of being; those who cannot do that, fall into nonbeing. Fundamentally, the worker, insofar as he is a worker, is not a man. When capital is everything, labor is nothing. At this level, which is ontological and not merely economic, the class struggle becomes a struggle between life and death, between being and nothing. The negation of the humanity of the worker is inherent in the concept of the worker himself. To re-appropriate his humanity, the worker has to stop being a worker; work, production, has to stop. The concept of a direct producer is what Marx envisages as the overcoming of the concept of the worker. The direct producer re-appropriates the full ontology of organic labor. He or she is also a creator, and not at all a producer in the narrow economic sense. His *property* is *organic*, and not “private.” Organic property is not sanctioned by the laws of the State; it is, in fact, not sanctioned at all and of the State it can make no use. Organic property is nothing but the truth which is made manifest in the working together of nature and of that part of nature which the human being itself is.

This continuous shaping of the form of organic property is the “*practical, human-sensuous activity*” called for by Marx in his *Theses on Feuerbach*. In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx shows that private property is not the cause, but the consequence, of alienated labor (p. 332). Indeed, labor is *activity*, whereas private property is a *situation*, a state. What we find here is the dialectic between living and dead labor, of which more will be said later.<sup>9</sup> Marx says that what from the point of view of the worker, of living labor, is activity, is, from the point of view of the nonworker, of dead labor, a situation. Both activity and situation are estranged and alienated. Furthermore, what is real and practical for the worker, is theoretical for the nonworker (p. 334).<sup>10</sup> Private property is a *theoretical situation*, that is, a formal, external and legal state. Ontologically speaking it is void. From the point of



view of the worker it is simply the alienation form of that real, practical and sensuous activity which, left to its immediacy, would constitute organic property. In reality, property itself is the product of labor; its private or organic character depends solely on whether this labor is alienated or itself organic.

## LABOR AS THE ESSENCE OF MAN

The ontological nature of the antagonism between labor and capital is further developed by Marx in the second manuscript. He says, "The worker is the subjective manifestation of the fact that capital is man completely lost to himself, just as capital is the objective manifestation of the fact that labour is man lost to himself" (pp. 334–335).

At first sight, man appears as the middle term and the univocal concept common to the two extremes: capital and labor. In reality, the common concept is labor itself, for it is the only concept which is included in all the three terms: labor, capital, and man. Furthermore, the fact that man is completely lost to himself and becomes nonman is a consequence of the alienated nature of labor, and it is also the origin of private property. Finally, we also have to keep in mind that "man" is nothing but labor, provided that labor is understood ontologically, and not economically, as human sensuous activity—but this would be organic, creative labor. Thus, the concept of labor is to practical, social ontology what the concept of being is to pure ontology: the most common and univocal concept. Even in the dead world of capital, we find nothing but labor, albeit labor in its estranged and congealed form. In the above quotation, Marx distinguishes between the subjective and the objective manifestations of this loss of humanity, of this estrangement. But of course here subjective does not mean relative to a particular point of view, for the point of view of the worker is universal. Subjective does not mean partial; it does not mean nonobjective, for man *is* an objective being, and, in reality, a "non-objective being is a *non-being*" (p. 390). We have seen that capital reduces the worker to a nonbeing; however, this is not why the worker and labor have the character of subjectivity. Instead, "subjective" and "objective" are here used by Marx in a different sense. "Subjective" means "living"; "objective" means "dead." The former is an activity; the latter a situation, as we have seen. Moreover, the subjective has, in this case, preeminence over the objective. In the third manuscript, Marx says, "The *subjective essence* of private property, *private property* as activity for itself, as *subject*, as *person*, is *labour*" (p. 341). Thus, living labor does not lose the character of the objective being, defined later, in the section on Hegel, as "a natural being and as a living natural being" (p. 389), which is active and suffering at the same time. What I am saying is that living labor, understood ontologically and thus, fundamentally, as organic labor, is not simply one aspect of a compound nature, or else human beings would be, at one and the same time, and necessarily so, both labor and the negation of labor, that is, capital. But this cannot be the case. Rather, in its nonestranged form labor is the essence of man in its totality, and this is an

action and a passion. But of course this is not the concept of labor understood by political economy.

