



*Citation for published version:*

Pitts, F 2016 'Beyond the Fragment: the Postoperaist Reception of Marx's Fragment on Machines' School of Sociology, Politics & International Studies Working Paper Series, no. 2, vol. 2016.

*Publication date:*  
2016

*Document Version*  
Other version

[Link to publication](#)

*Publisher Rights*  
Unspecified

**University of Bath**

**Alternative formats**

If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact:  
[openaccess@bath.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@bath.ac.uk)

**General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



School of Sociology, Politics  
and International Studies (SPAIS)

## **Beyond the Fragment: The Postoperaist Reception of Marx's Fragment on Machines and its Relevance Today**

**Frederick Harry Pitts**

**University of Bath/University of Bristol**

© **Frederick Harry Pitts**

**School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies**

**University of Bristol**

**Working Paper No. 02-16**

**Frederick Harry Pitts** is a PhD researcher at the University of Bath and University of Bristol, as part of the South West Doctoral Training Centre's ESRC Global Political Economy pathway. His research examines how Marxist theory understands the changing world of work, with reference to a case study of work in the creative industries. All correspondence: [f.h.pitts@bath.ac.uk](mailto:f.h.pitts@bath.ac.uk)

## **Beyond the Fragment: The Postoperaist Reception of Marx's Fragment on Machines and its Relevance Today**

**Frederick Harry Pitts**

### **Abstract**

This paper critiques the purposes to which Marx's Fragment on Machines is put in postoperaist thought. I suggest postoperaist readings wield influence on contemporary left thinking, via postcapitalism, accelerationism and 'Fully Automated Luxury Communism'. Changes in labour lead proponents to posit a crisis of measurability and an incipient communism. I use the New Reading of Marx and Open Marxism to dispute this. Based on an analysis of value as a social form undergirded in antagonistic social relations, I argue the Fragment's prognosis runs contrary to Marx's critique of political economy when the latter is taken as a critical theory of society. This theoretical claim bears implications for contemporary left political praxis.

**Keywords:** Marx, Negri, postoperismo, value, immaterial labour, capitalism, postcapitalism

## **1. Introduction**

Marx's value theory has for some time struggled against its adherents. Weaponised for worker power, its analysis wavers. Traditionally, it has been taken to theorise the link between expended labour-time and surplus-value. The rendition goes something like this. Workers, with every hour, create value. Part of this is necessary for the worker. What is not, accrues as surplus to the capitalist. Read this way, it wielded a long but limited efficacy in mobilising workers politically. Or, at least, it falsely reassured them they were more powerful than they were in reality. But, luckily, other Marxes are available. It is the contrast between two such competing visions of Marx and his work that I explore here.

These revisionist strands challenge the traditional understanding of value, but in different ways. They lay divergent stresses on certain parts of Marx's output. In common, they reject the ideological monoliths erected of Marx's work in the last century. They emphasise instead what is unfinished, fragmentary and open to reconstruction. They do so distinctly, however. One cites empirical reasons for its specific and selective reading of Marx. The other does so exegetically.

The first is postoperaismo. In the Italian sixties and seventies, its forerunner, operaismo, focused on the factory as the locus of capitalist society. Postoperaismo, however, situated the factory in society as a whole. This theoretical switch was informed by an empirical understanding of changes afoot in production. They focused on the shift towards 'immaterial labour' (Lazzarato 1996). This rises with the service sector, creative industries and so-called knowledge economy. Postoperaists brought this empirical understanding to a reading of Marx's Grundrisse (1973). The Grundrisse were a series of notebooks for what would later become Capital (1976). Their availability in English and Italian offered elements of an unorthodox Marx. Specifically, postoperaists seized on one part of the Grundrisse, the 'Fragment on Machines'. The scenario Marx paints in this led postoperaists to posit a crisis in the law of value his wider theory describes. Significantly, they use a revolutionary new Marx derived from long-unpublished notebooks to suggest his key theory's exhaustion. From the Fragment, they derive a vision of an incipient communism realised in the shell of capitalism. This vision, we shall see, wields political influence today. A new generation of postoperaist-inspired dreamers begin from the same few pages of Marx.

The second is the New Reading of Marx (NRM), with which we can also associate a descendent, Open Marxism. Postoperaismo cites empirical reasons for its specific and selective reading of Marx. But the NRM takes an exegetical approach. It originates in Germany, around the same time as operaismo. Scholars under Adorno's tutelage began scrutinising Marx's published and unpublished manuscripts (Bellofiore and Riva 2015). This close study showed the progression of Marx's value theory as it appears in Capital. Constantly revised and honed, in the procession of working drafts new complexities shone through. This exegesis extracts from the development of Marx's work a reconstruction of his value theory. The central insight is that value relates not to expended concrete labour as in orthodox accounts. Rather, it relates to abstract labour. This is a category of social mediation expressed in money. It springs from the exchange of commodities by means of money in the sphere of circulation. Thus, for the NRM, the Grundrisse here plays a much lesser role than Capital. And there is less consideration of empirical factors than we find in postoperaist literature. Focus falls instead upon the general laws of how capitalism proceeds through a series of social forms.

Thus, both postoperaismo and the NRM radically challenge received Marxist wisdom around value. The former comes to bury it using the Grundrisse and new empirical facts. The latter, bearing the first volume of Capital, buries only one form of it- the labour theory of value. In its place, it establishes an alternative 'value theory of labour' (Elsoufi 1978). On one hand, postoperaismo fortells the demise of the law of value and its theory. NRM, on the other hand, maintains their persistence, in radically rethought forms.

The two schools are seldom treated together (see Pitts 2016a). This is an occasion to do so. It is motivated by the recent rise to prominence the postoperaist reading of the Fragment enjoys. It wields more influence on left political thinking than ever. This gives us cause to use the NRM as a sharp tool with which to cut through some of the wilful leaps of faith it makes. There is a pressing political necessity to once again uncover alternative ways of reading Marx. New orthodoxies have sprung up in place of the old, and postoperaismo is one.

More stimulating politically, postoperaismo has had a much longer Anglophone exposure than the NRM. It has filtered through into public discourse in a largely unspoken and often unknowing way. Its worldview, I suggest, reduces critical resources for a sophisticated, revisionist Marxism. Too positive about prospects for change, it obstructs confrontation with contemporary capitalism's concrete realities. In this paper I suggest that the postoperaismo-inspired paragons of postcapitalism impoverish left politics. We may be better off with the negative dialecticians of the NRM tradition.

## **2. The Fragment on Machines**

Like others through time, our political moment may well rest on the inheritance of a few slender pages from the oeuvre of Marx. The 'Fragment on Machines' (1973, 704-706) is a small section of his *Grundrisse*, the notebooks for what would later become *Capital* (1976). In it, Marx presents a future scenario where the use of machines and knowledge in production expands. Production revolves more around knowledge than physical effort. Machines liberate humans from labour, and the role of direct labour time in life shrinks to a minimum. Free time proliferates. The divorce of labour-time from exchange value sparks capitalist crisis. But this technological leap brings about the possibility of a social development on a massive scale. Freed from physical subordination to the means of production, workers grow intellectually and cooperatively. This freely-generated 'general intellect' reinserts itself, uncoerced, into production as fixed capital. The worker is incorporated only at a distance, rather than as a constituent part of the capital relation. The potential for an incipient communism arises.

If this scenario sounds familiar now, it likely is- albeit not by means of its conditions being brought any closer to reality. Rather, a new generation of Fragment-thinkers are steadily evangelising its message through the media and policy circuit. In so doing, they pick up the thread of work commenced by postoperaists like Antonio Negri two decades ago.

In the eighties and nineties, the Fragment inspired postoperaist analyses of the New Economy and 'immaterial labour'. Popularised by Hardt and Negri's bestseller *Empire* (2001), it wielded influence on early-noughties alterglobalisation struggles. Its echoes carried through, post-crisis, to Occupy and its intellectuals. And, as the left moved towards a state-oriented politics of populism and electoralism in the mid-2010s, it reached a peak. Postcapitalism (Mason 2015b), accelerationism (Mackay and Avanesian 2015, Srnicek and Williams 2015a, see also Negri's response (2015)), Fully Automated Luxury Communism (Bastani 2015): all owe their roots to the Fragment. In their name, the Fragment has gained a foothold in the popular consciousness. Media personalities accrue it broadsheet inches, directly (see for instance Mason 2015a) or by inference (Harris 2016, Jones 2016).

