

THE PRODUCTION OF SUBJECTIVITY: FROM TRANSINDIVIDUALITY TO THE COMMONS

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Abstract *Collectivity is increasingly difficult to conceptualize. This is perhaps due to a long philosophical cold war. Which has left us with concepts of social relations that start with an irreducible individual, figuring society as nothing other than the sum total of individual actions, as in social contract theory and various forms of methodological individualism, on the one hand, and spectres of organic or functionalist totality, on the other hand. Against both terms of this division this paper examines Gilbert Simondon's work on individuation to explore the transindividual production of subjectivity. The conditions of our subjectivity, language, knowledge, and habits, are neither individual nor part of any collective, but are the conditions of individual identity and collective belonging, remaining irreducible to each. These conditions have become increasingly important to the contemporary production process, becoming the source of new forms of wealth. They are the new commons that are increasingly becoming enclosed, privatized. Finally, following the work of Paolo Virno and Bernard Stiegler, I argue that these commons, the transindividual production of subjectivity, can become the basis of a new politics, a politics irreducible to individuality or totality.*

Keywords subjectivity, real subsumption, transindividuality, the common, capitalism, politics, Gilbert Simondon, Paolo Virno, Karl Marx, Bernard Stiegler, Gilles Deleuze.

The current conjuncture is marked by a fundamental impasse in terms of how to engage the question of politics. This is in part due to the fact that the various figures through which one engages with politics - the citizen, worker, or militant - have become exhausted of their meaning; the citizen has been replaced by the interest group, the worker by the investor in his or her own human capital, and the militant by the terrorist. As Alain Badiou writes:

This political subject has gone under various names. He used to be referred to as a 'citizen,' certainly not in the sense of the elector or town councillor, but in the sense of the Jacobin of 1793. He used to be called 'professional revolutionary'. He used to be called 'grassroots militant'. We seem to be living in a time when his name is suspended, a time when we must find a new name for him.¹

Rather than work in the direction that Badiou supposes, finding a new name

1. Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, J. Barker (trans), New York, Verso, 2005, p102.

for the political subject, I would like to focus in this essay on the ‘production of subjectivity’. The ‘production of subjectivity’, the way in which human beings are constituted as subjects, through structures of language and power; to adopt such a concept is often seen as tantamount to a denial of political agency altogether, to the assertion that everything is an effect of power, that agency and action cannot exist. What I would like to propose is that far from being a theoretical dead end for politics the production of subjectivity is the condition for its renewal. It is only by examining the way in which subjectivity is produced that it is possible to understand how subjectivity might be produced otherwise, ultimately transforming itself, turning a passive condition into an active process. The connection between production and politics that lies at the root of the Marxist project remains as valid as ever, but production needs to be understood in the broadest sense, not just work, the efforts on the factory floor, but the myriad ways in which actions, habits, and language produce effects, including effects on subjectivity, ways of perceiving, understanding, and relating to the world.

As a philosophical perspective, or line of inquiry, ‘the production of subjectivity’ is fundamentally disorientating, primarily because it forces us to treat something that, in liberal individualistic society, is generally considered to be originary, the subject or individual, as produced, the cause and origin of actions as an effect of prior productions. The perspective cuts through the established binaries of philosophical thought, mingling effects with causes, material conditions with interior states, and objects with subjects. As an initial gesture of orientation I propose that the production of subjectivity can at least be provisionally defined along two axes that it cuts across: that of base and superstructure and that of structure and subject. Rather than understand the work of Marx through the oft-cited figure of base and superstructure, in which the production of things and the reproduction of subjectivity are each given their place and degree of effectivity according to a hierarchical structure, it is perhaps more interesting to view his work through the intersection of a mode of production and a mode of subjection. This assertion gets its textual support through the multiple places where Marx addresses the prehistory of capitalism, the breakdown of feudalism and previous modes of production. It is not enough for capitalism to constitute itself economically, to exploit the flows of wealth and labour, but it must constitute itself subjectively as well, develop the desires and habits necessary for it to perpetuate itself.² As Marx writes: ‘The advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by education [*Erziehung*], tradition, and habit [*Gewohnheit*] looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self evident natural laws’.³ Thus the production of subjectivity demands that two facets of social reality, that of the constitution of ideas and desires and that of the production of things, must be thought of not as hierarchically structured with respect to each other, but fully immanent, taking place at the same time, and within the same sites. This is not to say, however, that the ‘production of subjectivity’ is a pure subjection;

2. Both of these axes are developed at greater length in my *The Micro-Politics of Capital: Marx and the Prehistory of Capitalism*, Albany, SUNY, 2003.

3. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume I., Ben Fowkes (trans), New York, Penguin, 1977, p899.

subjectivity is not simply an effect of the economic structure, without its own specific causality and effects, effects that are even antagonistic to the demands of the economic structure. This combination of subjection and subjectivity can be understood by focusing on the two senses of the phrase, 'the production of subjectivity,' as the simultaneous non-identity of the manner in which subjectivity is *produced* and the manner in which subjectivity is *productive*, not just in terms of value or wealth, but its general capacity to produce effects. The subject is in some sense an effect of the structure, but it is never just an effect of the structure. This can be seen to make-up the antagonistic logic of Marx's *Capital*, from the discussion of the labour process to the struggle over the working day: at each step the subjects that capital produces, through training, education, and habit, produce a surplus of subjectivity, of desires and needs, that struggle against the very site of their constitution.

