

CRACK CAPITALISM

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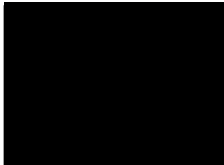
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The cracks are the revolt of one form of doing against another: the revolt of doing against labour.

The focus on cracks carries us back and forth, from elation to despair, from despair to hope and determination, and back again. The breaks clash with the social synthesis and they are absorbed or repressed. We rage against the machine, but we want more than that: we want to break it and we want to create something else.

The tradition of orthodox Marxism tells us that the only way forward is to break the system as a whole, to take state power, dismantle capitalism and construct socialism. But that does not work, has not worked. Our only option is to fight from the particular, but then we clash against the force of the whole. It would be lovely just to forget about the force of the whole, but it is there, a real, crushing force of social synthesis.

We go back and forth between despair and hope. Ping, pong. Are we crazy to rebel or is there some real force in our drive against capitalism? Are we tragic Don Quixotes out of touch with historical reality, or are we the first swallows of a new summer? 'Before a time breaks up and moves on', wrote Ludwig Börne in the early nineteenth century, 'it sends capable and trusted people ahead of it, to suss out the new terrain. If these heralds were allowed to go their way, people would soon learn where time is heading. But that is not done, these precursors are called troublemakers, seducers and fanatics and held back with force.'¹ But how do we would-be heralds of a new age know that we are not crazy troublemakers? Maybe *they* are right. Maybe books like this are sheer nonsense or, worse than that, actually harmful.

This is a practical and urgent dilemma. The cracks exist. Many, many people are devoting their lives to breaking the rules,

to trying to live in a way that does not fit in to the patterns of capitalist social relations. What do we say to them? Do we warn them that they will not go very far because sooner or later the system will prevail, and that the only way forward is to conform or to fight for the overthrow of the capitalist system as a whole? Or do we say to keep on pushing, to make the cracks as big as possible, because the cracks are the crisis of the system, the only way that the system can be overthrown? A frightening question, because people are playing their lives on the answer. Banging one's head against reality can be painful.

To try and find a way forward, we go back to that which we have already emphasised as being the core of the crack: '*a crack is the perfectly ordinary creation of a space or moment in which we assert a different type of doing.*'² We start from two antagonistic types of doing: that which we reject and that which we try to create. The cracks are revolts of one type of doing against another type of doing.

'We shall not do what capital requires, we shall do what we consider necessary or desirable.' That is the essence of a crack in capitalist domination. 'We shall not do *a*, we shall do *b*.' But no: this formalisation is completely wrong. The first option (*a*, what capital requires) is fundamentally different from the second option (*b*, what we consider necessary or desirable). 'Do' in the first case (do what capital requires) is absolutely different from 'do' in the second case (do what we consider necessary or desirable). To *do* something over which we have no control is a completely different experience from *doing* something that we choose to *do*.

We really need two different words for the two forms of doing. In English, we have the word 'labour' to indicate a doing that is unpleasant or subject to external compulsion or determination.³ To find an adequate word for activity that is self-determined or at least pushes towards self-determination is more difficult, so we shall retain 'doing' as a general term to indicate an activity that is not necessarily subject to alien determination, an activity that is potentially self-determining.⁴

The essence of our crack can be rephrased: 'We shall not *labour* under the command of capital, we shall *do* what we

consider necessary or desirable.' The crack is the revolt of doing against labour.

The revolt of doing against labour is the revolt of one form of activity, which we choose, against another form of activity, which we reject. We reject labour because it is unpleasant to do something as the result of external obligation, and also because we can see that it is labour that creates capital, that creates a world of injustice that is destroying humanity. The doing we choose is more agreeable by virtue of the fact that we choose it, and it is also an attempt to stop creating capitalism and create a different world.