Political economy obscures the real nature of the ontology of labor by making *appear* the alien character of the relationship between labor and capital “as something *real*” (p. 335). The power of creation no longer resides in labor *as* labor, that is, in its immediate and universal form, but only in labor as subsumed under capital, in productive labor; and creation is mere production: “The worker produces capital and capital produces him, which means that he produces himself” (p. 335). But the worker is not all labor: “Political economy... does not recognize the unoccupied worker, the working man insofar as he is *outside* this work relationship” (ibid.; emphasis added). The totality of actions and passions, of drives and limitations, which we will consider more closely below, is reduced by political economy to a single dimension: “... as far as political economy is concerned, the requirements of the worker can be narrowed down to one: *the need to support him while he is working* and prevent the *race of workers* from dying out” (p. 335). The distinction between the worker and the unoccupied worker is fundamental here. It is the same as the distinction between productive and unproductive labor, that is, both terms of the distinction fall within the categories of political economy. What escapes political economy is the empty time in which both the occupied and unoccupied workers enter a modality of resistance and revolt. In fact, the unoccupied worker, who usually performs some kind of labor outside the formal paradigm established by capital, receives his/her identity through and by those same categories. The working person not employed by capital, that is, the proletarian who is not a worker, does not, by virtue of this fact alone, perform organic labor. He or she is still within the “general illumination” of capital and of estranged labor. The categories of “worker” and “jobless working person” are two determinations of the same reality, they belong to the same logic, just as productive and unproductive labor do. The totality of organic labor, which is in itself neither-productive-nor-unproductive, but something *different*, has nothing to do with having or not having a job. For Marx, this totality is *genuine*, that is, not “crude,” *communism*. In genuine communism, the ontology of labor regains its unhindered powers.

## GENUINE COMMUNISM

Marx gives a definition of communism, of genuine communism, in the third manuscript. This is a rare fact in Marx’s writings, but it is important to dwell on it because it shows that speaking about what communism is, is no mere exercise in “futurology,” but a sense of ontological clarity.<sup>11</sup> First of all, Marx calls communism a *positive supersession* and a *restoration*. He says, “*Communism* is the *positive* supersession of *private property* as *human self-estrangement*, and hence the true *appropriation* of the *human* essence through and for man; it is the complete restoration of man to himself as a *social*, i.e., human, being...” (p. 348). Both labor and property are seen in their organic character. Property

is nothing but the consequence of appropriation, the direct result of labor. The *positive* character of this supersession is in line with the concept of ontological affirmations of which Marx speaks later in the text (p. 375) and with his critique of Hegel's dialectic at the end of the *Manuscripts*.

One of the most important moments of this critique has to do precisely with Hegel's concept of negation (the negation of the negation), which Hegel presents as the absolute positive, but which Marx calls a "*false positivism*" (p. 393), to which he counterposes Feuerbach's concept of *the positive in itself* (p. 381). Thus, supersession and restoration have the positive character of affirmation, and this affirmation is the sensuous, practical activity of the natural, objective being which man himself is. It is obvious that what brings about communism so conceived cannot be a change in the economic sphere. Of course, the sphere is rather that of politics. But the question arises: Politics of what sort? Or, rather: What is politics? It is the politics (and this is its true concept) based on the antagonism which has itself ontological foundations. It is therefore in the sphere of political, practical, ontology that this change takes place. In its organic character, that is, in its nonestranged form and in its agreement with nature, human sensuous activity defines not only political and social ontology, but ontology *tout court*. This is the meaning of Marx's definition of genuine communism as the identity of humanism and naturalism: "This communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism" (p. 348). We will see later, how this synthetic moment goes well beyond the critique of political economy into the constitution of an ontology of liberation.<sup>12</sup> In this ontology, when labor appears *positively* as the medium term between economy and culture, it serves as the univocal concept of the identity established here by Marx. The *oikos* of "economy" will then be what Marx calls "man's inorganic body," nature; and economy will in fact be ecology at this point. Culture, on the other hand, is the shaping, the care, the *cultivation* of the *oikos*.<sup>13</sup> In this careful shaping there is no imposition of external forms, that is, forms that are not in agreement with the nature of the *oikos* itself. This, it seems to me, is the organicity of communism, and, in the last analysis, the identity of economy and culture.