FROM GATTUNGSWESEN TO TRANSINDIVIDUALITY

I have recapped these two aspects somewhat briefly only to introduce two other problems introduced by the production of subjectivity: namely, the relation of the individual to society and political subjectification. It is in relation to these problems that we see the difficulty of this orientation, its challenge to the existing ways of thinking, and its promise, its capacity to reorient thought. These problems, that of a social ontology and politics, would at first glance appear to be not only distinct but distant from each other: the first being speculative and the second practical. However, they are inseparable, linked by the difficulty of imagining and envisioning forms of collectivity: a task that requires the creation of new modes of thought and the destruction of an individualistic ontology. (The burden of this individualist ontology has weighed down theories of the production and constitution of subjectivity: imagining the production of subjectivity as an individualistic project of aesthetic self-fashioning or ironic distance from the conditions of production). Starting from the production of subjectivity means that first the subject, the individual, must be seen as produced, as an effect, thus the individual cannot be privileged as a given, as the irreducible basis of ontology, epistemology, and politics. Furthermore, maintaining both senses of the genitive, that is the simultaneous non-identity of the way in which subjectivity is productive and produced, means that the subject can also not simply be seen simply as an effect of society. Thus, the two ways of understanding the relation between the individual and society, either starting from individuals as a given and understanding society as nothing more than the sum total of individuals, or, starting from society and seeing individuals as nothing more than effects of a larger structure, are barred from the outset. As Etienne Balibar has argued, these two conceptions, which could be named individualism and holism (or organicism), constitute much of the thought of the problem of society and the individual in western philosophy.⁴ Thus, the political problem and the

4. Etienne Balibar, *Spinoza: From Individuality to Transindividuality*, Rijnsburg, Eburon, 1997, p6.

ontological problem prove to be if not the same at least similar; in each case it is a matter of thinking beyond the opposition of the individual and society, of moving beyond these starting points to grasp the productive nexus from which both individualities and collectivities emerge.

Marx's thought occasionally attempts to break with both of these options. I say occasionally because despite the fact that we could argue that Marx's implied social ontology is consistently opposed to both a methodological individualism and a holism of the organic or functionalist variety, Marx only explicitly argues against these perspectives in those occasional moments where he reflects on his fundamental philosophical orientation. As Marx writes, critiquing the isolated individual that classical economic thought places at its foundation, 'The human being is in the most literal sense a political animal, not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society'.⁵ As we will clarify below, what is essential about this point is that the alternative between the individual and the collective is rejected: individuation is an unavoidably social process. More fundamentally, it could be argued the core of Marx's critique of political economy, from the early texts on alienation to *Capital*, is the idea that capital exploits not just individuals, but the collective conditions of subjectivity, what Marx referred to as species-being [*Gattungswesen*]. However, for reasons that are more historical than philosophical, Marx considered this generic essence to be first and foremost one of labour, and labour understood specifically as the production of things through the work of the body and hands. Labour is inescapably collective, in part because it encompasses the biological basis of subjectivity; it is related to our common condition of biological necessity. Labour is not simply an anthropological constant, defining man's metabolic relation with nature, however, it encompasses skills, tools, and knowledge that are the products of history and social relations. Labour is mankind's inescapable relation with nature and its constitution of a second, or inorganic nature. Labour constitutes and is constituted by habits, practices, and operational schema that traverse individuals, making up a social relation and a shared reservoir of knowledge. Labour is not just a passively shared condition, that of need, but it actively places us in relation: to work is to work in relation to others. Marx's clearest statement regarding capitalism's exploitation of the collective conditions of subjectivity is in the chapter in *Capital* on cooperation. As Marx argues, when a large number of people are assembled in one place, such as a factory, the sum total of their productive activity exceeds that of the work of the same number of isolated individuals. As Marx writes, 'When the worker co-operates in a planned way with others, he strips off the fetters of his individuality, and develops the capabilities of this species'.⁶ Exploitation is not of the individual, the alienation of what is unique and proper to the individual, but is the appropriation of that which is improper to the individual, and only exists in relation.

Despite the fact that Marx places this exploitation of the collective

5. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, Martin Nicolaus (trans), New York, Penguin, 1973, p84 (Translation Modified).

6. Karl Marx, *Capital*, p447.

conditions of subjectivity at the centre of *Capital*, he does not theoretically develop its conditions. Marx is in many respects quite nominalist regarding the cause of this social surplus, the reason why a group working together is necessarily greater than the sum of its parts. As Marx writes:

Whether the combined working day, in a given case, acquires this increased productivity because it heightens the mechanical force of labour, or extends its sphere of action over a greater space, or contracts the field of production relatively to the scale of production, or at the critical moment sets large masses of labour to work, or excited rivalry between individuals and raises their animal spirits, or impresses on the similar operations carried on by a number of men the stamp of continuity and many-sidedness, or performs different operations simultaneously, or economizes the means of production by use in common ... whichever of these is the cause of the increase, the special productive power of the combined working day, is under all circumstances, the social productive power of labour, or the productive power of social labour. This power arises from cooperation itself. When the worker co-operates in a planned way with others, he strips off the fetters of his individuality, and develops the capabilities of this species [*Gattungsvermögen*].⁷

7. *Ibid.*, p447.

Marx enumerates all of the possible causes, from animal spirits to mass conformity, remaining equally open and equally indifferent to the various causes of cooperation. For Marx it is enough to say that man is a social animal, and leave it at that. Which is not to say that Marx remains completely silent as to the basis of collective existence. In his more speculative or theoretical moments, Marx also refers to the inorganic nature, or body, as the basis of subjectivity. In the first instance, and in keeping with the generic aspect of species being, this inorganic body is nature itself, nature considered in its totality: the animal interacts with a specific part of nature, its ecosystem, while man interacts with nature in its entirety, materially and aesthetically.⁸ In later writings Marx uses the term inorganic body to stress that these preconditions are not simply given, but are produced. The inorganic body of man includes second nature, habits, tools, and structures - everything that functions as the precondition of productive activity. Thus the inorganic body is situated at the point of indistinction between nature and history.⁹ Moreover, these conditions are not just physical in the form of tools and natural conditions but encompass the mental preconditions of production as well. Or, more to the point, every tool is indissociable from habits, ways of acting and comporting oneself. Thus, if an irreducible mental component accompanies all labour, separating 'the worst architect from the best of bees', this mental component is irreducibly collective as well, composed of shared knowledge embodied in habits and practices.¹⁰

8. Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, D. Struik (trans), New York, International, 1964, p112.