The story of the cracks is the story of a doing that does not fit into a world dominated by labour. The cracks are mis-fittings, mis-doings. To say that cracks are quite ordinary rebellions is to say that the misfit is not someone or something that belongs to the margins of society, but is at its very centre. To mis-fit is a central part of everyday experience. We start from there because it is this failure or refusal to fit in to an oppressive society that is the basis for hoping that we can change it. If we look through the eyes of domination or start from the analysis of capital, these misfittings simply do not exist. To put cracks at the centre gives us a different vantage point: we start from that which does not fit in, that which overflows, that which is not contained, that which exists not only in but also against-and-beyond. We start not from the stillness of identity but from the moving of non- or, better, anti-identity. We start dialectically, but not with a dialectic understood as interaction but rather as the negative restlessness of misfitting, of insufficiency.⁵

The pivot, the central fulcrum, in all of this is our doing: human creation. One form of doing, labour, creates capital, the basis of the society that is destroying us. Another form of doing, what we call simply 'doing', pushes against the creation of capital and towards the creation of a different society. In both cases, our doing is at the centre. By focusing on doing, we put our own power at the centre of our understanding of society: our power-to-do (and therefore, our power not to do, and our power to do differently). By focusing on doing, we also state clearly that the argument of this book is not for 'more democracy' but

for a radical reorganisation of our daily activity, without which the call for 'more democracy' means nothing at all.⁶

The insoluble dilemma of our cracks, the back-and-forth between hope and despair, is not composed of external forces but has to do with the organisation of our own practice. We create the society that we want to get rid of. That is terrible, but it is also the source of hope. If we create capitalism, then we can also stop creating it and do something else instead. Hope lies in the dual, self-antagonistic character of human doing.

The abstraction of doing into labour is the weaving of capitalism.

Here we turn to Marx. We must. This is not an apology, but an acknowledgement that some readers (if such there be) may be reluctant to look at Marx. The current wave of struggle against capitalist globalisation has paid relatively little attention to Marxist theory, and much of the writing within the Marxist tradition has become divorced from the movement of struggle. In the argument so far, I have insisted on the importance of starting out from particular struggles – the cracks in capitalist domination – rather than starting out from an analysis of capitalism as a whole, as most work in the Marxist tradition has done. This is not because I reject Marxism but, on the contrary, because I understand Marxism as critique, a solvent, an acid which dissolves the social rigidities that confront us, the apparently unmovable system that we keep on clashing against. In the present stage of the argument, that is exactly what we need, an acid to dissolve the hardness of the social synthesis that repeatedly puts us down. In what follows, I shall suggest that the key to the solvent power of Marxism is the dual nature of doing.

The ‘two-fold nature of labour’ (as he called it) was central to Marx’s critique of capitalism. At the beginning of the second section of the first chapter of Volume I of *Capital*, he states quite clearly: ‘This point [the two-fold nature of the labour contained in commodities] is the pivot on which a clear comprehension of Political Economy turns’ (1867/1965: 41; 1867/1990: 132).¹ After the publication of the first volume, he wrote to Engels (Marx, 1867/1987: 407): ‘The best points in my book are: 1) the two-fold character of labour, according to whether it is expressed as use value or exchange value. (*All* understanding of the facts depends upon *this*. It is emphasised immediately in the *first* chapter).’² Despite the force and prominence that Marx gave to

this point, it has remained almost unmentioned in the Marxist tradition (so that to insist on its importance is inevitably to propose a re-reading of Marx).

Marx introduces the idea of the dual nature of labour in his youthful work, the 1844 *Philosophical and Economic Manuscripts*. One of the most famous (and important) passages in his writings is the section there on Estranged Labour. In order to understand the 'intrinsic connection' (1844/1975b: 271) between the phenomena of capitalist society, Marx turns to labour as it exists in capitalist society, which he characterises as alienated or estranged labour: 'The object which labour produces – labour's product – confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer' (ibid.: 274). This alienation is not just the end result of labour but inherent in the process of labour itself:

But the estrangement is manifested not only in the result but in the act of production, within the producing activity itself. How could the worker come to face the product of his activity as a stranger, were it not that in the very act of production he was estranging himself from himself? ... If then the product of labour is alienation, production itself must be active alienation, the alienation of activity, the activity of alienation. (1844/1975b: 274)

Labour, as alienated labour, is a separating of ourselves from ourselves, a tearing asunder of ourselves and our activity.