But Marx's definition of communism continues: "It is the *genuine* resolution of the conflict between man and nature, and between man and man, the true resolution of the conflict between existence and being, between objectification and self-affirmation, between freedom and necessity, between individual and species. It is the solution of the riddle of history and knows itself to be the solution" (p. 348). This definition posits the question of communism absolutely beyond the narrow limits of political economy, into the realm of philosophy in general, of metaphysics and ontology precisely, and of ethics. There is a strong utopian strand in Marx's thought at this point, and this not because the *Manuscripts* belong to his "early writings," rather, I believe that this is so because it is in the nature of the concept of communism to be *utopian*, not perhaps in the literal sense of the word, but in a sense similar to the one described by Marcuse who, in the introduction to *An Essay*

on *Liberation*, speaking of contemporary societies, says, “what is denounced as ‘utopian’ is no longer that which has ‘no place’ and cannot have any place in the historical universe, but rather that which is blocked from coming about by the power of the established societies” (Marcuse 1964: 3–4). It is then a *real* utopia.

In Marx, more than in Marcuse, the universal dimension of this utopia becomes evident. Of course, Marx’s is the language of a nineteenth-century philosopher coming from the Hegelian tradition, and of a man arguing against utopianism, so his definition of communism seems more a-historical than one would expect; or rather it is historical in the Hegelian sense of history as the spirit of the world. Thus, he continues: “The entire movement of history is therefore both the *actual* act of creation of communism—the birth of its empirical existence—and, for its thinking consciousness, the *comprehended* and *known* movement of its *becoming*” (ibid.). To this, he counterposes the crude understanding of communism: “whereas the other communism, which is not yet fully developed, seeks in isolated forms opposed to private property a historical proof for itself, a proof drawn from what already exists...” (ibid.). This “other” communism is utopianism proper: “from what already exists” it seeks to advance to what does not yet exist. Genuine communism, by contrast, posits its own potentiality in the concept of history itself, in the *phenomenology* and the *logic* of a spirit turned sensuous and practical. It posits its own potentiality, from which the actuality of the act will come, in the realm of a practical ontology. Political economy is certainly what hinders this movement, but this movement itself—the movement of history—is broader and more various than the episode constructed and narrated by political economy, the episode of capital.

Let us go back to genuine communism as the resolution of a conflict. All the pairs of conflictual relationships considered here by Marx come down to the opposition between object and subject. This opposition is no longer popular today, for, it is true, when considered in itself, that is, without its resolution, it describes a figure of heterogeneity more present in the analytic forms of discourse than in reality itself. But the resolution is the synthesis, life itself, the organic manner in which what seems scattered and separate comes together in its actuality. To be sure, Marx does not leave the opposition to itself, nor does he solve it in a purely dialectical, but mechanical, manner. This means that what pertains to communism is not the concept of the synthesis, for that pertains to all manifestations of the concrete; rather, what pertains to communism is a peculiar mode of the synthesis. For instance, *private property* is one of the modes in which the synthesis occurs, but not, of course the only one; and from the point of view of communism, this is, particularly, a synthesis that can no longer obtain. In the system of private property, the synthesis that makes up the concrete directly unifies the commodity form to the legal subject and the legal superstructure in general.<sup>14</sup> Private property is the expression of the way in which the ontological modality of appropriation becomes estranged and constitutes, while being in turn legalized by, a system

of laws. In communism, the concrete is still the “concentration of many determinations” and a “unity in diversity” (Marx 1973: 101), for, as Marx says, this belongs to the very concept of the concrete. Thus, the resolution of the conflict does not bring about a grey and dull sameness. Instead, it allows for the possibility of a nonconflictual actualization of difference. Here, both the process that creates the commodity form and that which creates the legal form (indeed, two aspects of the same process) return to themselves and create difference *as* difference.