The most unexpected turn has been its uptake in the parliamentary political world. Under Corbyn, Labour's shadow treasury team has embraced an economic agenda of 'Socialism with an iPad' (Wintour 2015) and the basic income (Stewart 2016). Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell routinely invites leading postcapitalists and accelerationists to address policy workshops (Labour Party 2016). The intellectuals disseminating Fragment-thought number among the embattled Corbyn's leading supporters (see Mason 2016). This cross-fertilisation with the calculation of party policy marks high-water for the Fragment's reception. It has wended a strange and unconventional route to prominence in which Marx is often a silent partner. It is one part of this route, in the work of Negri and the postoperaists, I seek to chart here.

To the Italian operaist milieu, the Fragment's interpretation, Thoburn (2003, p. 80) writes, has been 'akin to biblical exegesis'. This interpretation rests less on 'reification of authorial truth' than its 'iteration' in 'different sociohistorical contexts as part of the composition of varying political forms'. Its early apogee was Negri's 1978 Paris lectures on the *Grundrisse*, published as *Marx Beyond Marx* (1992). A political weapon from the start, it was not until *Empire* (2001) that its lasting sociohistorical iteration was set out. The New Economy drew Negri to conclude that the conditions described in the Fragment were already present.

In this way, postoperaist receptions of the Fragment seize upon contemporary transformations in work (Noys 2012, 113-114). The positing of an already-existing crisis of measurability rests upon the advent of 'immaterial labour' (Lazzarato 1996). This puts to work elements formerly, we are told, extraneous to the production process. Cognitive, affective and cooperative capacities and free time factor in value production. What the Fragment foretells becomes reality.

Hardt and Negri define immaterial labour as transcending 'the expropriation of value measured by individual or collective labor time'. This, of course, rests on an understanding whereby value was measured thus previously- which was never the case to begin with (Pitts 2016a). Regardless, they inform us that, today, labour is no longer subject to capitalist control. It is a self-organized function of the 'multitude'. For Hardt and Negri, the multitude is what happens when the proletariat and the labour movement alters radically from its paradigmatic figure of the white, male manual worker to a multifarious, mobile body of so-called singularities (2001, p. 53). The multitude's immeasurable productivity is enacted through communicative and affective networks. In this way, labour holds the potential of 'valorizing itself' through its own activity. '[H]uman faculties, competences and knowledge' are 'directly productive of value', rather than requiring the superintendence of capital (2009, 132-133). This, Virno notes (1996, pp. 22-3), is the current form assumed by what Marx referred to in the *Fragment* as 'general intellect'.

Its autonomous activities, Lazzarato writes, are located in the 'immaterial basin' of 'society at large'. This labour, then, is 'not obviously apparent to the eye', undefined by the four walls of a factory. It thus 'becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish leisure time from work time. In a sense, life becomes inseparable from work' (1996, 137-8). And, postoperaists suggest, this potentiates the crisis of value *qua* labour-time described in the Fragment.

In this article, I contest the postoperaist positing of the existing realisation of the Fragment. Postoperaists elide the persistence of the real abstraction of value (Pitts 2016a) and the social relations of production it expresses and proceeds through. I challenge the assertion that the crisis and redundancy of value associated with the Fragment is realised. This is because we still, in a contradictory way turned against us, subsist through the value-form. Where postoperaists see a 'communism of capital' already existing, I contend that we live, work, starve and suffer still under its rule. An alternative strand of Marxist theorising- that of the New Reading of Marx and Open Marxism- brings its full horror home. But recognition of this negativity is necessary to develop the theoretical and practical tools to overcome it. In the next section, I will outline this perspective.

### **3. Theoretical Perspective**

The theoretical perspective I employ is informed by a synthesis of the New Reading of Marx (Bellofiore and Riva 2015, henceforth NRM) and Open Marxism (Bonefeld, Gunn, Psychopedis 1992). Taken together, the tradition these positions represent can be broadly defined as 'the critique of political economy as a critical theory of society' (Bonefeld 2014). This is opposed to the critique of political economy as an alternative economic theory that one can compare to that of, say, Smith or Ricardo. It rather takes the capitalist social totality as a whole as its object, including the economic categories the relations within this totality assume.

This radically diverges from the Marx one finds represented in receptions of the Fragment on Machines. In the Fragment, Marx describes how the increase in machinery in the labour-process displaces human labour. This weakens the role of labour-time as the measure of human productive activity. The quantitative connection between labour-time and exchange value breaks down. For postoperaists, this 'crisis of measurability' or 'crisis of the law of value' afflicts capitalism today.

In a recent iteration (2013, pp. 75 & 87), Franco 'Bifo' Berardi indicates the theorisation of value and labour that such an account rests on. 'When you want to establish the average time that is needed to produce a material object,' he writes, 'you just have to do a simple calculation: how much physical labor time is needed to turn matter into that good'. It is impossible to 'decide how much time it takes to produce an idea', or 'a project, a style, an innovation'. In their production, 'the relationship between labor-time and value suddenly evaporates, dissolves into thin air'. This is because 'the productivity of the general intellect' is 'virtually unlimited' (2013, p. 75). It 'cannot be quantified [or] standardized' and, ultimately, value cannot be measured in terms of time (*ibid.*). But, posing a simple resemblance between labour-time and value, Bifo elides the abstract mediation of concrete labour in the value-form. These claims rest on a fundamental misreading of Marx's theorisation of the law of value.

Read against the radically revisionist Marx exegetically defined by the NRM, there are two problems with the postoperaist account of the Fragment. The first relates to Marx himself. As Heinrich (2013) asserts, the Fragment's temporary formulation fails against the standards of Marx's own work. Its fragmentary status owes to this. The Fragment was one part of Marx's working discarded as his theory developed in sophistication and coherence. The most complete statement of this theory is that we find in the still-unfinished iteration given in *Capital*.

Second, as I assert elsewhere (Pitts 2016a), postoperaist claims of the Fragment's realisation rest on a disavowed orthodoxy. Despite their professed anti-productivism, they present a conventional labour theory of value. This incorrectly emphasises labour's concrete expenditure over its abstraction in exchange. By conceiving it contrary to its reality, postoperaists can then challenge the continuing role of the rule of value. As Caffentzis notes, in the assertions postoperaists make about the obsolescence of the law of value, they miss how Marx was 'the original 'immaterialist'. '[A]s far as capitalism is concerned,' Caffentzis argues (2013), Marx saw capitalists as 'not interested in things, but [...] their quantitative value' which is 'hardly a material stuff!'. Postoperaists render obsolete the law of value only by holding to its most productivist interpretation, rather than the properly 'immaterialist' Marx.

Here I suggest that value does not consist in the amount of labour-time expended in production by any one labouring individual. It relates to the amount of time 'socially required for its production' (Marx 1976, p. 301). This is subject to a validation made after the concrete expenditure of labour. It is only through this validation that labour can be said to produce any value at all (Bonefeld 2010, pp. 266-7).

In *Capital*, Marx counsels against situating value in the sheer amount of labour expended in a commodity's production. He notes that if this were the case then the commodity with the most value would be that produced by the most 'unskilful and lazy' worker. The labour-time that determines value is instead that *socially-necessary* (Marx 1976, p. 129). Value exists, according to Marx, only as 'definite masses of crystallised labour time' (*ibid.*, p. 184). The emphasis here is upon the crystallisation by which this can be said to be so- and not upon any amount of actual concrete labour in time. Hence, value relates to abstract labour and not its concrete expenditure (Bonefeld 2010, p. 262). Any putative crisis of measure based upon the latter is thus shown to be mistaken. And this extends to the scenario Marx himself paints in the Fragment.