It is through our alienated labour that we produce our master. Marx says of the worker who performs alienated labour:

Just as he creates his own production as the loss of his reality, as his punishment; his own product as a loss, as a product not belonging to him; so he creates the domination of the person who does not produce over the production and over the product. Just as he estranges his own activity from himself, so he confers upon the stranger an activity which is not his own ... The relationship of the worker to labour creates the relation to it of the capitalist (or whatever one chooses to call the master of labour). (1844/1975b: 279)

The worker produces the master, not by just any form of activity, but by performing alienated or estranged labour.

Marx focuses on alienated labour, but the very concept implies a contrast with non-alienated labour (or, as we might say, non-alienated doing). Marx does not use the term 'non-alienated' labour or 'non-alienated' doing, but he does speak of alienation as the alienation of man's conscious life-activity:

Free, conscious activity is man's species-character ... Conscious life-activity distinguishes man immediately from animal life activity ... Admittedly animals also produce. They build themselves nests, dwellings, like the bees, beavers, ants, etc. But an animal only produces what it immediately needs for itself or its young. It produces one-sidedly, whilst man produces universally. It produces only under the dominion of immediate physical need, whilst man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom ... It is just in his work upon the objective world, therefore, that man really proves himself to be a species-being. This production is his active species-life ... In tearing away from man the object of his production, therefore, estranged labour tears from him his species-life, his real objectivity as a member of the species, and transforms his advantage over animals into the disadvantage that his organic body, nature, is taken away from him. (1844/1975b: 276-7)

Marx does not dwell on conscious life-activity: it is the other side, the dark side of the moon, the inevitable reference point of the concept of alienated labour, but a reference point that has rather a shadowy existence, as the lost truth of humanity, as potential future, as present struggle. It is alienated labour that is in the foreground. Labour (alienated labour) is what we reject: it is an activity that we do not control, an activity that produces the master, that produces capital. (Alienated) labour is the enemy: we do not want to labour. But in the background there is another possibility (potential, dream?): to engage in free, conscious activity, conscious life-activity. There is not just a contrast but an antagonism here: between alienated labour and conscious life-activity.

Marx does not discuss the present status of conscious life-activity.³ Alienated labour is clearly visible as the present reality of capitalist society, but what exactly is the status of conscious life-activity: is it potential future (life in communism) or present struggle? Certainly the doing-against-labour that is

characteristic of our cracks *aspires to* become conscious life-activity: a life-activity that overcomes the distinction between labour and non-labour and pushes in the direction of conscious determination.

In *Capital*, Marx no longer speaks of alienated labour and conscious life-activity, but, as we have seen, he does place the 'two-fold nature of labour' at the very centre of his critique of political economy. The 'two-fold nature of labour' refers to the distinction between useful or concrete labour and abstract labour.

Useful (or concrete) labour produces use-values, things that are useful. Useful labour is inseparable from its specific qualities:

The coat is a use-value that satisfies a particular want. Its existence is the result of a special sort of productive activity, the nature of which is determined by its aim, mode of operation, subject, means and result. The labour whose utility is thus represented by the value in use of its product, or which manifests itself by making its product a use-value, we call useful labour. (1867/1965: 41; 1867/1990: 132)

Useful labour is 'productive activity of a definite kind and exercised with a definite aim' (1867/1965: 42; 1867/1990: 133). This type of labour 'is a necessary condition, independent of all forms of society, for the existence of the human race; it is an eternal nature-imposed necessity, without which there can be no material exchanges between man and Nature, and therefore no life' (1867/1965: 42–3; 1867/1990: 133). Later, when speaking of the labour process (the process of useful labour), Marx says, more accurately:

The labour-process ... is human action with a view to the production of use-values, appropriation of natural substances to human requirements; it is the necessary condition for effecting exchange of matter between man and Nature, it is the everlasting Nature-imposed condition of human existence, and is therefore independent of every social phase of that existence, or rather, is common to every social phase. (1867/1965: 183–4; 1867/1990: 290)

This self-correction is very important. If useful or concrete labour were *independent* of every social phase, this would imply a trans-historical concept, the idea that useful labour is something that can be studied independently of its historical forms. If, on the other hand, useful or concrete labour is *common* to all social phases, this implies a *historical* concept, that is, the idea that useful labour changes in each historical epoch and can only be understood in its historical context. While some sort of useful labour or productive activity is necessary in any society, it takes different forms in different societies: it does not stand outside the different social phases.

