The System of Machinery and Determinations of Revolutionary Subjectivity in the *Grundrisse* and Capital

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This chapter proposes a reading of Marx’s exposition of the forms of the real subsumption of labour to capital – in particular, the system of machinery of large-scale industry – as constituting the dialectical presentation of the determinations of revolutionary subjectivity. The proposition that the real subsumption constitutes the ground of revolutionary subjectivity should come as no surprise. In reality, this is no more than the concretisation of that insight about the most general determination of the process of ‘natural history’ constituting the development of humanity that Marx expounded in the Paris manuscripts of 1844. According to that early text, the content of the history of the human species consists in the development of the specific material powers of the human being as a working subject, that is, of *human productive subjectivity*. It is in the historical transformation of its material and social forms, Marx concluded, that the key to the abolition of capital – hence, to revolutionary subjectivity – should reside. However, that early attempt at the critique of political economy could not offer a rigorous scientific comprehension of the social determinations underlying the revolutionary transformation of society. Armed with a Feuerbach-inspired method of transformative criticism, Marx managed *analytically* to uncover alienated labour as the hidden *social* foundation behind

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the reified objectivity of ‘economic categories’. In turn, in those early writings he analytically discovered the specificity of the human species-being (i.e., human productive subjectivity) as the material content historically developing in that alienated form. However, although these discoveries allowed Marx to grasp the simplest (human) determination behind the content and form of the abolition of alienated labour, he arguably failed at synthetically unfolding the further mediations entailed by the social and material constitution of the revolutionary subject.2

The theoretico-practical need for the further dialectical development of the critique of political economy, which would eventually lead Marx to write Capital, expresses the following fact. The immanent ground of revolutionary subjectivity is not simple and unmediated; for instance, the sheer general materiality of human productive practice as the negated content behind the alienated objectivity of capitalist social forms.3 Instead, it is a ‘unity of many determinations’, which therefore means that its scientific comprehension can only be the result of a complex dialectical investigation involving both the analytic movement from the concrete to the abstract and the synthetic, mediated return to the concrete starting point.4 Dialectical research must therefore analytically apprehend all relevant social forms and synthetically reproduce the ‘inner connections’ leading to the constitution of the political action of wage-labourers as the form taken by the revolutionary transformation of the historical mode of existence of the human life-process.

Now, as the title of Marx’s most important work denotes, the subject whose determinations the dialectical investigation proceeds to discover and present is capital, which, as the alienated subject of social life, becomes ‘the all-dominating economic power of bourgeois society’ and must therefore ‘form the starting-point as well as the finishing-point’ of the ideal reproduction of the concrete.5 This does not leave revolutionary subjectivity outside the scope of the dialectical unfolding of capitalist social forms. Rather, it means that revolutionary subjectivity itself must be comprehended as the realisation of an immanent determination of capital as alienated subject.6 Accordingly, its dialectical presentation

3. As argued by so-called ‘Open Marxists’. See Bonefeld, Gunn and Psychopedis (eds.) 1992.
6. This point was insightfully hinted at in the 1970s by Giacomo Marramao in his critical appraisal of the polemic between the more subjectivist positions of Korsch and the Dutch Left Communists (Pannekoek, Gorter) and the objectivism of defenders of the theory of capitalist breakdown (Mattick, Grossmann). See Marramao 1975/6, pp. 152–5, and 1982, pp. 139–43. At least formally, Marramao correctly highlighted the necessity to ground the genesis of class-consciousness ‘in terms of the process of production and