In a footnote in *Capital* (1976, p. 188), Marx dispenses with the illusion that value relates to expended labour-time. The footnote envisions a national database logging the labour-time expended in commodity production. Individual contributions are calculated and recompensed in the form of a labour certificate. Marx critiques the scheme for its assumed comparison of like-for-like products of social labour-time. For Marx, the labour-time does not become social in production. It becomes social only in and through commodity exchange. As Elson writes, 'the labour-time that can be directly measured in capitalist economies in terms of hours...is not the aspect objectified as value, which is its social and abstract aspect.' (Elson 1979, p. 136).

Postoperaists have us believe value relates not to abstract social forms, but quantities of inputs and outputs. In this, their work bears out a disavowed productivist temptation towards the factory. As Heinrich suggests, against their protestations to have surpassed the proletarian condition, they 'equat[e] value-constituting "abstract labor" with temporal, measurable factory labor'. But, as Heinrich states (2007), 'Marx's concept of "abstract labor" is not at all identical with a particular type of labor expenditure', but is rather 'a category of social mediation'. This applies 'regardless of whether th[e] commodity is a steel tube or care giving labor in a nursing home'. If Marx's theory of value relates not to quantification but to the analysis of form, there is little difference between material and immaterial labours. The value-form relates not to labour but to its commensuration in commodity exchange.

In a recent critique, Moishe Postone (2012) assays Hardt's suggestion that 'the question of measurability is a function of the nature of that which is measured— material or immaterial'. Rather, 'the question of measurability is, basically, one of commensurability'. This relates not to specific objects or practices, but 'the social context within which they exist'. The grounds for 'mutual exchangeability' are 'historically specific and social'. For instance, how two distinct items are rendered commensurable will change through time. Today, this is value, what Postone calls 'a historically specific form of social mediation'. This 'crystallisation' occurs in spite of any change in the material or immaterial basis of that which it mediates.

Recognition of this socially mediated form destabilises the Fragment-interpretations hegemonic within new strands of popular Marxism. It shows that the situation set out in the Fragment is contrary to the development of Marx's own theory. And his interpreters since do not better, the law of value they claim redundant rendered resistant to its purported 'crisis'.

Postoperaist claims as to the realisation of the Fragment's conditions in the present are possible not only by virtue of a misunderstanding of the value-form. They also elide the persistence of the social relations it conceals and implies. The exchange abstraction that synthesis capitalist society is a real abstraction (Sohn-Rethel 1978). It is a conceptuality with a material, practical existence in antagonistic social relations. This is sublated (Arthur 2013) in the value form. But as Bonefeld writes, 'reality contains within itself what it denies' (2014, 64). Critiquing economic categories reveals the materiality of concepts and the conceptuality of the material world. Thus, the coin in one's pocket 'carries the bond with society', a bond that concerns 'the struggle for access to the means of subsistence' (Bonefeld 2015). The coin expresses and is concerned with this bond. But it also expresses a concept- value- inseparable from its constitution in the actual relations of life. The struggle for subsistence is as conceptual as it is material.

Reality, in this way, is socially constituted through human practice. As Horkheimer (quoted in Bonefeld 2016) writes, '[h]uman beings produce, through their own labour, a reality that increasingly enslaves them'. This, as we will see, confounds Hardt and Negri's ascription of a revolutionary creativity to their 'multitude'. By critiquing economic forms, we also critique the kinds of human lived practice and experience they express and mediate.

The critique of political economy, therefore, is, as Bonefeld (2014) puts it, fully a critical theory of society as a whole. It refuses to accept at face value the objective forms taken by congealed social relations in capitalist society. It does not reflect the world back at itself with the same objectified economic and social

forms that dominate us. In what follows, I suggest that postoperaist receptions of the Fragment do precisely that. And this complicity with the present state of things may account for the Fragment's popularity with policymakers and media movers-and-shakers today. In the subsequent discussion, I return to the roots of this popularity to destabilise them. In so doing, I hope to contribute to the unfolding debate over the possibilities of a post-work, postcapitalist utopia in the present day.

## **4. Discussion**

### **4.1. The Communism of Capital**

The modern tribunes of postcapitalism derive their wayward theorising from the postoperaist proliferation of Marx's Fragment. But I suggest that readings of Marx that sit the Fragment front-and-centre are misplaced. They extrapolate from it a situation impossible in the present according to the letter of his value theory. As we have seen, Heinrich (2013) recommends we treat it as exactly what it is: a fragment. The scenario it presents remains untouched as Marx develops his theory of value towards *Capital*. Tony Smith (2013) suggests another basis on which to situate the Fragment within Marx's wider body of work. Smith suggests that the Fragment describes a future communism, not a current capitalism. This would explain how radically the prospectus breaks with what we know of Marx's theory of value as a theory of social form.

Problematically, modern popularisations of the Fragment run counter to this periodisation. As Caffentzis notes, what Marx posits at some point in the future, Negri sees holding in the here and now (2005, p. 89). This was not always the case. In *Marx Beyond Marx*, for instance, Negri suggests that communism is defined in the transition towards it (1992, p. 115), with no implication this transition is complete. It is underway, perhaps, but in no meaningful sense realised. Here, Negri suggests that only communism's realisation fulfils the conditions the Fragment describes. It brings an end to the law of value, through 'the negation of all measure, the affirmation of the most exasperated plurality- creativity' (1992, p. 33). But Negri makes no intimation that this point has been reached.

But, by *Empire*, this 'exasperated plurality' reappears as the basis for a shift in stress from Marx to Spinoza. Drawing on the latter, Negri conceives creative desire immanently driving capitalist development towards Fragment-conditions. Empirical changes in the world of work express what we can call, following Beverungen, Murtola and Schwartz (2013), a 'communism of capital'. Immaterial labour- creative, communicative, cognitive- 'seems to provide the potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism' (2001, p. 294).

Earlier, in his *Grundrisse* lectures, Negri describes the Fragment as 'the highest example of the use of an antagonistic and constituting dialectic' in Marx's work (1992, p. 139). But in the switch to Spinoza, the antagonism and the dialectic disappear. Only constitution remains. The difference relates to how Negri periodises historical transition. In *Marx Beyond Marx*, he characterizes the Fragment as prophesizing a 'communism' reached through the constituting power of working-class subjectivity. '*Communism has the form of subjectivity,*' he writes, '*communism is a constituting praxis*'. This is a movement in opposition to the present: 'There is no part of capital that is not destroyed by the impetuous development of the new subject.' (Negri 1992, p. 163). But, by *Empire*, the struggle seeps away. The new subjectivity- that of the multitude- is in compliance, not conflict, with the present. This is because, by virtue of its immanent creative power, the present is in its own image. As such, the communism foretold in the Fragment is no longer subject to a struggle through which to attain it. It is, rather, a current with which one conforms. As we shall see, this shows how close postoperaismo remains to the productivist, teleological Marxist orthodoxy with which it auspiciously claims to break. In the next section I show how, despite appearing as a countervailing intellectual trend to traditional Marxism, it ends up repeating many of its mistakes.

### **4.2. Moving with the current**

That postoperaismo insufficiently breaks with the conventional Marxism its claims to relates to the position of workers and class struggle in its theoretical worldview. In delineating a 'communism of capital', Negri pays lip service to the worker-led struggle of Tronti's Copernican reversal (Clever 1992a) that sits at the very inception of the operaist tradition. But the account of change and crisis in *Empire* ultimately writes history without it. Multitude and Empire move in syncopation- and, vice versa. Whatever happens in the world is a result of the unfolding of the multitude's 'creativity of desire' (Hardt and Negri 2001, pp. 51-52) conceptually derived from Spinoza.

Here the 'affirmationism' that Noys (2012) skewers is clear. It illuminates the contemporary resonances of Negri's interpretation of the Fragment's present-day realisation. Take the 'accelerationist'

current, with which Negri himself engages (2015, see also Mackay and Avanesian 2015, Srnicek and Williams 2015). Here Fragment-thinking endows a nihilist optimism whereby whatever happens, however bad, is for the good. What accelerates subsumption and crises of measure represents a liberation. Srnicek and Williams (2015b), for instance, herald a time where newscasters report firm closures and job losses not as tragedies, but victories. When the immanent driving force of multitude stands behind every twist and turn in capitalist misery, it is easy to see a silver lining to the fraying thread that links life ever less with labour. A crisis in social reproduction is misread as post-work possibility (Dinerstein, Taylor, Pitts 2016). How one sees this situation produces quite different politics. One emphasises human questions of how we access the things we need to live. The other places faith in robots and machines to liberate us from what we need to do to get them instead.