In a capitalist society, products are not produced simply as use-values: they are produced as commodities, that is, they are produced for exchange. What interests the producer is not the utility (or use-value) of the product but its exchangeability or value. The tailor produces a coat not because he wants to wear it but because he wants to exchange it. The weaver produces linen not because he wants to use it but because he too wants to exchange it. In the process of exchange between coat and linen, two qualitatively different concrete, useful labours are brought into contact and a proportional measure established between them, so that 1 coat = 20 yards of linen (say). What is measured in the equation is not a qualitative relation between two different types of activity but a quantitative relation between two labours considered *in abstraction from* their specific qualities. From the point of view of the exchange, that is, from the point of view of value, the only thing that matters about labour is its quantity, not its quality or particular characteristics. The labour that produces value is not useful, concrete labour, but abstract labour, labour seen in abstraction from its concrete characteristics. The commodity can no

... longer be regarded as the product of the labour of the joiner, the mason, the spinner, or of any other definite kind of productive labour. Along with the useful qualities of the products themselves, we put out of sight both the useful character of the various kinds of labour embodied in them, and the concrete forms of that labour; there is nothing left but what is common to them all; all are reduced to one and the same sort of labour, human labour in the abstract ... The labour ... that forms the substance of

value is homogeneous labour, expenditure of one uniform labour-power.
(1867/1965: 38–9; 1867/1990: 128–32)

This is 'an abstraction which is made every day in the social process of production' (1859/1971: 129).

Useful or concrete labour exists, then, in any society. In capitalist society (or more generally, commodity-producing society), it acquires a specific social form, the form of abstract labour.⁴ Useful labour continues to exist, but in relation to other labours it counts only quantitatively, as a certain quantity of labour abstracted from its specific qualities. When commodities exchange, what matters is the quantitative relation between them (measured normally by the amount of money I get for the coat I have made). This quantitative relation is determined by the amount of labour required to produce the commodity concerned: not just the amount of time that I actually spent on it, but the amount of labour time socially necessary to produce the commodity. The quantity of the value of the commodity is determined by the socially necessary labour time required to produce it: socially necessary labour time establishes the *measure* by which the different labours are compared. The worker may work with love and care and true dedication to her craft, but if the article produced does not sell (or does not sell at a price that secures the survival of the worker), she will have to change her relation to her work and produce what will sell and at a rhythm and in a way that will secure her own reproduction. The imposition through the market of the socially necessary labour time required to produce a commodity is at the same time the abstraction of labour, the separating of the worker from her process of production. The process of exchange (the operation of the market) imposes an abstraction which rebounds upon the way in which the concrete labour is performed.

I bake a cake. I enjoy baking it, I enjoy eating it, I enjoy sharing it with my friends and am proud of the cake I have made. Then I decide that I will try to make a living by baking cakes. I bake cakes and sell them on the market. Gradually, the cake becomes a means to gaining an income sufficient to allow me to live. I have to produce the cake at a certain speed and in a certain way so that I can keep the price low enough to sell it. Enjoyment is no

longer part of the process. After a while, I realise that I am not earning enough money and think that, since the cake-making is in any case merely a means to an end, a way of earning money, I might as well make something else that will sell better. My doing has become completely indifferent to its content, there has been a complete abstraction from its concrete characteristics. The object I produce is now so completely alienated from me that I do not care whether it is a cake or a rat poison, as long as it sells.