9. Franck Fischbach, *La production des hommes: Marx avec Spinoza*, Paris, PUF, 2005, p56.

10. Karl Marx, *Capital*, p284.

In different, but related ways, Balibar and Paolo Virno have suggested the

term transindividuality, to name and conceptualise what Marx designates with such borrowed concepts as ‘species-being’ and the ‘inorganic body’. The term is drawn from the work of Gilbert Simondon, who interrogates the privilege that western thought has ascribed to the principle of individuation.¹¹ For Simondon individuation has to be grasped as a process, in which the individual is neither the ultimate end nor absolute beginning, but a continual effect of an activity. There are multiple and successive individuations, physical, biological, psychic, and collective, each resolving the problems posed by the others, and transforming the fundamental terms of the relation. At the basis of Simondon’s understanding is a fundamental fact of existence, that Marx indicates (and Virno underscores): the very things that form the core and basis of our individuality, our subjectivity, sensations, language, and habits, by definition cannot be unique to us as individuals.¹² These elements can only be described as preindividual, as the preconditions of subjectivity. In some sense they do not even exist, at least as individual things, instead they make up a metastable condition, a flux of possibilities. Virno, following Simondon, outlines three different level of preindividual singularities; the sensations and drives that make up the biological basis of subjectivity, language which constitutes its psychic and collective relations, and the productive relations, which constitute the historical articulation of the preindividual.¹³ The clearest example of what is at stake in designating these different activities and relations as preindividual can be seen by looking at the specific example of language. Language is transindividual; there is, it is often said, no such thing as a private language, but it is also fundamentally preindividual: language is not made up of individual things, words, but of differential relations. Virno follows Saussure in defining language as a system of relations, but stresses that this should be seen as constituting language’s fundamental insubstantiality, its metastability, rather than its structure.¹⁴ Language is not the statement or the system, but the metastable system of relations between the two: every utterance presupposes a system of differences as the condition of its articulation, but every system is constantly being transformed by the utterances that traverse it. Thus, to follow the example of language, preindividual singularities exist as a differentially-articulated set of relations, or possible relations: they are metastable. These preconditions are not simply the raw material of subjectivity; they are not completely transformed into a subject, but persist as unresolved potential along with the subject.¹⁵ There is always more to us than our putative identity as individuals, and it is only because of this that anything like collectivity, like social relations are possible.¹⁶ The two concepts central to Simondon’s ontology, or ontogenesis, preindividual and transindividual, are strictly complementary: it is because the individual is only a process, an individuation of a metastable field of preindividual difference, that it is possible to think of the transindividual as something other than a collection of individuals.

From this perspective it is fundamentally incorrect to posit something

11. Gilbert Simondon, *Individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information*, Paris, Millon, p23.

12. Paolo Virno, ‘The Multitude and the Principle of Individuation’, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 24, 2, 2003: 137.

13. Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, I. Bertoletti, J. Cascaito, and A. Casson (trans), New York, Semiotexte, 2004, p77.

14. Paolo Virno, *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation*, I. Bertoletti, J. Cascaito, and A. Casson (trans), New York, Semiotexte, 2008, p50.

15. In Simondon’s terminology the term ‘subject’ is used to refer to the coexistence of the individual with preindividual singularities and transindividual conditions. Simondon, *Individuation*, op. cit., p310.

16. *Ibid.*, p298.

like 'society' and the 'individual' as two separate entities, the relation of which is a problem. For Simondon transindividuality is not something that stands above the individual; rather it is nothing other than articulation of the individual. Individuals are individuals of the collective, of particular social relations and structures, just as collectives are nothing other than a reflection of the individuals that constitute them. Transindividuality is not the relation between two constituted terms, between the individual and society, but is a relation of relations, encompassing the individual's relation to itself, the process of its psychic individuation, as well as the relation amongst individuals, and the relation between different collectivities.¹⁷ Transindividuality is in many respects an articulation of the preindividual, as the habits, language, affects, and perceptions form the basis of a shared culture. Individuals are individuated in relation to a specific language or cultural backdrop, not language or culture in general.¹⁸ Transindividuality, the common, is, as Virno argues, 'historiconatural': historical because a given language, a given set of habits, or culture is itself the historical and contingent effect of various transformations and developments, but this history does not change the fact that language, habits, productive relations are constitutive of humanity as such.¹⁹ The production of subjectivity, and its corollary concepts such as transindividuality and preindividual, entails not just a rethinking of that antinomy of the individual and the collective, but a new ontology and logic of thinking about the subject. The subject is a 'social individual', not just in the sense that he or she lives within society, but in the sense that individuality can only be articulated, can only be produced, within society.²⁰

FROM TRANSINDIVIDUALITY TO THE COMMON

The transformation of capital can be viewed as an increasing incorporation or subsumption of the production of subjectivity into capital, in terms of both the preindividual conditions and transindividual relations. Capital begins with formal subsumption, with labour power, which is initially taken as is, according to its traditional structure of technological and social development, but as capitalism develops it transforms this basic relation, transforming the habits that link knowledge and work. In place of the organically developed habits, which connect the work of the hand with that of the head, capitalism interjects the combined knowledge of society, externalised in machines and internalised in concepts, habits, and ways of thinking. At this point capital no longer simply exploits labour; extracting its surplus, but fundamentally alters its technical and social conditions, as it subsumes all of society. Subsumption in this case crosses both sides of market relations, encompassing labour, which comes to involve the work of language, the mind, and the affects, and the commodity form. If sensations, language, and habits or knowledge constitute the preindividual backdrop of subjectivity, then it has to be acknowledged that much of what we sense, discuss, and do, comes to us in the form of commodities. It is from this perspective that we can grasp the ontological

