CHAPTER 3

Individual Separation

We undergo individual and isolated formation processes marked by all kinds of distortions and lacerations ... But at the moment at which we discover that this society is a system of total exploitation ... our formation process becomes a collective one, not in the sense of destroying our individuality, but, on the contrary, as the very constitution of individuality ... We undergo formation processes ... that reconstruct in an emancipatory way what individuality is, to the extent that we unite in the practical struggle against this system.

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‘Trennung’ and Capitalism: The Erosion of Common Property

Marx’s concern was not, in the last instance, to provide a total picture of human history, but rather to examine the capitalist mode of production in its specific difference from what went before, as it breaks through all the prior communitarian, familial ties. Indeed, already in the very first of Marx’s texts, like the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right and On The Jewish Question, his entire reflection was sustained by an interpretation of the modern world characterised by the element of separation [Trennung]. Crucial, here, within a still rather generic perspective on the terrain of economic analysis, was the question of the separation of civil society and the state – which Hegel had addressed yet also mystified. With the passing of time, there was a gradual shifting of Marx’s landscape, though he held onto the idea that the modern world was structurally characterised by the dimension of Trennung. The Grundrisse’s outlook stood in continuity with this approach, as emerged from our discussion of precapitalist forms in the previous chapter. More generally, capitalism is here understood in its character of ‘permanently revolutionising’ all communitarian ties and in posing the individual as its point of departure. After the Grundrisse, from the 1860s onward Marx’s studies in this regard were further complicated, in terms of the internal articulation of capitalism, more than of the relationship between precapitalist communities and capitalism. In his anthropological extracts and writings
largely concerning specific conjunctures, he provided a less homogeneous picture of the structure of capitalism. Capitalism did not develop everywhere in the same way, and whole areas were still excluded from capitalist development in the strict sense: Russia, India and China appearing to be particularly significant cases in point. Yet, notwithstanding the ever greater complexity of his analysis, the capitalist mode of production remained the centre of his perspective.

The whole of Marx’s analysis of the capitalist system sought to bring out its character of structural separation. Even the Grundrisse were pervaded by the idea of a counterposition between precapitalist orders characterised by unity [Einheit] and capitalism, characterised by separation [Trennung]. If the former were distinguished by the organic unity of man and community through the mediation of the land, and thus a negation of individuality and of the possibility – even if not without contradictions – of building autonomous paths, then capitalism effected a break in this unity, thus giving life to a separation: a separation of the individual from the produce and means of labour, from objective conditions, as well as among individuals. He also brought to light the distance between each person and their own capacity to labour. Later, the entire framework of Capital would be sustained by the dimension of separation: most of the time Trennung, but also Teilung (particularly in relation to labour and the division of labour), and Scheidung, the capitalist mode of production thus being configured as a Scheidungsprozeß. We could interpret the whole of Capital in terms of this question, whose historical genealogy (or better, historical genealogies)¹ and operating mechanisms Marx tried to establish. His reference to precapitalist forms, then, still remains in the background: in order to see such a separation, it is necessary to consider that what went beforehand was a unity. In this sense, surplus-value distinguishes the capitalist mode of production from other social orders, and therefore waged labour must not be

¹ On the structure of genealogy, note the considerations by Michel Foucault, for example Foucault 2003, pp. 9–10: ‘You can see that this activity, which we can describe as genealogical, is certainly not a matter of contrasting the abstract unity of theory with the concrete multiplicity of the facts. It is certainly not a matter of some form or other of scientism that disqualifies speculation by contrasting it with the rigor of well-established bodies of knowledge ... It is a way of playing local, discontinuous, disqualified, or nonlegitimized knowledges off against the unitary theoretical instance that claims to be able to filter them, organize them into a hierarchy, organize them in the name of a true body of knowledge, in the name of the rights of a science that is in the hands of the few. Genealogies are therefore not positivistic returns to a form of science that is more attentive or more accurate ... They are about the insurrection of knowledges’. On the Foucault-Marx relationship, see Macherey 2014, pp. 149–212. See also Mezzadra 2014; Chignola 2014.