This myopia around work and production unwittingly reproduces the stale communism and social democracy operaismo originally sought to escape. On one hand, there is teleology. The orthodoxy stood sure in the knowledge that history unfolds precisely to plan: an inevitable collapse of capitalism propelled by outdated irrationality and technological change. Workers were expected to move with the current, rather than against it. But, as Benjamin wrote of the social democracy of his time in Thesis XI of his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1999), its conformism to what is 'attaches not only to its political tactics but to its economic views as well [...]'. Nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current. It regarded technological developments as the fall of the stream with which it thought it was moving' (Benjamin, quoted in Noys 2012, p. 115).

As Noys suggests, a 'key symptom' of this conformism was the celebration of labour (2012, p. 115). This reappears again, today, in the affirmationist Fragment-thinking of post-operaists like Negri. It betrays a reverse productivism, whereby all change in capitalist hangs on the workplace. Only here, its end is posited as opposed to its liberation. Today's postoperaist-inspired radicals hold post-work to be synonymous with postcapitalism. A kind of work, with a kind of worker, is taken to portend a new world. In this case, it is the 'immaterial labourer'. This displays a traditionalist productivism inherited, as Caffentzis astutely notes, from Marxist-Leninism. Here, 'the revolutionary subject in any era is synthesised from the most "productive" elements of the class' (2013, p. 79).

But, in postoperaismo, this is augmented by a 'Spinozist metaphysic' that 'affirms the productive force of humankind', as Ryan puts it (1992b, p. 218). Everyone is the most productive element of the class, which is now 'multitude'. Spinozist monism, which suggests everything is as one, grants Negri a convenient alibi. Unremitting positivity greets a world wherein whatever happens results from a multitudinous 'creativity of desire'. And the hypothesis that this is so is by its nature indisputable. Its only proof is what is. 'History' becomes synonymous with 'multitude', and just as elusive. The political message echoes through bided time: sit back, and let teleology do the rest. Whatever you are doing is good enough. But is it? In the next section, I will evaluate the limitations of the kind of popular action Negri champions.

### 4.3. Too Unlimited

In the following, I argue that, in eulogising the multitude's capacity to create the world around it, Negri and other postoperaists end up affirming that world. This neutralises their ability to critically get to grips with a state of affairs in which human creativity is turned against itself. Benjamin Noys's concept of 'affirmationism' is important here. In realising the Fragment, for postoperaists like Negri the multitude's actions wield an 'affirmative' dimension (Noys 2012). Capital is subject to its drives, we are told, which are the immanent motor of all change. This is as true when capitalism is working as when it is not. On one hand, globalisation responds to the border-hopping boundlessness of the nomadic multitude. The New Economy arises from the autonomous and cooperative creativity of that multitude. On the other hand, crisis springs from the multitude's challenge to capital's limits. As Noys notes, the crisis of measurability springs from an excess of life made 'directly and immeasurably productive' (2012, pp. 113-4). So the multitude both compels capitalist development, and its crisis. The positivity of this process is made clear in *Empire*. Hardt and Negri celebrate the immanent force of the multitude, writing that:

Immanence is defined as the absence of every external limit from the trajectories of the action of the multitude, and immanence is tied only, in its affirmations and destructions, to regimes of possibility that constitute its formation and development [...]. If *Empire* is always an absolute positivity, the realization of a government of the multitude, and an absolutely immanent apparatus, then it is exposed to crisis precisely on the terrain of this definition, and not for any other necessity or transcendence opposed to it. Crisis is the sign of an alternative possibility on the plane of

immanence- a crisis that is not necessary but always possible [...]. Since the spatial and temporal dimensions of political action are no longer the limits but the constructive mechanisms of imperial government, the coexistence of the positive and the negative on the terrain of immanence is now configured as an open alternative. Today the same movements and tendencies constitute both the rise and the decline of Empire. (2001, pp. 373-374)

The crisis, then, is in no way forced by the *negation* of the unfolding of capitalist social relations. Rather, it confronts capitalism with an *excess* of things already present within it *positively*. These elements are a positive part of its functioning- free time, productivity, value, creativity, desire, labour and non-labour- and of life, which under capital is nothing other than labour-power and its reproduction. In *exceeding* them, the multitude *affirms* (Noys 2012, 113-114) what exceeds limits and the limits themselves. And, by extension, it affirms the relations and things that usually proceed with reasonable bounds of those same limits. Which is to say, value, labour, capital and so on.

One reading might have the multitude affirming what meets the limits, but not the limits themselves. But this chicken-and-egg scenario implies the pre-existence of a constituted power. This suspends the Copernican inversion, springing not from constituent power but something prior. Thus the undialectical core of the idea of constitutive power is exposed.

In a critique of Negri, Bonefeld (1994) restates how the perverted forms taken by the products of human practice dominate and cajole us. In Negri, only the provenance of that which pushes against the limits of valorisation is explained. The origin of those limits themselves is lacking. And it lies in perverted forms of human practice assuming alien power above and beyond us.

A dialectical standpoint can grasp this. It comprehends the contradictory unity of, on the one hand, the conceptuality of abstract social form, and, on the other, the non-conceptuality of the struggle to subsist on the other. But Negri's Spinozist immanentism sees only one, uncomplicated monad. It lacks the dialectical sensitivity to contradiction and mediation capable of accessing the nature of the limits it claims the multitude transcends. This relates to an understanding of history and its progression and periodization. In the next section, I will discuss the relevance of Hardt and Negri's distinction between 'molar' and 'molecular' standpoints. I argue that, by advocating the latter over the former, Hardt and Negri are able to posit changes impossible in a capitalism that in many respects remains the same.

#### **4.4. Molar and molecular**

As I asserted in the previous section, Negri positively associates the multitude with the breaking of capital's quantitative boundaries. But in embracing what challenges its limits, he loses critical focus on the nature of those limits themselves. This disregards how the perverted forms resulting from human practice continue imposing themselves anew. The activities that ebb at the limits of capital are one and the same as those that constitute those limits to begin with. Human practice takes the form of abstract labour in a society mediated by the exchange relation of value. This relates not only to an analysis of social processes at their most abstract. Rather, those processes express the essence contained, denied, within their appearance. Which is to say, concrete social relations, of antagonism, coercion and separation from subsistence outside selling one's labour-power.

Their elision in Negri's account of the Fragment's unfolding is curious. The conceptualisation of the crisis of the law of value is historicist in its presentation. The conditions that make it possible are embedded in a changing set of concrete realities. The crisis of measure attends changes in the relations of production. And these are, for Negri, are synonymous with the forces of production. Workers set the rules under which they labour. The Italian situation in the sixties and seventies is central to this prognosis. A constituent powergrab led to the breakdown of the Keynesian accord on wages and productivity. Operaists watched closely as wage demands rocketed and work refusal proliferated. Workers abandoned agreements submitting their productivity to capitalist command (Cleaver 2000, p. 68). This eventually resulted in a new kind of economy, immaterial and factoryless. For the postoperaists, the revolt of these forces was also a revolution in the relations of production. This is not a dialectical relationship, but one shared by two sides of the Copernican Inversion. Negri's embrace of Spinozist immanence makes this clear. It gives a philosophical basis to render two as one. Where multitude leads, Empire not only follows, but moves in step. But the historical analysis remains more or less the same. The change is rooted in concrete circumstances.

But this historicity leaves postoperaismo no more capable of capturing capitalism's overwhelming continuities. It emphasises only change. This is a deliberate choice. Hardt and Negri set out to distance

themselves from a *molar* perspective (Hardt and Negri 2008, p. 50) that explains history along the lines of 'large aggregates or statistical groupings'. This, they claim, results in a world portrayed as one of continuity rather than change, 'a history of purely quantitative differences' (Hardt and Negri 2008, pp. 51-2). On the other hand, a *molecular* perspective is a qualitative approach revealing change rather than continuity. It refers to 'micromultiplicities, or rather singularities, which form unbounded constellations or networks' (Hardt and Negri 2008, p. 51). This is the approach Hardt and Negri choose.