17. Muriel Combes, *Simondon, Individu et collectivité: Pour une philosophie du transindividuel*, Paris, PUF, 1999, p46.

18. Bernard Stiegler, *Acting Out*, D. Barison, D. Ross, and P. Crogan (trans), Stanford, Stanford UP, 2009, p5.

19. Paolo Virno, *Multitude*, op. cit., p48.

20. 'In this transformation [the worker] is neither the direct human labour he himself performs, nor the time during which he works, but rather the appropriation of his own general productive power, his understanding of nature and his mastery over it by virtue of his presence as a social body - it is in a word, the development of the social individual which appears as the great foundation-stone of production and of wealth', Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, op. cit., p705.

21. Karl Marx, *Capital*, op. cit., p126.

22. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, op. cit., p92.

23. Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, op. cit., p139.

dimension of the first sentence of *Capital* - 'The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an immense collection of commodities' - by inverting it: whatever appears does so as a commodity.²¹ This transformation of what appears has effects on subjectivity, as Marx reminds us: production not only creates an object for the subject, but a subject for the object.²² Under commodity production, the production of private property, this entails a massive reduction of the sense of an object: 'Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only ours when we have it ...'²³ The real subsumption of subjectivity by capital is articulated by two different productions of subjectivity, each defined by different economic sectors: in terms of production, there is a movement away from work as a solitary enterprise, the labour of a craftsman, whose individual effort organises the labour process, to work that engages the knowledge and desire of humanity in general, while at the same time, on the side of consumption, there is a reduction of the world to what can be possessed, owned, viewed in the comfort of one's home - a massive privatisation of desire.

Real subsumption is an increased exploitation of the transindividual and commodification of the preindividual. This division between production and consumption defines to some extent the paradox of social existence under contemporary capitalism: never have human beings been more social in their existence, but more individualised, privatised, in the apprehension of their existence. On the one hand, the simplest action from making a meal to writing an essay engages the labour of individuals around the world, materialised in commodities, habits, and machines, while on the other, there is a tendency to transform everything, every social relation, into something that can be purchased as a commodity. In the *Grundrisse* Marx offers perhaps the most succinct definition of the paradox of this relation of individual and collective in the early stages of capitalism. As he writes,

Only in the eighteenth century, in 'civil society', do the various forms of social connectedness confront the individual as a mere means towards his private purposes, as external necessity. But the epoch which produces this standpoint, that of the isolated individual, is also precisely that of the hitherto most developed social (from this standpoint, general) relations.²⁴

24. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, op. cit., p223.

Both tendencies have only increased since the eighteenth century, as we have become simultaneously more connected and disconnected. The materialisation of collective intelligence in machines produces new effects of isolation - 'individualizing social actors in their separate automobiles and in front of separate video screens'.²⁵ Transindividual relations, the cooperation of multiple minds, bodies, and machines produce individuated and isolated perceptions.

25. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, Harvard, 2000, p322.

As Bernard Stiegler is quick to point out, one would be incorrect to identify

these technologies, and the habits of isolation and separation they imply, with an ‘individualistic society’. Stiegler utilises Simondon’s conception of transindividuality - understood as a relation constitutive of the individual and of the collective - to make a diagnosis of modern technology that allows for neither.²⁶ The isolation of people watching television, confronting the frustrations of the morning commute, or surfing the internet, is not that of individuals, singular points of difference within a collective, but a serialised repetition of the same. In each case, perception or consciousness is structured by the same object, the television program, roadway design, or search engine, but in such a way that can never form the basis of a ‘we’ of collectivity.²⁷ There is no commonality, no collectivity, constituted by the different individuals watching the same program, the different cars on the same roadway, or the different ‘hits’ to the same website: the other people encountered in such contexts are at best measured quantitatively, having effects only in terms of their number, at worst they are engaged with competitively, as obstacles to my goals and intentions.

From this thumbnail description of the current conjuncture it is possible to specify what is meant by the politics of the production of subjectivity. Politics bears directly on the preindividual and transindividual conditions of subjectivity; it is a matter of their distribution, presentation, and articulation. These conditions make up what could be called ‘the commons’. The commons is a term that has become the focus of a great deal of political and philosophical discussion in recent years. At first glance this might seem odd, since the term initially applied to commonly held pastures and land, conditions that have been all but eradicated in most of the world. However, the commons can also be understood to refer not just to the conditions necessary for supporting material existence, but subjectivity as well.²⁸ What is at stake then in the struggle over the various commons, such as the knowledge commons and the digital commons, is a struggle precisely over the forces and relations which produce subjectivity as much as wealth and value. As we have seen, in capitalism the common is divided, split between labour, which is reified in machines and structures, and consumption, which reduces it to a private object that is passively consumed. The political task must in some sense be one of the actualisation or manifestation of the common. The problem is how to make the common, the transindividual and preindividual conditions of subjectivity, something other than the inchoate backdrop of experience, to make it something actively grasped, so that subjects can transform their conditions rather than simply be formed by them. To butcher a phrase from Hegel, it is necessary to think transindividuality as subject, rather than as substance. It is a matter of bringing the background, the plurality underlying language, sensation, and knowledge, into the foreground: transforming a passive condition into an actual production. The politics of the production of subjectivity is a question of the relation between a subject and the conditions of its production. It is

26. Bernard Stiegler, *La télécratie contre la démocratie*, Paris, Flammarion, 2006, p61.

27. Bernard Stiegler, *Acting Out*, op. cit., p48.

28. Antonio Negri, ‘Kairos, Alma Venus, Multitudo’, in *Time for Revolution*, M. Mandarini (trans), New York, Continuum, 2003, p215.

a matter of producing and transforming the very relations that produce us.