## COMMUNISM AND PHILOSOPHY

To be sure, in the *Manuscripts* it is not clear whether this conflict is brought about by capitalism alone, whether it belongs essentially to human nature, or whether the two are combined in the sense that an original *metaphysical* conflict is brought by capitalism to its utmost degree. However, given Marx’s concept of human nature (as becoming and always in the making), it is safe to exclude what could at times seem to make room for a traditionally metaphysical understanding of his thought. Instead, there *is* metaphysics, but it is of a different, nontraditional, kind; it is rather in line with Vico’s *poetic metaphysics*, which emphasizes precisely the sensuous, human and practical activity, the concept of *making* as the measure of human nature and of the social and cultural world. With a metaphysics of this kind, the possibility of change and of resolution of a conflict is left to the human will—but of a concrete will. The concept of the will, central to the German Idealist tradition from which Marx himself starts and that he later criticizes and rejects, is also a common concept in the movement of thought that goes from Vico to Gramsci, and, before Vico, it is a central concept in the philosophy of John Duns Scotus. In Gramsci, the will—the rational and concrete will—is precisely the movement of self-affirmation; it is, Gramsci says, the superstructure (Gramsci 1971: 403), thus what escapes the immediately narrow domain of political economy.

We have many problems here. On the one hand, we are saying that Marx’s concept of communism is based on the will. This is necessary if one wants to avoid the mechanical, deterministic, understanding of dialectic and history, that is, the idea that one historical stage necessarily follows another—necessarily, and not in accordance with the idea of freedom. On the other hand, we have to stress Marx’s aversion to the idea of the will, especially of the free will. This aversion is particularly clear in *The German Ideology*, in which Marx and Engels attack the German idealist conception of the will. Yet, if the will—and by that I mean to refer to the concept of the rational or concrete will—is understood as subjectivity and the motor of sensuous activity, of action, then this is not what Marx is attacking. He is against the concept of an arbitrary will; but not only that: he is against a whole philosophical method. Thus, in *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels say: “In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth,

here we ascend from earth to heaven" (1947: 47). This is a metaphorical manner of speaking, but its meaning is very clear: we start from the concrete, the sensuous, not from the abstract or even speculative moment. Marx and Engels make this very clear: "we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process" (ibid.). This passage, together with the famous statement that follows in the same text a few lines below: "Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life," strongly supports and justifies, at least at first sight, the structure/superstructure distinction central to a large part of Marxist theory. Yet, one wonders if this method is, besides the necessity of contrasting German Idealism at this point, the one really chosen by Marx. In the introduction to the *Grundrisse* we find a completely different statement on method, indeed quite the opposite of what we have just read, for the concrete is, in thought, not the point of departure, but the point of arrival; and the point of departure is, precisely, the abstract.<sup>15</sup> The will, therefore, that is, imagination, conception, but also thoughtful action, the concrete will, cannot be dismissed as a speculative or abstract moment of a philosophy that has lost contact with reality; on the contrary, it is reality itself.

Given the problematic nature of the argument, it is probably good to say immediately what we have in mind: the creation of communism is a philosophical endeavor, and communism itself a philosophical state. In fact, it is only philosophy that can bring about that *totality* of which Marx speaks. What else could be the solution of the riddle of history and the consciousness that communism itself (the communist subject) would have of being that solution? By "philosophical state" I do not mean, of course, to refer to what only pertains to the mind nor to a caste of professional philosophers, for I am here speaking of philosophy as philosophy of praxis. Yet, this truth is no less important, for otherwise nothing is easier than to conceive of communism as a mere alteration of the mode of production in the strictly economist sense. Let us reproduce Marx's thought once again: "The entire movement of history is therefore both the *actual* act of creation of communism—the birth of its empirical existence—and, for its thinking consciousness, the *comprehended* and *known* movement of its *becoming*" (1975: 348). It is easy, at this point, to split again the *organic* and *total* movement into the opposition and the conflict of a subject and an object, of existence and being, of freedom and necessity, and so on. Indeed, this has been the unhappy history of most socialist thought so far. The failed attempt to build socialism (if not communism) in the Soviet Union, for instance, is the history of the missed resolution of these conflicts. As if communism could be built under the pressure of compulsory laws that only have behind an abstract and irrational will—the will criticized by Marx. This can be done in the spirit of the transition to communism from within a paradigm of strict historical determinism, a concept now criticized by many.