This molecular perspective moors accounts of the Fragment's unfolding in a rejection of continuity. This is so on two counts. On one hand, it elides the persistence of the abstract rule of value. Hence measure is done away with. On the other, it elides the continuation of the social relations that undergird it. In other words, it ignores its antagonistic undertow in separation, hunger and dispossession.

The molecular vantage point allies in important ways with Negri's reverse productivism. It permits the extrapolation from compositional changes in labour's content systemic observations about capitalism. But the labour process is merely a carrier of the valorisation process (Arthur 2013). This implies the persistence of certain social forms and relations. The content of a given labour process matters less than the form it assumes at the level of capitalist reproduction as a whole. If a molar perspective is necessary to comprehend this, then so be it.

From the molecular perspective, crisis issues from the constituting movement of the multitude. The historically specific conditions under which this occurs owe to this immanent relationship. The multitude's movements are those of capital, too. This is so 'not for any other necessity or transcendence opposed to it' (Hardt and Negri 2001, pp. 373-4). Value moves beyond measure because the multitude makes it so.

Understanding value as quantity rather than a social relation, this eschews the 'molar' dimension. Measurability is always in the condition of 'crisis' ascribed to it in Fragment-thought. Capital permanently confronts its inability to fully negate life's concrete specificity in the value-form. For Negri, the challenge posed to measure is historically specific. The multitude's immeasurable productivity is a novel fact. Its 'immeasurable powers of life' express not an existential vitalism but the contemporary rise to prominence of a 'multitude of singularities' (Noys 2012, p. 112).

But the truth is that there was always an excess, with or without the multitude. There is a remainder in the human dignity the value relation cannot contain through denial. This is a critical position Hardt and Negri consciously set out to refute in a missing insert from *Empire* (see Noys 2012, p. 110). Critiques of capitalist totality rally to the defence of principles 'totally Other' to it. But this 'otherness' implies antagonism and contradiction alien to an immanentist viewpoint. This renders out of bounds the positing of a humanity that constantly evades capture.

From Negri's molecular and immanentist perspective, any excess is historically temporary. But, contrary to this periodization, the domination of the particular by totality is permanent. The molecular resonates with pop-intellectual eulogies for a long line of 'new economies'. It celebrates change, at the expense of critiquing capitalist continuities that must be overcome. Politically, this has us hang our hopes on the affirmation and acceleration of historical change, and not its halt-cord. Hence the bad political efficacy of the Fragment and its postoperaist reception on the left today.

Reading history molecularly allows Negri to view the present through the prism of the Fragment. The rise of immaterial labour seems to realise the conditions Marx describes. But the ascription of novelty elides how value persists, and the social relations this implies. This extends to the positing of 'paradigm shifts'. As Holloway (2002) asserts, Hardt and Negri alight upon this idea to explain social change. But parsing one from another- Fordism from post-Fordism, for instance- overlooks how common features carry over.

This parsing is easy when one sees all change issuing from the workplace. As Aufheben note (2007), these paradigms are defined along productivist lines. They pass by in accordance with superficial transformations in the content of labour. This overlooks the stability of the social form productivity activities assumes. It is this aspect that is crucial from the standpoint of Marx's critique of political economy. Postoperaists focus on only the immediate form taken by productive activity. But, to see the Fragment within the context of Marx's work, focus must fall on the social form mediating this immediacy. What characterises capitalism is not the specific kind of productive activity that takes place. Rather, it is characterised by the forms taken by its results: value, money, capital. This is the specificity of the social formation in which we find ourselves. Which is to say, capitalism.

Bypassing this specificity, postoperaists conceive a capitalism they cannot grasp undergoing a crisis it cannot suffer. The same theoretical imprecision blights the new politics of postcapitalism. Misunderstanding what capitalism is produces misunderstandings over the possibilities of its replacement.

And this leads to bad politics. But these foreshortened forms of praxis stem from analytical weaknesses in the first instance. In the next section, I will show how the theorization of measure's crisis and replacement by violence conceals a failure to grasp the existing link between measure and violence. An inability to take seriously the continuing coercion represented in measure suggests a bleak prospectus for the capacity of present-day left politics inspired by postoperaismo to overcome it.

#### 4.5. Measure and violence

As I showed in the last section, faulty conceptualizing follows from the molecular succession of paradigm shifts. Its immanentist and productivist analysis of change leads it down many blind alleys. Postoperaist attempts to explain capitalism's reproduction after the unfolding of the Fragment demonstrate this. How does capitalism carry on once its forms of measure enter crisis? To answer this, postoperaists reach for a string of concepts- command, control and violence. They propose a transition from measure to pure coercion. This suggests that the two are not already implicit within each other. This owes to a misreading of how value and social domination function in the first place.

The progression through command, control and violence mirrors the development of autonomist Marxism. The operaist-postoperaist transition centred on a changing interpretation of class struggle and capitalist development. The first-generation operaists saw a role for capitalist planning of production. This implied measurement, rationalisation, quantification and so on. But this related less to top-down control than capital's reaction to class struggle. Mario Tronti's so-called 'Copernican inversion' was groundbreaking in this regard (Cleaver 2000, pp. 65-66). It placed workers as the prime mover in capitalist development. But, essentially, capital could still act in response, channelling production to its ends.

With Negri's lectures on the *Grundrisse* came a bold contention to the contrary. An 'empty form of capitalist command' replaced the law of value (Negri 1992, pp. 147-8). The planning and regulation of production gave way to 'a direct relation of force', as Ryan puts it (1992 [Preface], p. xxix). The exchange relationship between the buyer and seller of labour power- in production a relationship of exploitation- passes over into a relationship of pure command over which the struggle is no longer economic but 'purely political' (*ibid.*, p. xxix).

Later, Negri substitutes command for control. With Hardt, he follows Deleuze in positing a transition from disciplinary society to one of control. The former saw power enforced within the four walls of the factory, the prison and the school. In the latter, their carceral and exploitative logics seep out of their four walls into society as a whole (Deleuze 1990, Hardt and Negri 2001). The conduit for this is the disciplined subjects themselves. Rather than coming from without, at the hands of the capitalist, discipline comes from within. Foucauldian biopolitics meets the Spinozist 'creativity of desire' through which the multitude propels history. The immaterial labourer's self-valorising self-production reappears as a consensual self-exploitation. Under 'command', power is extensified. But in the society of control, it is intensified, through subjectivity itself.

In a recent iteration, Bifo situates violence as measure's resolution in contemporary capitalism. Capitalist reproduction holds not through planning, command or control, but through brute force alone. Bifo writes:

After Nixon's decision, measurement ended. Standardization ended. The possibility of determining the average amount of time necessary to produce a good ended. Of course, that means that the United States of America, its president, Richard Nixon, decided that violence would take the place of measurement. In conditions of aleatority, what is the condition of the final decision? What is the action or process of determining value? Strength, force, violence. What is the final way of deciding something- for instance, deciding the exchange rate of the dollar? Violence, of course [...]. There can be no financial economy without violence, because violence has now become the one single method of decision in the absence of the standard.' (Berardi 2013, p. 88)

The problem with each of these novel replacements for measure is they imply measure is not always already based in relationships of command, control and violence. This owes to the absence of a social-form appreciation of value in postoperaismo. Postoperaists see measure relating to a quantitative process of valorisation. Hence it enters into crisis when things cannot be counted. But value is a social relation, not a property of things. It appears as a relationship between things. But it contains within this appearance its essence in relationships between people. Postoperaists remain stuck with the objective economic forms of appearance.