It is possible to interpret this political project as a matter of constituting a collective form of subjectivity against an individualised and isolated existence. This is often the tenor that this struggle takes in Marx; it is a struggle of the two productions of subjectivity: the market, or consumption, which produces not only a world as property, but individuals as possessors or consumers, whose relations are governed according to the fictions of 'freedom, equality, and Bentham'; and the factory, which produces and exploits a transindividual collectivity. While Marx's general argument against the 'egoistic' man of civil society captures something essential about the social ontology underlying political economy and liberal political thought, it lapses into the interminable binary of the individual versus society. Which is to say that it makes it appear as if one could simply choose 'individuality' or 'collectivity' as an ethical value of individualism or solidarity. However, things are not that simple. It is not enough to oppose the collective to the individual, as the good to the bad form of subjectification. First, because as I have argued, ontologically, the individual, the subject, is nothing other than a modification of preindividual conditions and transindividual relations. As Marx argued in the *Grundrisse*, it is necessary to think the 'isolated individual' as social, as the product and condition of a particular society: there is no opposition between the individual and the collective, just different articulations of transindividuality, different productions of subjectivity. There is a second more complex objection to such an opposition: equating the transindividual with the collective, with some ideal of solidarity, assumes that the former can be represented. Marx's early criticism of the state in *The German Ideology* articulated a gap between the conditions productive of subjectivity and the representation of those conditions. The state is an 'illusory communal life' based upon real ties of flesh and blood, language, and the division of labour.²⁹ This rift between the conditions that are productive of subjectivity and the representation of those conditions is grounded on the connection between transindividuality and subjectivity. The relations that make up transindividuality are nothing more than preindividual conditions in a metastable state, a flux that is simultaneously productive and produced. (For example we could say that 'a language', as much as it is the condition for any articulation, any style, is simultaneously being transformed by the various jargons and slang.) Along these lines Simondon makes a distinction between society and community: a society is metastable, criss-crossed by individuations, while a community is closed, static.³⁰ A community makes its specific conditions of belonging, its specific values or norms, the conditions of belonging as such. The representation of transindividuality, in that it makes specific qualities or attributes, a language, cultural practices, or values, stand in for the collectivity as such, closes it, makes it a community and not a society.

If the transindividual cannot be represented, how can it be actualised? Answering such a question entails not only examining the link between

29. Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, C.J. Arthur (trans), New York, International, 1970, p53.

30. Gilbert Simondon, *L'individuation psychique et collective*, Paris, Aubier, 1989, p259.

politics and representation, but also refining the very vocabulary we use to discuss social relations and their materialisation in objects and structures. Virno argues that Simondon's ontology makes possible a redefinition of the fundamental, but often vague and undefined, Marxist concepts of alienation, reification, and fetishisation. As Virno argues:

Reification is what I call the process through which preindividual reality becomes an external thing, a *res* that appears as a manifest phenomenon, a set of public institutions. By alienation I understand the situation in which the preindividual remains an internal component of the subject but one that the subject is unable to command. The preindividual reality that remains implicit, like a presupposition that conditions us but that we are unable to grasp, is alienated.³¹

Virno's argument is in part based on a revalorisation of reification: reification is the externalisation of the preindividual, its articulation into a series of things, structures, and machines. The central point is that the 'thing' in this case bears with it the relation and it is public, or at least potentially so, and thus exposed to the possibility of transformation and rearticulation. Virno's fundamental example, or provocation, remains the 'general intellect', Marx's term for the collective knowledge that is at once internalised in machines and dissipated across social space in the form of knowledges, habits, and ways of acting.³² In this instance the social dimension is inescapable and cannot be eradicated. This is fundamentally distinct from fetishisation in which the qualities and attributes of social existence are attributed to a thing, echoing Marx's classic formula that the social relation between men takes the form of a relation between things. 'Fetishism means assigning to something - for example to money - characteristics that belong to the human mind (sociality, capacity for abstraction and communication, etc.)'.³³ Thus, Virno returns the fetish to Marx's earliest arguments about money, in which 'money is the alienated ability of mankind'.³⁴ Whatever quality or attribute I may lack - intelligence, attractiveness, strength, etc. - can be purchased. Money scrambles the preindividual singularities, the fundamental elements of subjectivity, transforming them into things that can be purchased. Marx's assertion of the 'ontological' power of money intersects with Simondon's notion of ontogenesis. It is thus no accident that Marx's essay on the power of money in bourgeois society ends with a discussion of the individual: the world of money is juxtaposed to that of the irreplaceable individual, in which social qualities can only be exchanged for their similar qualities - if you want to be loved you must be capable of love, and so on. 'Every one of your relations to man and to nature must be a *specific expression*, corresponding to the object of your will, of your *real individual life*'.³⁵

Returning to the paradox of modern existence addressed above, the socialised isolation, or what I referred to as the simultaneous exploitation of

31. Paolo Virno, 'Reading Gilbert Simondon: Transindividuality, Technical Activity, and Reification', *Radical Philosophy*, 136, (March/April 2006): 38.

32. Paolo Virno, *Multitude*, op. cit., p41.

33. Paolo Virno, 'Reading Simondon', op. cit., p40.

34. Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, op. cit., p104.