However, from the point of view of the construction of genuine communism, it is untenable. The communist subject posits itself beyond the legal superstructure as well as beyond the economic base; it posits itself in the immediacy of nonideological, nonfetishistic, human and social relations, or better in the neutrality of labor and the law.

### E. B. PASHUKANIS

Certainly, under capital and for political economy, the conflict is presented as a logical continuum that does not require a resolution, but must be accepted for what it is, as a metaphysical given. In this sense, it is admirable the way in which Pashukanis draws a parallel discourse between political economy and the law, the concept of value and the will, the subject and the commodity. In *Law and Marxism*, Pashukanis says, "After he has become slavishly dependent on economic relations, which arise behind his back in the shape of the law of value, the economically active subject—now a legal subject—acquires, in compensation as it were, a rare gift: a will, juridically constituted, which makes him absolutely free and equal to other owners of commodities like himself" (1978: 114). This (juridical) will is an ideological construct, and so are all the categories of the legal superstructure, of the subjective sphere. Yet, Pashukanis says, an ideological construct is not nothing, it is not an unreal, *merely* psychological, *merely* subjective, and thus illusory thing; rather, it represents the way in which a given society understands and interprets the material relations taking place within it.

In fact, the categories of political economy are not different: "The categories commodity, value and exchange value are indubitably ideological constructs, distorted, mystified mental images (as Marx put it), by means of which the society based on the exchange of commodities conceives of the labour relations between individual producers" (p. 73). Thus, ideological is not merely what pertains to the superstructure. Rather, ideological is the totality of social determinations that presents the conflict as a logical continuum and as a metaphysical reality. As Pashukanis says in the Preface to the second Russian edition of his book, "the principle of legal subjectivity and the model it implies—which appears to bourgeois jurisprudence as the *a priori* model of the human will—follows with absolute inevitability from the conditions of the economy based on the commodity and on money" (p. 42). And, furthermore, "there is an indissoluble internal connection between the categories of the economy based on the commodity and on money, and the legal form itself" (*ibid.*). The juridical will is an ideological construct just as the commodity is. Yet, behind its ideological nature, all determinations are based on material relations. Speaking of the categories of political economy, Pashukanis says, "The ideological nature of these forms is proven by the fact that, no sooner do we come to other forms of production than the categories of the commodity, value and so on cease to have any validity whatsoever" (p. 73).

## SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

Departing now from Pashukanis, who is interested in the question as to whether the law can be conceived of as social relation, just as capital is, we can draw from what precedes some consequences for our own discourse, that is, our reading of Marx's definition of communism. Communism certainly represents a different mode of production, different from capitalism, and under communism the categories of political economy: commodity, value, exchange value, and so on, cease, as Pashukanis says, to have any validity. They are no longer ideological constructs because the social relations that create them are eliminated, or because social relations are now *regulated* in a radically different way.<sup>16</sup> Yet, the product of labor is still something: "a thing which," says Marx at the outset of Volume I of *Capital*, "through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind" (1977: 125).

If this is true of the categories of political economy, that is, if it is true that they cease to have any validity, not because of an ideological change, of a change in their ideological nature, but because the social relations that give them that nature are eliminated, the same must be true of the categories of the superstructure. The change occurs, respectively, not at the level of political economy or the law. Rather, it occurs at the more fundamental level of social ontology; it is in the constitution of their being that the determinations that make up the concrete undergo a substantial change. Yet, at this point, the point of the resolution of the conflict and of the creation of communism, there is no longer a political economy here and a legal structure there, no longer a logical continuum masking a practical conflict; this is the meaning of the supersession of private property, which, to exist, requires precisely that split and that opposition. Human activity, organic labor, is now the totality of those determinations that, estranged under capital, create a new and total social being, whether this is a man or a woman, an object for everyday life, or a work of art.