Scrutinising the relationships between people clarifies the link between measure and violence. The question central to the critique of political economy as a critical theory of society is 'why does this content take this form?' (Bonefeld 2001, p. 5). But this is never posed, foreclosing a grasp of how measure and labour relate. The appearance of objective economic forms like measure contains, sublated, that which it denies. Which is to say, historically-grounded concrete social relations. These are the product of an original and sustained violence of brute physicality. They express the radical dispossession whether we eat or starve is arbitrated by the coins in our pocket (see Marx 1973, 156-7). The socially synthetic (Sohn-Rethel 1978) function of money and value rests in forceful separation. Continuously, people are deprived of independent individual and collective means to reproduce themselves (see Bonefeld 2014). The sale of labour-power is last resort. Only by means of this bloody fact do we live in a world of objective economic categories. Measure carries within it this background.

The continuous character of this dispossession institutionalises violence or the threat of it. It is present not only in the continually reproduced material and social preconditions of a world ruled by value. It is also present in the policing of the measures by and through which value manifests. Measure *is* violence. Postoperaists posit its lapse into crisis and the replacement of one by the other only by willfully eliding this.

But violence is not only present in the continually reproduced material and social preconditions of a world ruled by value, but in the policing of the measures by and through which value manifests. Measure *is* violence, and postoperaists can only posit its lapsing into crisis and the subsequent replacement of one by the other by willfully eliding this. As Lukacs writes, the value abstraction 'has the same ontological facticity as a car that runs you over' (quoted in Lotz 2014, p. xiv).

We can see this dimension implied in the etymology of the word 'abstract'. 'Abs' comes from the Latin for 'away', 'tract' '*trahere*', or move. To 'abstract', then, is 'to transport into a formal, calculative space' (Muniesa, Millo and Callon 2005). Even in the most basic and primitive instances of calculation, this meaning is significant. As David Graeber writes, the 'violence of quantification' (2012, p. 14) present in forms of debt 'turns human relations into mathematics'. Violence might 'appear secondary' to measure, money and the abstraction it implies. But, writes Graeber, they have 'a capacity to turn morality into a matter of impersonal arithmetic'. This permits the exertion of force in their pursuit. Graeber uses the example of tribal 'sister exchange'. The forceful removal of things from their context implicated in abstract measurement is clear:

[T]o make a human being an object of exchange, one woman equivalent to another, for example, requires first of all ripping her from her context; that is, tearing her away from that web of relations that makes her the unique conflux of relations that she is, and thus, into a generic value capable of being added and subtracted and used as a means to measure debt. This requires a certain violence. To make her equivalent to a bar of camwood takes even more violence, and it takes an enormous amount of sustained and systematic violence to rip her so completely from her context that she becomes a slave.' (Graeber 2012, p. 159)

Problematically, Graeber's method is to extrapolate from non-capitalist society insights about a very different social formation. But the link remains. The divergence rests in the fact that, in capitalist society, this violence is sublated in the value-form. But the exchange abstraction still 'liquidates' the concrete, as Adorno and Horkheimer suggest. It is disappeared, as surely as fate was held to dispatch with human subjects pre-Enlightenment (1972, p. 13). Measurement not only denies the concrete chaos of reality, transforming quality into quantity. It also denies the concrete social relations that undergird value. The capitalist state enshrines the rule of equivalence in law whilst implicitly threatening violence to enforce it. The sublated principle is negated but retained in the mode of denial. As Kunkel writes of the quantitative obligations of debt (2014, p. 116), 'the violence wielded by mafias or the state enforces the abstraction' by which value is ascribed to things, and by which money mediates relationship between individuals. Violence is measure, and vice versa. It is not, as postoperaists suggest, an alternative to it in the form of command, control or outright force. Once again, change wins out analytically over continuity, to the detriment of critique and praxis. The idea that crisis is around the corner consoles us that change is afoot. In the next section, I detail how the positivity can be extracted from this prospectus, freeing space for a welcome injection of negativity. If capitalism is seen as in a state of permanent crisis and uncertainty, the easy belief in its coming collapse seems far less tenable.

#### 4.6. Capitalism is crisis

By seeing measurement as a functioning part of capitalism, postoperaists portend its breakdown. But I argue here that its death cannot be announced so brusquely. Postoperaists see capitalism as functioning perfectly until crisis comes. But this ignores the uncertainty capital must constantly confront, in creating, commensurating and circulating commodities. And, I suggest, its persistence in light of this uncertainty indicates, contrary to Negri and his modern followers, capitalism is far from done.

For postoperaismo, command, control and violence step in only when measure breaks down. This elides the continuity of measure's crisis-ridden fragility. Pure quantity can never capture the chaos of reality, and nor does it claim to. Force is always needed to bend reality to its expectations and ease of measurement. This force often issues from the state, and from the law. And force undergirds that which is measured in the first place. Constant struggle marks the condition by which we cannot eat except by the buying and selling of commodities. Violence is meted out in support of it. What the molecular positing of change implies is that all this is novel. But it is not.

The Fragment's scenario of a crisis in the law of value is thinkable only on the basis of a kind of functionalism. Postoperaists perceive breakdown in the functioning of something that, in normal conditions, 'functions' freely and without contradiction. But, where measure sublates antagonistic social relations of production, contradiction, not function, reigns. Where capitalism seems to function, it teeters on the brink of a social basis that exists in the mode of being denied. It struggles to negate what is concrete in abstraction. This is a permanent crisis where postoperaists see only a recent one.

Key here is Negri's attack on dialectics in the name of a Spinozist embrace of immanence and monism. With this disappears the ability to grasp contradiction. Things cannot be two things at once, or contain within them the essence of another. Form analysis is impossible. The strange situation whereby the results of human practice should assume transcendent forms of social domination slides entirely from view. Contradiction is mistakenly seen as relating to crisis, rather than capitalism itself. The ascription of crisis portrays a normal functioning broken by contradiction. Whereas in fact capitalism, to the extent it 'functions' in the way suggested, does so *via* contradiction.

This relates to Negri's 'molecular' positing of a succession of self-contained paradigms. As Holloway notes (2002), paradigm-thinking has the effect of rendering Negri's argument functionalist. All things in a given historical juncture must always correspond to the correct paradigm. Even crises come to play their part in their unfolding. The paradigm is a framework to which all parts of reality must fit. There is no room for contradiction, or conflict.

But capital always struggles to measure, and what is measured always struggles back. The value-form sublates the qualitative incommensurability of feelings, dignity, desires- but never totally. There is *always* an excess left over that cannot be captured. This is not a novelty of Empire. It is as true for the industrial factory, where sabotage and subordination was rife, as it is for the social factory. And, confounding paradigms, it is as true for Fordism as for so-called 'post-Fordism'. This is where a 'molecular' micro-focus on the immediate forms taken by concrete labour fails. The forms of social mediation persist. And with them lasting contradictions Fragment-thinkers optimistically see as a sudden and liberatory crisis.

Marx's critique of political economy is all about understanding the *form* productive activity assumes. Crucial here is abstract labour- and not immediate concrete labour. Changes in labour-time and the composition of the labour cannot create in themselves a crisis of measure. It is comforting to contend an incipient communism is around the corner owing to such changes. But placing the Fragment on Machines in the context Marx's work as a whole gives little cause for comfort. Capitalism is characterised by categories of social mediation. They persist regardless of whether a worker uses a keyboard or a hammer, ideas or nuts and bolts. This gives pause for thought to those projecting Fragment-inspired pipedreams. The epochal crisis they posit is no crisis at all. On their terms, capitalism *is* crisis, for all involved. No amount of Spinozist optimism is capable of coming to terms with the theory and practice required to change it. And, I conclude in this paper's remainder, we must look to elements of Marx's work other than the Fragment to overcome this impasse.

#### 4.7. Beyond the Fragment?

As we have seen here, the Fragment on Machines casts a long shadow over postoperaist treatments of value. But, I would suggest, little thought has been given to the coherence of the fragment within the whole body of Marx's work. Fragment-thinking tends toward a conventional understanding of the relationship between labour and value. Ironically, this productivist standpoint belies the avowed post-workerism of its proponents. Their conceptualisation of a crisis of measurability depends upon it. Value must relate directly

to expended concrete labour for the latter's reduction to pose a threat. But it instead relates to abstract labour, which has no concrete existence (Bonefeld 2010, 260). As such, the Fragment sits uneasily in the development of Marx's value theory (Heinrich 2013). This accounts for its fragmentary, unpublished nature. Its crisis scenario implies a simplistic labour theory of value that Marx later outgrew. The Fragment can be considered only a partial viewpoint on value from a Marxian perspective. For this reason it should not be extrapolated to a theory of the crisis of measure and the law of value made to fit the conditions before us today.