This example can be discussed in terms either of alienation or abstraction. My doing (baking) is alienated or abstracted, and this alienation or abstraction converts it into labour: doing is alienated or abstracted into labour. Essentially, then, the abstraction of labour discussed in *Capital* is the alienation of labour discussed in the 1844 *Manuscripts*.⁵ All the characteristics of alienated labour – the fact that ‘the worker is related to the product of his labour as to an alien object’ (1844/1975: 272), the ‘relation of the worker to his own activity as an alien activity not belonging to him’ (ibid.: 275), the estrangement of the worker from his own species-being (that which makes him human), his estrangement from the other workers, and so on – all of these recur in Marx’s critique of abstract labour in *Capital*. The argument of *Capital* rests on the same distinction between humans and animals which is so central to the 1844 *Manuscripts*. It is purposive doing that distinguishes us from animals: ‘a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality’ (1867/1965: 178; 1867/1990: 284). Capitalism robs us of the unity of project and performance, purpose and doing: it robs us, therefore, of our distinctive humanity.⁶

And yet there is an importance in the shift from alienated to abstract labour. The notion of abstract labour confronts us more directly with the question that is central for us: the relation between the quality of what we do and its integration into the social context. Alienation tends to focus our attention on the experience itself, whereas abstraction draws our attention also to the social character of the labour: it takes us to the question of social cohesion.

The quality of our doing is intimately related to its social character. Abstraction is not external to the activity itself. The way in which our particular activity is brought into relation with other activities rebounds upon our activity, shaping it to its core. We have seen this in the example of the cake: here, there is a gradual process of abstraction, a gradual transformation of the pleasurable activity of baking into a labour totally indifferent to its content, an activity shaped by the pursuit of money. This is not a moral issue but a question of value and socially necessary labour time. In order to sell my cake, I must be able to produce it as fast and efficiently as other cake-makers: if I do not, I will be forced (by my own necessity to survive) to charge more than other bakers for cakes of the same quality, and my potential clients will buy their cakes elsewhere. The fact that I am producing for the market forces me to produce in a certain way. The abstraction is an abstraction of the activity itself, a process by which I become indifferent to the content of my own activity. The abstraction is not just an exchange-abstraction but a real abstraction. The relation between the abstraction implicit in exchange and the transformation of the activity itself into abstract labour is not a completely automatic process (think of cooperatives, for example, that struggle to transform their labour processes even while producing for the market), but it certainly exists as a strong tendency or pressure.

I make some cakes, sell them and with the money I buy a coat. My activity as a cake-baker and the activity of the tailor who makes the coat are brought together, but they are brought together through a process of abstraction, through the negation of the particular characteristics of baking and tailoring. This is an abstraction mediated through money, which is totally blind to the niceties of baking and tailoring. And so on, and on, and on. We are talking here not just of the relation between the baker and the tailor, but of the way in which the activities of all people are brought into relation with one another, and therefore the way in which those activities themselves are shaped. What makes it so difficult to punch a hole in capitalism is the way in which our activities (our lives) are woven together. This weaving is achieved not through the state (as appears to be the case) but through the abstraction of labour (the state is no more than a

sort of protective coating that gives extra cement to the weave of abstraction). This is the way in which the totality of social relations is formed: the social synthesis is formed through the abstraction of doing into labour.

Abstraction is the peculiarly capitalist weaving of social relations, the peculiarly capitalist weaving of the particular into the totality. It is a process that nobody controls. It is the fact that nobody controls it that makes it absolutely essential to break it: not only is it the negation of human self-determination, but it is also clear that its dynamic is leading us towards human self-annihilation. At the same time, it is the fact that nobody controls it that makes it so difficult to break, for it confronts us as a seamless web. This totality of social relations woven by the performance of abstract labour is the social synthesis that constantly confronts our cracks, the synthesis that constantly pulls us back into conformity in practice, back into the reproduction of the system that we want to break.