The ability to resolve the conflict constitutes the measure of society. Communism is for Marx the only *society* worth of this name, notwithstanding the fact that it belongs to the essence of man to be a social being. The question then does not have to do with whether or not there is a society, but it has to do with its modality. This means that society is not an abstraction, nor is it the negation of the individual: "The individual *is* the *social being*" (Marx 1975: 350). Marx says, "*Society* is therefore the perfected unity in essence of man with nature, the true resurrection of nature, the realized naturalism of man and the realized humanism of nature" (pp. 349–350). It is difficult today to dwell on these thoughts, particularly when one's intention is not to criticize and ridicule them (an intention always based on ignorance or bad faith), but to endorse them as pointers for an alternative. After the so-called collapse of communism, to do this means to be part of a laughable minority. For the vast majority, the word "communism" has the meaning given to it by people like Bastiat, whose ideology has come back today in the dominant and malignant



form of neoliberalism. In this sense, communism, far from being a “perfected unity,” is *plunder*.<sup>17</sup> For Bastiat, “*Exchange*, like *property*, is a natural right” (1964: 197), and the exercise of this natural right is the essence of freedom (p. 210). Today, neoliberalism is showing to what degree of perfection and freedom are free exchange and free trade able to bring society! Yet, the historical experiments based on the philosophy of communism have done very little (and at times nothing) to break and do away with the logic of productivism, which defines capital. For this reason, the “unity in essence of man with nature,” that is, the total and organic conception of life, has more and more given way to fragmentation and estrangement. The concept of, and the desire for, totality continues to live in holistic ways of thinking and practices of a religious nature. What Marx calls “the return of man from religion, the family, the state, etc., to his *human*, i.e. *social* existence” (1975: 349), that is, the construction of that *secular and earthly plenitude* that Gramsci calls “absolute historicism,” is seen, paradoxically, as a dehumanization of the human being, as an infringement on the liberty of the individual. Thus, men and women return instead *to* religion, the family, and the state, in search of an identity—as it is happening now in the republics of the former Soviet Union and elsewhere—an identity able only to foment chauvinistic divisions and ideologies.

If one looks for instance at the European twentieth century in the light of Marx’s *Manuscripts of 1844*, one realizes that what was missed (and is even now being missed) is not something that lies within the sphere of economics and political economy, but rather within the sphere of philosophy and culture. The rapid industrialization of the Soviet Union and the economy of growth in postwar Western Europe and on a global scale show very well that, economically (and technologically) speaking, “man” has the ability to reach and pass the limit. This indeed does not appear to be a problem. It is from the political and social point of view that even those elements of progress, such as the welfare state, soon enter a phase of regression. The *integral* and *total* way in which man could, according to Marx, reappropriate his essence, has become something of a rhetorical figure for the great majority of people. Marx says, “Man appropriates his integral essence in an integral way, as a total man” (p. 351). But what is a “total man”? Of course, for Marx this totality is given, first and foremost, by the “unity in essence of man with nature,” thus by society itself. The total man is certainly not the man defined by the one-sidedness of having and possession, but rather the unity of action and passion, *effectiveness* and *suffering*. Marx says, “Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it, when it exists for us as capital or when we directly possess, eat, drink, wear, inhabit it, etc, in short, when we *use* it” (ibid.). Marx’s prescient attack against the society of consumption does not intend to describe the society of the future as a society of scarcity and misery; in other words, communism is not a system that promises “bread and onions” to everybody, as is often thought by those who partake in the social idiocy of the dominant ideology. However, what here seems problematic is Marx’s use of the word “use,” for the positive meaning of “use-value” as opposed to