35. Ibid., p105.

the transindividual and commodification of the preindividual, it is possible to argue that this relation constitutes a new sort of alienation, provided that by alienation we follow Virno in transforming our understanding of what this term means. Alienation, at least in the way that it has been understood as a generic watchword of various versions of Hegelian-Marxism, has been understood as a loss of self, a loss of subjectivity to the object. As such, the concept often uncritically reproduces the very individualistic ontology that Marx's writing is mobilised against. However, as we have already indicated, it is not clear that Marx necessarily understood the concept in this way; alienation is not just loss of object, and control of activity, it is also alienation from species-being [*Gattungswesen*], from mankind's universal nature, what could be referred to as the preindividual and transindividual components of subjectivity. Alienation is not so much the loss of the subject in the object, but the loss of objectivity for the subject, the loss of the relation to its conditions.³⁶ As Virno argues, alienation is a separation from the conditions of the production of subjectivity; it is not a loss of what is most unique and personal but a loss of connection to what is most generic and shared. The commodification of the preindividual is such an alienation due to the fact that the basic components of our subjectivity - language, habits, perceptions - come to us in a prepackaged form, as things which can only be passively consumed. The milieu of our existence, preindividual and transindividual, becomes something we are passively subjected to, something consumed, not something that we can act on or transform, a condition that cannot be conditioned.

36. Franck Fischbach, *La production des hommes*, op. cit., p14.

If alienation best describes the commodification of the preindividual, or vice versa, then what could best describe the exploitation of the transindividual? Answering this question is difficult because it cuts through the distinction that Virno makes between fetishism and reification as two ways of presenting the transindividual. Fetishism and reification both deal with the relationship between sociality and things, things that are not opposed to subjectivity, to the constitution of the individual, but are its condition. With the fetish the thing stands in for the relation; money is nothing other than the concretisation of desires. It is thus able to stand-in for various social attributes and relations. As Marx writes of money, 'The individual carries his social power, as well as his bond with society, in his pocket'.³⁷ While in reification the thing is the relation, the network of machines that constitute the general intellect, which cannot exist apart from the relations. In reification the thing is that which relates rather than standing in for the relation. Virno's generalisation of the problem of fetishisation makes it possible to return to Marx's critique of the state, which is primarily a critique of the representation of collectivity, of sociality itself, through a seemingly extraneous detour: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's reworking of Marx's critique of capital. Deleuze and Guattari, in their inventive reading of Marx, have generalised this critique of the state into an examination of the way

37. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, op. cit., p157.

in which every society represents its historical conditions. In every mode of production, in every production of subjectivity, there is an unproductive element, a representation of the social order itself, what Deleuze and Guattari call a full body, that appropriates the social forces of production. It is an effect that appears as a cause. As Deleuze and Guattari write:

... the forms of social production, like those of desiring production, involve an unengendered non-productive attitude, an element of anti-production coupled with the process, a full body that functions as a *socius*. This socius may be the body of the earth, that of the tyrant, or capital. This is the body that Marx is referring to when he says that it is not the product of labour, but rather appears as its natural or divine presuppositions. In fact, it does not restrict itself merely to opposing productive forces in and of themselves. It falls back on [*il se rabat sur*] all production, constituting a surface over which the forces and agents of production are distributed, thereby appropriating for itself all surplus production and arrogating to itself both the whole and the parts of the process, which now seem to emanate from it as a quasi-cause.³⁸

Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the socius expands upon Marx's idea of the inorganic body; in each case it is a matter of the preconditions of production, the material, intellectual, and social conditions that appear as given. Deleuze and Guattari stress the historical nature of this relation, the inorganic body, the socius, is not just the natural world, but encompasses those conditions of production, institutions, habits, and ways of being that constitute a kind of second nature. The historically produced conditions of production, the technical and social conditions, including the political structure, appear as something given rather than produced, as divine preconditions. This full body constitutes a particular representation of community, based on a condition of belonging: the lines of filiation or descent that determine a clan; custom and tradition that defines a culture: or language and birth that constitutes a nation. Society itself exists as a fetish, or rather it is fetishised to the extent that what is produced from social relations, such as the power of the despot or capital itself, appears to be the cause of production, rather than its effect. As Deleuze writes, 'The natural object of social consciousness or common sense with regard to the recognition of value is the fetish'.³⁹ To speak of society as a thing and not a relation, as something given and not produced, is to be under the sway of fetishism.

In this series of full bodies capital functions as something of an exception. As Marx argues in the *Grundrisse*, capitalism is fundamentally different from all previous modes of production because in it production is not subordinated to the reproduction of a particular mode of existence. Whereas in the previous modes of production, production, the creation of wealth, was always subordinated to reproduction - to the maintenance of particular structures of

38. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, R. Hurley, M. Seem and H. R. Lane, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota, 1983, p10.

39. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, Paul Patton (trans), New York, Columbia, 1994, p208.

authority, particular forms of subjectivity - in capital wealth is subordinated only to itself, to the production of more wealth. As Marx writes: 'In bourgeois economics - and in the epoch of production to which it corresponds - this complete working-out of the human content appears as a complete emptying out, this universal objectification as total alienation, and the tearing down of all limited, one-sided aims as sacrifice of the human end-in-itself to an entirely external end'.⁴⁰ To place this back in the terms of Simondon, the fetish is no longer a particular community, a particular condition of social belonging, but it becomes a society organised around an abstract object, money, or capital itself. As we have seen money is nothing other than the alienation of human potential; it is everything human beings can do, everything human beings can desire, represented in the form of an object, a universal equivalent that is nothing other than the materialisation of this abstract power itself. There is thus a connection between fetishisation and alienation, between the separation from the constitutive conditions, and their projection onto an object. As Marx writes, 'All the powers of labour project themselves as powers of capital, just as all the value-forms of the commodity do as forms of money'.⁴¹ This tendency increases with the real subsumption of society; the more production is distributed across society, the more collective it becomes, the more it appears as if capital itself is productive.

40. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, op. cit., p488.