Read along the lines set out here, measure continues the same as always. The optimistic picture the Fragment foretells cannot be the case. Caffentzis points to the everyday persistence of measure in all kinds of work. Far from crisis, it continues to function, just as necessary for capital as ever before. At the most basic level, 'the process of creating propositions, objects, ideas and forms and other so-called "immaterial products" [...] is a process in time that can be (and is) measured' (2013, p. 111). This may differ from, say, the 'material' factory labour of Marx's own time. But it occupies time and is subject to measure on this basis all the same. Caffentzis captures this well when he writes that the crisis of measurability 'does not seem to refer to what billions of people across the planet do every day under the surveillance of bosses vitally concerned about how much time the workers are at their job and how well they do it again and again' (2005, p. 97). The coercive social relations are still there, synonymous with measure, and sublated within it, contradictory and denied.

Contra the postoperaists, Caffentzis contends, measure has always endured the uncertainty ascribed in the Fragment scenario. No commodity has ever had its value seamlessly read off from the amount of direct labour-time that went into its production. As Caffentzis contends (2013, p. 112), this is as true for material commodities as it is for the immaterial goods and services emphasised by the postoperaists. This is because the labour represented in the value of a commodity is abstract labour (Pitts 2016a). This is measured on the basis of socially necessary labour time. This is determined by, as Marx writes (1976, p. 129), 'the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labour prevalent in that society'. In other words, it is arbitrated not by direct, concrete labour time, but through social validation in monetary exchange. Value, on this account, always faces the conditions of crisis described by those foretelling its downfall (Pitts 2016a). But that cannot be fatal in the way that the Fragment implies. The Fragment runs counter to the whole endeavour of Marx's critique of political economy. We must, therefore, beware the siren calls of those who seek to tear the Fragment from its context within the unfolding of a fuller theory of capitalism. Its misguided application to the present wields real political efficacy. Its popularity may relate to the reassurance it offers to two diverse audiences. To those interested both in capitalism's continuation, a soothing requiem to its immeasurable productivity and peaceful passage of progress. To those seeking otherwise, the promise of its imminent transformation. From a critical Marxist perspective, both thrive off false hope. We can endow ourselves with real hope only through an initial moment of negativity. This is lacking in the techno-optimism of the Fragment-thinkers.

## **5. Conclusion**

I will conclude with some broad theoretical assessments of the Fragment and its theoretical legacy in postoperaismo and its contemporary popularisers, and set out why this matters politically.

On one hand, postoperaist interpretations of the Fragment's realisation in immaterial labour are seldom immaterial enough. Like the most conventional value theory, they emphasise labour's concrete expenditure over its abstraction. They extrapolate systemic change from the immediate form labour takes, ignoring its mediation. This supports the claim of a crisis mimicking that described in the Fragment. But the novelty it posits is not actually so novel after all (Pitts 2016a). The Fragment provides a faulty map which to read a mistaken prognosis. Marx is as much to blame as Negri.

On the other hand, postoperaist interpretations of the Fragment's realisation are not materialist enough. Negri's Spinoza-derived monism induces him to overlook the persistence of social relations of production. The shiny exterior of workplace change conceals continuing hunger, domination, separation and violence. Both sides- appearance in the value-form and essence sublated within- are missed. And with them the continuing and coercive role played by measure within and without the sphere of production. This facilitates the claim of a capitalist collapse attended by an incipient communism.

As problematic as this analysis is, it would not be nearly so problematic were it not for the forms of political praxis it invites. Today policymakers obsess over automation, technological unemployment and the basic income. Via its media popularisers, Fragment-thinking wields real influence. It falls most on those forces in favour of those on receiving end of capitalist domination. Social democratic and popular left

parties sit under its spell. Protest groups too, as evidenced in the demands emblazoned on banners at a recent march in London. 'Demand full automation, demand basic income, demand the future', they read (Harris 2016).

Wrong ideas about the world can produce wrong forms of human practice in response. As Caffentzis notes, in common with other treatments of the purported 'end of work', postoperaismo generates a stultifying politics that suggests 'capitalism has already ended at the high-tech end of the system' and all there is to do is 'wake up to it' (2013, p. 81).

Today, the so-called 'social movement' around Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn exhibits a similar conviction. Mason (2016) numbers among those commentators championing Corbyn. He casts the Corbyn movement as a 'counterpower' within and against capital, driving change. This communicates all the comfort that if you keep on doing what you're doing, everything will be okay. All change will issue from the immanent drive of the vague and ill-defined 'multitude' of which you are a member.

But this does not stand up to scrutiny (Bolton 2016, Pitts 2016b/2016c). Corbynum posits a 'singularity' similar in hue to the multitude. It goes by the name of the 'people'. But this singularity cannot exist in world criss-crossed by antagonistic class relations. There is, translating ideas across times and milieus, a postoperaist hangover operating here. It clings desperately onto the positive and underplays the negative. In the process it obstructs a proper assessment of what is necessary, what is possible, and what is neither in the present. Popular analyses celebrate empirical trends in work and economic life in expectation of change. But no substantial critical effort is made to understand capitalism's negativity. But the 'actual conditions of life' (Bonefeld 2015) that characterise capitalism carry over. A crisis, attended by incipient communism, can be conceived only in spite of this.

Wishing all this away theoretically leads to a strategic impasse for left politics. Postoperaismo's inheritors weld the Fragment to a politics too enchanted with the world that is. They assume too much is right, and not enough wrong. Spellbound modes of praxis result, that rub with the grain rather than against it. Positivity is praised, negativity goes un-negated. Policymakers seize upon the false promise of change the radical left heralds. Continuing forms of social domination rest unquestioned. A few pages of Marx helped get us here. But more pages still can help us get out.

### **Acknowledgement**

Supported by research funding provided by the Economic and Social Research Council [grant number ES/J50015X/1], this working paper draws from a chapter in a forthcoming PhD thesis, 'Marxian Value Theory and the 'Crisis of Measurability': A Case Study of Work in the Creative Industries in the UK and Netherlands', to be submitted to the University of Bath in late 2016. Thanks to Ana Dinerstein at the University of Bath for her comments. The development of the paper will benefit from presentation at a publication workshop held by the International Initiative for Promoting Political Economy at the University of Westminster, 15<sup>th</sup> September 2016.

### **Bibliography**

- Adorno, T. W., and Horkheimer, M., 1972. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. London: Verso.
- Arthur, C., 2013. 'The Practical Truth of Abstract Labour', pp. 101-120 of In Marx's Laboratory: Critical Interpretations of the Grundrisse, R. Bellofiore, G. Starosta, and P. Thomas (eds) Brill, Leiden and Boston.
- Aufheben, 2007. Keep on Smiling: Questions on Immaterial Labour. *Aufheben* #14, pp. 23-44
- Bastani, A., 2015. We Don't Need More Austerity, We Need Luxury Communism. *Vice Magazine*. 12<sup>th</sup> June 2015. Available online at [http://www.vice.com/en\\_uk/read/luxury-communism-933](http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/luxury-communism-933)
- Bellofiore, R., and Riva, TR., 2015. The Neue Marx-Lektüre: Putting the critique of political economy back into the critique of society. *Radical Philosophy* 189 Jan-Feb, 24-36
- Benjamin W., 1999. Theses on the Philosophy of History. *Illuminations: Essays and Relections* ed. H. Arendt. London: Pimlico, 245-255
- Berardi, F., 2013. The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
- Beverungen, A., Murtola, A-M., Schwartz, G., 2013. The communism of capital? *ephemera* 13(3), pp. 483-495
- Bolton, M., 2016. The Terrifying Hubris of Corbynum. *Medium*. 14<sup>th</sup> July 2016. Available at <https://medium.com/@matatatatat/the-terrifying-hubris-of-corbynum-6590054a9b57#.ftpsvjg87>.
- Bonefeld, W., Gunn, R., Psychopedis, K. (eds.) 1992. *Open Marxism Vol. II: Theory and Practice*. London: Pluto Press.