“exchange value” is well known. In general, we think of estrangement and alienation not when and because we use something, but when and because this something is raised to a level that is not, precisely, that of immediate and direct use, the level of abstraction and exchange. Thus, the fact that Marx speaks negatively here of the concept of “use” is explained by his attempt to redefine this concept at the philosophical, ontological, level. It is precisely *in use* that the analytic gap between subject and object disappears and *praxis* arises as the synthetic involvement of the two terms. But this *use* can go into different directions; it can become *ab-use*, as is often the case under the logic of productivism of our societies, or it can be what Marx calls “*human use*.” It is in this latter sense of “use” that the organicity of the relationship between humans and nature is recuperated. In this sense, “use” is the same as “labor.” If it is true that consumption is part of production, and production of consumption,<sup>18</sup> then the redefinition of the concept of use redefines the way in which we conceive of the process of production as a whole. Under attack is the concept of thoughtless use, not of use as such. Human use does not start, within the whole cycle of production, at the end of the moment of production proper, nor does labor end when consumption proper begins. This is why I said that labor and use are in reality the same. Marx provides a very deep understanding of this question—and one that proves fertile for today’s ecological concerns as well—when he grounds the possibility of the future society, not in a thoughtless transformation of the object of utility: nature, but in the simultaneous transformation of nature *and* the human subject.<sup>19</sup> The human subject changes subjectively and objectively. It is “*all the physical and intellectual senses*” (Marx 1975: 342), estranged under the system of private property and within the modality of “having,” that are radically transformed.<sup>20</sup> Marx says, “The supersession of private property is therefore the complete *emancipation* of all human senses and attributes, but it is this emancipation precisely because these senses and attributes have become *human*, subjectively as well as objectively” (p. 352). Here Marx appears as a visionary and, in the positive sense of the word, utopian thinker; as a thinker of the possible, of what-could-be.

## THE EMANCIPATION OF THE SENSES

To say that the senses are emancipated can be a very obscure thought, and even more obscure can be what follows: “The *senses* have therefore become *theoreticians* in their immediate praxis” (p. 352). It is, in reality, another way of asserting the resolution of the conflict. Marx prepares the ground for the above statement by saying: “The eye has become a *human* eye, just as its *object* has become a social, *human* object, made by man for man” (ibid.). Unless one wants to believe that Marx is simply playing with philosophical concepts—a play to be later abandoned to favor a more serious and more “scientific” discussion of economic questions—one has to take very seriously this emphasis on the senses, the apparently paradoxical nature of their *theoretical* ability, and the definition of praxis.

Of course, the emphasis on the sensuous is related to the sensationalism and materialism of the Enlightenment, and it is, moreover, analogous to Nietzsche's emphasis on the same concept, as we shall see in the last chapter of this work. With the Enlightenment, the senses become the place of the primal synthesis, yet these are not blind senses, but the senses already endowed with certain rational powers. From them, all experience and all knowledge follow. Thus, in his *Traité des sensations*, Condillac says, "... la sensation enveloppe toutes les facultés de l'âme" (1984: 58). And he concludes his work: "... toutes nos connoissances viennent des senses, et particulièrement du toucher, parce que c'est lui qui instruit les autres" (p. 265). The senses, and particularly touching (thus handling, using, manipulating), inform each other and, ultimately, they also inform judgment. Certainly, the first synthesis of the senses is, just like Marx's concept of the concrete, enmeshed in confusion; hence, analysis and abstraction become necessary. Yet it is the senses themselves that open up the space for thought. The senses, Marx says, become *theoreticians in their immediate praxis*: it is not a simple doing, nor is it a simple recording of sensations; rather, it is the identity of theory and praxis which is based on this understanding of the senses. The act is not the pure act of those philosophies that continue the tradition of German Idealism; it is, rather, the act that knows itself as *this* act and is itself its own theory. With Nietzsche, the sensuous is what remains after the destruction of metaphysics and the demise of the supersensuous as a true world of ideas. The sensuous is *this world*, and the world is the will to power that "imposes[s] upon becoming the character of being" (Nietzsche 1968: #617). By following the senses, with their "subtlety, plenitude, and power" (#820), the world and life become art, a work of art, or work as art. The doer and the doing go back into the deed (#675), that is, to bring together Nietzsche and Marx in this respect, to *their immediate praxis*. In this praxis, and this is also true from a Nietzschean point of view, knowledge is not external and merely overimposed to the act. It is rather the act itself.