41. Karl Marx, *Capital*, op. cit., p756.

In order to understand capital it is necessary to retreat to the misty realm of fetishism, but it is also necessary to understand how capital fundamentally transforms this relation - there is a fundamental difference between the fetishisation of the despot and the fetishisation of commodities. In the first instance the object in question represents the productive powers of society: the despot stands as a precondition of the labours of society. In the second, the object does not so much represent these powers, giving them a concrete instance, something to believe in, as operates through them. Money does not represent anything, or rather what it represents is only pure abstract potential; it is the capacity to buy anything, to become anything, social power in the abstract. The axioms of capital refer less to beliefs than to what needs to be done. Deleuze and Guattari express this difference, between the representational and functional full body, as being between code and axioms. Codes set up a relation between actions and desires, actions and perceptions, 'relations between flows', in Deleuze and Guattari's terms. To draw on the social ontology that we have been developing here, we could say that codes are a particular articulation of the preindividual conditions for subjectivity, a particular organisation of the transindividual that delimits a community. What is essential is that these codes, in attaching themselves to a particular full body, ascribe a particular meaning to these practices, situating them within a religion, a nation, a culture, a way of life. Codes can be thought of as tradition, or prescriptions and rules bearing on the production and distribution of goods, prestige, and desire. As such they are inseparable from a particular relation to the past - a relation of repetition. This is fundamentally

distinct from axioms. Axioms have no ‘meaning,’ they set up relations between differential flows, between purely abstract quantities, the most important of which are the flows of money and abstractive subjective potential, otherwise understood as labour power. As Deleuze and Guattari write: ‘*your capital or your labour capacity*, the rest is not important ...’⁴² Axioms do not repeat or venerate the past, but are fundamentally flexible; it is always possible to add new axioms to the system, to open more markets. What is at stake in Deleuze and Guattari’s distinction between codes are two different ways of understanding the constitution of social relations. Codes constitute a meaningful totality, a community, while axioms are functional rather than meaningful, making up a society ruled by abstractions. In each case, codes or axioms, the productive powers of mankind, the transindividual is fetishised, transformed into the attribute of an object. However, there is a fundamental difference: the pre-capitalist object, the full body subject to the domination of a code, is more restrictive, tying the transindividual to a particular condition of belonging - a tradition, a tribe, a nation; while the full body of capital is fundamentally open: the productive power of social relations appears, but appears as the attribute of a paradoxically abstract object, money or capital.

Deleuze and Guattari’s understanding of codes and axioms (and the relational social ontology they imply) brings us close to Marx’s fundamental dialectical point with respect to capitalism: that in capitalism the fundamentally productive power of mankind, of transindividuality, comes close to appearing as such. Capital strips away the illusions that masked exploitation under religious or political guises. As Marx famously wrote in *The Communist Manifesto*:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real condition of life and his relations with his kind.⁴³

Capital, in its ceaseless revolutionising of the conditions of production, exposes the produced nature of sociality as such. In Alain Badiou’s terminology, capital constitutes a desacralisation of the social bond.⁴⁴ Deleuze and Guattari add to this process something that Marx did not grasp in his identification of capitalism with ceaseless modernisation: the production of new territories, new islands and representations of belonging. What once existed as code, as an object of collective belief and evaluation, as a full body, is reborn as a private object. The religions, cultures, and practices of the world are reborn as private objects of consumption: all the world’s cultures and all the world’s

42. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, op. cit., p251.

43. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto in The Marx/Engels Reader*, R. Tucker (ed), New York, W.W. Norton, 1978, p476.

44. Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, N. Madarasz (trans), New York, SUNY, 1992, p56.

beliefs - Buddhism, Native American Spirituality, etc. - can be enjoyed in the privacy of ones own home. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, capitalism is 'a motley painting of everything that has ever been believed'.⁴⁵ These private beliefs are made possible by the fact that society is reproduced and regulated through the axioms of the market and not the codes of culture. In some sense they are not just rendered possible by the market, but necessary as well: one could argue, as Stiegler does, that the loss of a transindividual culture leads to a search for meaning in the private realm, in the artificial territories of various spiritual beliefs and desires. The axioms of the market produce the commodity, which is by definition cut off from, and conceals, its constitutive conditions, masking the labour in its production (this is one aspect of Marx's definition of commodity fetishism). Once they are separated from their different codes, and cultures, there is no contradiction between the different cultures, beliefs, values and ideals occupying the same space of the market. As Peter Sloterdijk illustrates the materialisation of this indifference:

The best prep school for *Capital* - would it not consist in watching television several hours a day, looking through several newspapers and magazines the remaining hours, and continuously listening to the radio? ... We live in a world that brings things into false equations, produces false sameness of form and false sameness of values (pseudoequivalences) between everything and everyone, and thereby also achieves an intellectual disintegration and indifference in which people lose the ability to distinguish correct from false, important from unimportant, productive from destructive - because they are used to taking the one for the other.⁴⁶

The world, or at least the question of its meaning, becomes a private affair, all the while the world is actually governed by abstract and meaningless flows. Deleuze and Guattari's argument is not, however, that subjectivity is entirely produced in the private realm. It is not a matter of subjectivity simply being produced by the commodity, by the fragments of code and desire leftover from every religion and culture: it is the split between these private codes and the axioms of the market that produces and reproduces subjectivity.⁴⁷ The latter cannot be called public, since the axioms of capital are by definition cut off from the general problem of meaning, and thus public contestation and debate, taking on the appearance of 'quasi-natural laws' (another aspect of 'commodity fetishism'), becoming what Virno refers to as 'publicness without public sphere'.⁴⁸ Transindividuality is fetishised, made to appear in the form of the abstract and indifferent quantities of money, which transforms it into an impersonal force. The impersonality of this force, its abstraction from other practices and norms, makes possible the proliferation of a series of private objects, commodified desires. The market cannot be called a 'we', because there is no way to identify with the impersonal force of its structural laws, but nor can the commodity be identified with the 'I', the individual, since it

45. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, op. cit., p34.

46. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, M. Eldred (trans.), Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1988, p314.

47. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, op. cit., p264.

48. Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, op. cit., p40.

remains pre-packaged, inaccessible, and alienating. The things that we buy to consume in the privacy of our home are never properly ours, because they demand first and foremost a subordination to the market as a condition of individuation (a condition that becomes true, or more true, as commodities are the conditions of our image and ideal).⁴⁹

From this perspective we can grasp the full extent of the third of Virno's redefinitions: reification. Transindividuality is reified when it becomes a public thing. Virno's example of this is as we have seen Marx's concept of the 'general intellect', the collective powers of intelligence, distributed across the machines and subjects of social space, which contemporary production depends upon. Like money, or capital, 'the general intellect' embodies the collective powers of society, but it does so in a fundamentally different way, rather than being displaced onto an object, such as money. With the general intellect the collective powers of society are articulated through a series of objects and relations - the machines, knowledge, and habits that make up the productive relations of society. In adopting the term from Marx, Virno has insisted that the general intellect should be understood not just as intelligence incorporated in machines - the steam engines or telegraphs of Marx's day or the computers of ours - but as the generic intelligence embodied in subjectivity, the habits and knowledges that make up the preindividual conditions of subjectivity. Thus, one of the defining characteristics of the general intellect is that the rules and norms which govern collective life are constantly being rewritten and transformed, as new codes, new knowledges, and new styles, are produced, exposing the contingency and artificiality of public existence. This contingency cuts both ways. First, it disengages transindividuality from a fixed object, from a repetition of the past; it becomes a pure differential force. Second, it unmoors human activity from any norm, from any criteria, including that of exchange value. As much as money can be denounced as a fetish, as an alienation of human activity and powers, as a real abstraction, it still imposes an equivalent on the disparate activities and practices: equal must be exchanged for equal. As Marx wrote in *Capital* one of the fundamental riddles of capitalism is how it produces inequality, namely surplus value, in a market in which equal is exchanged for equal. The answer to this riddle is of course labour power, and the division between production and consumption, the market and the factory. Despite this inequality, capital, the capital of formal subsumption, cannot dispense with the image of equality, with the general exchangeability, and commensurability of labour. As the general intellect moves to the front of the production process, and the contingency and groundlessness of rules and operating procedures becomes dominant, the standard of equality disappears. This gives rise to a fundamentally ambivalent situation. As Virno writes:

When the fundamental abilities of the human being (thought, language, self-reflection, the capacity for learning) come to the forefront, the

49. Bernard Stiegler, *La télécratie contre la démocratie*, op. cit., p118.

situation can take on a disquieting and oppressive appearance; or it can even give way to a *non-governmental* public sphere, far from the myths and rituals of sovereignty.⁵⁰

50. Ibid., p40.

This disquieting and oppressive appearance refers first of all to new possibilities of exploitation. The work of real subsumption, work that utilises capacities to think, create and interact, is not isolated in time or space, making exploitation coextensive with existence. Exploitation is no longer organised around the abstract entities of labour and money, but encompasses all of existence. More to the point it refers to a breakdown of both collectivity and individuality, the combination of fetishisation and alienation. The market - what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as the axioms of capital - becomes the new fetish of transindividuality; it is a form of transindividuality, of collectivity, that produces and presupposes alienation. It does not allow for the possibility of constituting an individuation through the collective, it does not exist as a 'we', but only as a series of quasi-natural laws, from which the 'they' emerges as the hostile backdrop of individual actions. Competition is a paradoxical form of individuation in that it produces individuals who are all the more alike in that they see themselves as absolutely opposed to each other, locked into bitter struggle.⁵¹ At the same time, the collective production of norms of knowledge and action makes possible a new politics, one that liberates the collective from the various full bodies that attempt to represent it, what Virno calls a nongovernmental public sphere, but what we have called here 'the common'. The reification of transindividuality, its physical instantiation in practices, machines, and habits, makes possible a new understanding of collectivity, not as an amorphous mass to be represented, but as a multitude that acts and cannot be separated from its acting. This collectivity, this multitude, already exists in the 'hidden abode of production,' in the increasingly socialised and collective forces of labour power, but its activity, and potentiality is more or less invisible, concealed by the fetishisation of peoples and the alienation of individuals.⁵² It is a matter of articulating this common, the unrepresentable transindividual collectivity, against the conditions and practices that conceal it. We see the shine and sparkle of the commodities that we purchase, and we see the economic forces that structure and tear apart our existence, but do not see the social relations, transindividuality, that underlies these commodities and the laws of the economy.⁵³

51. Bernard Stiegler, *Acting Out*, op. cit., p49.

52. Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, op. cit., p24.

53. Massimo De Angelis has underscored the manner in which the capitalist economy, which is centred on competition, must obscure the cooperative relations that are necessary to its very existence. Massimo De Angelis, *The Beginning of History: Value Struggles and Global Capital*, London, Pluto, 207, 64.

The political question is not a matter of looking for 'the subject' capable of transforming the existing political conditions, something that could play the role of the proletariat, the gravedigger of the existing society. Rather, in turning our attention to the production of subjectivity, to the preindividual conditions and transindividual relations that constitute subjectivity, it is possible to recognise the subjections that make up the present, the fetishisation of mankind's abstract transformative potential in the form of money, and the alienation of subjectivity in the commodities that make up our daily

existence. The market constitutes a short circuit of transindividuality, creating individuals as primarily passive consumers of an alienated existence and a public that appears only in the form of a fetishised market. At the same time, however, it is also possible to see in the present conditions of the production of subjectivity lines of liberation, namely the possibility of a public that is no longer constituted around a fetishised full body, of the nation, state, or market, but is open to its own innovation and productive transformation. The production of subjectivity is not simply synonymous with subjection, with the way in which individuals are produced by the system, nor is it a force of eruption, a revolutionary force; rather, it is a method by which the fault lines between subjection and liberation can be traced.