- Bonefeld, W., 1994. 'Human Practice and Perversion: Between Autonomy and Structure', *Common Sense* no. 15, pp. 43-52
- Bonefeld, W., 2001. *The Politics of Europe: Monetary Union and Class*. London: Palgrave.
- Bonefeld, W., 2010. Abstract labour: Against its nature and on its time. *Capital and Class* 34(2), pp. 257-276
- Bonefeld W., 2014. *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Bonefeld, W., 2015. 'Bringing critical theory back in at a time of misery: three beginnings without conclusion' *Capital & Class*, pp. 1-12
- Bonefeld, W 2016, 'Negative Dialectics and Critique of Economic Objectivity' *History of the Human Sciences*, vol 29, no. 2, pp. 60-76.
- Caffentzis, G., 2005. Immeasurable Value? An Essay on Marx's Legacy. *The Commoner*. N. 10. 87-114
- Caffentzis, G., 2013. *In Letters of Blood and Fire: Work, Machines, and Value*, (Oakland: PM Press, 2013).
- Cleaver, H., 1992a. The Inversion of Class Perspective in Marxian Theory: From Valorisation to Self-Valorisation. *Open Marxism Vol. II: Theory and Practice*. London: Pluto Press. pp. 107-144
- Cleaver, H., 1992b. Translators' Introductions, Part I. in Negri, A., 1992. *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*. London: Pluto Press, pp. xix-xxvii
- Cleaver, H., 2000. *Reading Capital politically*. Edinburgh: AK Press.
- Deleuze, G, 1990. Society of Control. *L'autre journal*, Nr. 1, Mai 1990. Online at <https://www.nadir.org/nadir/archiv/netzkritik/societofcontrol.html>
- Dinerstein, A., Taylor, G., Pitts, F. H., 2016a. A post-work economy of robots and machines is a bad utopia for the left. *The Conversation*. 23<sup>rd</sup> May. Available online at <https://theconversation.com/a-post-work-economy-of-robots-and-machines-is-a-bad-utopia-for-the-left-59134>
- Elson, D., 1979. The value theory of labour. In *Value: The representation of labour in capitalism*. London: CSE Books.
- Graeber, D., 2012. *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*. Brooklyn, New York: Melville House.
- Hardt M and Negri A (2001) *Empire*. Harvard University Press.
- Hardt M and Negri A (2004) *Multitude*. London: Penguin.
- Hardt M, and Negri, A (2009) *Commonwealth*. Harvard University Press.
- Harris, J., 2016. Should we scrap benefits and pay everyone £100 a week? *The Guardian*. Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> April 2016. <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/apr/13/should-we-scrap-benefits-and-pay-everyone-100-a-week-whether-they-work-or-not>
- Heinrich, Michael, 2007, Invaders from Marx: On the Uses of Marxian Theory, and the Difficulties of a Contemporary Reading. *Left Curve* 31.
- Heinrich, Michael. 2013. The 'Fragment on Machines': A Marxian Misconception in the Grundrisse and its Overcoming in Capital. Bellofiore, R., Starosta, G., and Thomas, P. (eds), *In Marx's Laboratory: Critical Interpretations of the Grundrisse*. Leiden: Brill, 197-212.
- Holloway, J., 2002 Going in the Wrong Direction; Or, Mephistopheles – Not Saint Francis of Assisi *Historical Materialism*, 10:1, pp. 79–91
- Jones, O., 2016. We should be striving to work less, not toiling until we drop. *The Guardian*. Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/mar/03/retirement-retiring-age-77-strive-work-less-progress-challenge-bleak-prospect>
- Kunkel, B., 2014. *Utopia or Bust: A Guide to the Present Crisis*
- Labour Party, 2016. The new economy, Shadow Chancellor's Conference, Imperial College, London, 22 May 2016
- Lazzarato, M., 1996. Immaterial Labor. *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, eds. P Virno and M Hardt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 133-150.
- Lotz, C., 2014. *The Capitalist Schema: Time, Money, and the Culture of Abstraction*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Mackay, R., and Avanessian, A. (eds), 2015. *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*. Falmouth: Urbanomic.
- Marazzi, C., 2008. *Capital and Language*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
- Marx, K. 1973. *Grundrisse*. London: Penguin
- Marx, K., 1976. *Capital*. London: Penguin.
- Marx, K., 1981. *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. (Moscow: Progress)
- Mason, P., 2015a. The end of capitalism has begun. *The Guardian*. Friday 17<sup>th</sup> July 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jul/17/postcapitalism-end-of-capitalism-begun>

- Mason, P., 2015b. *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future*. London: Allen Lane.
- Mason, P., 2016. Corbyn: The Summer of Hierarchical Things. *Mosquito Ridge*. 12<sup>th</sup> July. Available at: <https://medium.com/mosquito-ridge/corbyn-the-summer-of-hierarchical-things-ab1368959b80#.f8e5z4k82>
- Muniesa, F., Millo, Y. and Callon, M. (2007), An introduction to market devices. *The Sociological Review*, 55: 1–12
- Negri, A., 1992a. *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*. London: Pluto Press.
- Negri A., 1992b., Interpretation of the Class Situation Today: Methodological Aspects. *Open Marxism Vol. II: Theory and Practice*. London: Pluto Press. pp. 69-105
- Negri, A., 2008. *Reflections on empire*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Negri, A., 2015. Some Reflections on the #Accelerate Manifesto. In *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Manifesto*. Eds. R. Mackay and A. Avanessian. Falmouth: Urbanomic, pp. 363-378.
- Noys, B., 2012. *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pitts, FH, 2016a Crisis of Measurability? *Capital and Class* [forthcoming]
- Pitts, FH, 2016b Corbynism changes the centre, but can it convert it? *Disclaimer Mag*. 27<sup>th</sup> July 2016. Available online at <http://www.disclaimermag.com/politics/corbynism-changes-the-political-centre-but-can-it-convert-it-3727>.
- Pitts, FH, 2016c Popular delusions: Corbynism constructs its people. *Open Democracy*. 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2016. Available online at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/uk/f-h-pitts/popular-delusions-corbynism-constructs-its-people>.
- Pitts, FH, forthcoming. Negri's Age of Immanence: A Critique.
- Postone, M., 2012. 'Thinking the Global Crisis', *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 111:2, Spring 2012
- Ryan, M., 1992a. Translators' Introductions, Part II. in Negri, A., 1992. *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*. London: Pluto Press, pp. xxviii-xxx
- Ryan, M., 1992b. Epilogue. in Negri, A., 1992. *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*. London: Pluto Press, pp. 191-221
- Smith, T., 2013. The 'General Intellect' in the *Grundrisse* and Beyond. *Historical Materialism* 21.4, pp. 235–255
- Sohn-Rethel, A., 1978. *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*. London: Macmillan Press.
- Srnicek, N., and Williams, A., 2015a. #Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics. In *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*. eds. R. Mackay and A. Avanessian. Falmouth: Urbanomic. pp. 347-362.
- Srnicek, N., and Williams, A., 2015b. Remembering the future. *BAMN* #1. Available online at: <http://www.weareplanc.org/bamn/remembering-the-future/>
- Srnicek, N., and Williams, A., 2015c. *Inventing the Future*. London: Verso.
- Stewart, H., 2016. John McDonnell: Labour taking a close look at universal basic income. *The Guardian*. Monday 6<sup>th</sup> June 2016. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/05/john-mcdonnell-labour-universal-basic-income-welfare-benefits-compass-report>
- Thoburn, N., 2003. *Deleuze, Marx and Politics*. London: Routledge.
- Virno, P., 1996, The Ambivalence of Disenchantment. *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* eds. P. Virno and M. Hardt, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press pp. 13-36
- Wintour, P., 2015. John McDonnell to unveil 'socialism with an iPad' economic plan. *The Guardian*. Friday 20<sup>th</sup> November 2015. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/nov/20/john-mcdonnell-to-unveil-socialism-with-an-ipad-economic-plan>