It seems obvious that at this point Marx is not simply dealing with the theory of communism; or rather he understands communism as the condition for the overcoming of the separation and relation of externality between thought and being. This does not mean that thought and being become one and the same thing. Rather, they are distinct, and yet united in essence. As Marx says, "It is true that thought and being are *distinct*, but at the same time they are in *unity* with one another" (1975: 351). Here one cannot avoid thinking of Parmenides's position. Parmenides, "the father of materialism" according to Burnet (1957: 182), says in his philosophical poem: "... for it is the same thing that can be thought and that can be" (in Burnet 1957: 173); and again: "The thing that can be thought and that for the sake of which the thought exists is the same" (p. 176).<sup>21</sup>

Is then communism—the solution of the riddle of history—also the solution of the riddle of philosophy, that is, of the question of the relationship between thinking and being? I think that the answer is positive, which means that communism is not simply a way in which society can be organized at the

level, first and foremost, of its economy. Communism implies much more than that: the radical transformation of the social subject, and Marx is often explicit and emphatic about this. As he says in another of the “early writings”: “To be radical is to grasp things by the root. But for man the root is man himself.”<sup>22</sup> This may sound apocalyptic and, after what some have interpreted as the rise and fall of radicalism, no longer tenable.

However, if we go past the ideological and philosophical confusion of the present, we may be able to look at this question with some freshness of thought and perhaps realize that the world needs this radicality much more than it needs the philosophically weak and yet violent inertia of what has usurped the name of democracy. It may very well be that the world needs to recuperate a lost totality, or build it once again, find the solution to a riddle, the resolution of a conflict, the unity in distinction of thinking and being. Probably, one of Marx’s most interesting and deepest contributions is, precisely, the emphasis on the senses, on the radical transformation of the social subject—and this is also what, as Murray Bookchin points out, the Marxist tradition has in general completely overlooked.<sup>23</sup>

Of course, there have been exceptions, notably, Che Guevara’s concept of the “new man,” as well as others; but in general the question of the subject has been seen as not scientific and even not revolutionary (not proletarian) enough. The subject, the subjectivity of the subject, has often been seen as the element holding back the revolutionary process, as the petit-bourgeois, liberal unreadiness lagging behind the ripeness of the objective struggle. Thus, in communist parties around the world, subjectivity was to be castigated as deviant, and no effort was made to understand, at the level of philosophy as well as of everyday life, its meaning and truly revolutionary potential. The communist movement, in the institutional forms it acquired in the so-called socialist or communist countries and elsewhere, became the opposite of what it intended to be. However, the general tendency of a process that turns into a fixed situation is very often at variance with the true substance and motor of ideas. In addition to the notable exception I have mentioned, an emphasis on subjectivity can be found in Gramsci<sup>24</sup> and in readers of the *Grundrisse*. Antonio Negri, for instance, in an interesting reply to Norberto Bobbio’s “Is There a Marxist Doctrine of the State?”—as well as in virtually all of his work—gives to subjectivity an explosive content. In the reply to Bobbio, he says, “The ‘how’ and the ‘who’ of the revolutionary process are the same” (in Bobbio 1987: 131), which means that the subject and the process are the same.<sup>25</sup> However, the question remains open as to *how* is the *who* of the revolutionary process—a question which finds elements of an answer in the pages of Marx we are presently reading and later, as we shall see, in the *Grundrisse*. In fact, the subject itself is absolute openness looking for a modality of radical and essential difference. This subject is the *proletarian* as defined by Marx at the outset of the *Manuscripts*, not the worker *as a worker*.<sup>26</sup> This means that the subject cannot revolutionize itself (its “how”) by continuing to produce capital; rather, it revolutionizes itself by withdrawing from that modality of