And yet, it is our doing, our creativity that is at the centre. It is abstract labour that constitutes the totality of social relations. We could say that it is exchange that binds all our activities together, or value, or money, and all of these formulations would be correct. And yet Marx is right in insisting that it is the dual character of labour that is the 'pivot' of understanding. It is the pivot quite simply because *we* are the pivot. Our activity is the 'intrinsic connection' (Marx 1844/1975: 271) between the phenomena of capitalist society. It is by our activity that we humans create the society we live in, so it is important to understand the society and its potential in terms of our creative activity and its organisation, and not just in terms of the social relations we have created (value, money, capital, and so on): to go beyond value theory to a theory of that which creates value – abstract labour. This is what Marx calls critique *ad hominem* – a critique that brings all phenomena back to the human subject, to the way in which human activity is organised. If we make it, we can break it.⁷

Going to the root of things and understanding that root as our own activity is crucial. Think back to the previous discussion of the force of value and the way in which it imposes the social synthesis upon us (thesis 9, 4). That section was very

depressing to write and should be depressing to read because we feel that there is no way out. It is when we open up value and ask what it is that produces value and see that it is our own activity, our abstract labour, then the skies begin to open, we begin to see a way forward, simply because it is not a thing (value), but our own activity that is at the centre. There is a world of difference, then, between an analysis that takes value as its pivot and one (such as this) that places the dual character of labour in its centre.

And yet. Analysing everything in terms of human action gives us a sense of our power to create a different world, but it does not (yet) free us. The abstract labour that we perform is real: it really creates a society that holds us entrapped, a social synthesis or totality of social relations that has such a cohesive force that it appears to run automatically, to operate according to the 'laws of capitalist development'. The abstract quality of capitalist labour means that the social interconnections are formed beyond any form of social control. The social synthesis or totality acquires an autonomy of its own and stands against us as an alien force: its uncontrolled and uncontrollable character expresses itself most visibly in the constant and frenetic movement of money, the medium through which the total social character of capital expresses itself. The existence of a social totality in this sense, as a cohesive law-bound force independent of any conscious human direction, is peculiar to capitalism.⁸ We create this totality, we weave the web that holds us prisoner; to understand this helps us to see that we can stop weaving the web and do something else, but the totality retains its force: the web is still there.

Let us repeat the argument: we create the society that holds us entrapped. In capitalism, we do so because the way in which our activities are bound together, through exchange, imposes certain ways of behaving upon us that neither we nor anyone else controls. The way in which our activities are bound together gives us an illusion of freedom, but in fact our activities weave a web (what we have called a 'social cohesion' or a 'social synthesis') that is controlled by nobody, ruled by the necessity to produce things as efficiently as possible, in the socially necessary labour time. That is what Marx refers to when he speaks of

abstract labour (which, it should be quite clear, has nothing to do with the concept of mental labour or immaterial labour).

But there is more to our activity than the creation of this social synthesis: we also act in ways that do not conform, that rebel, that misfit, that clash with the social synthesis. Our doing is not totally subsumed into abstract labour. At times, it seems that there is nothing more in life than the abstract labour of capitalism, but we know that it is not so, and all that we have discussed in relation to the cracks tells us that it is not so. Marx insists on the *two-fold* nature of labour, not just on abstract labour.⁹

The crucial question which we must explore in the rest of this book is the relationship between the two aspects of labour, between abstract labour and what we have called *doing*, for want of a better word. The young Marx refers to a contrast between alienated labour and conscious life-activity. This contrast can be understood in various ways: conscious life-activity can be understood as past (a lost paradise) or as future (communist activity). Neither of these interpretations is sufficient: the very concept of alienation would make no sense unless we had present experience of something that pointed beyond alienation. In other words, conscious life-activity must refer in some way to present experience. The contrast between alienated labour and conscious life-activity is a living antagonism. In relation to the present, however, the life-activity cannot be fully conscious, because we do not control our life-activity in capitalist society: it is rather an aspiration to conscious life-activity that clashes with the contrary movement, the alienation that deprives our activity of conscious determination. The antagonism expressed by the young Marx, so understood, can be seen as the clash between the push for self-determination and the social synthesis, which we have seen to be typical of the cracks.

In *Capital*, we take a step forward with the move from alienated to abstract labour. Here it becomes clear that abstract labour is the constitution of the social synthesis, that abstraction is simultaneously an alienation of our activity and the constitution of the social nexus, the weaving of capitalist society. The other side, however, is less forcefully formulated than the 'conscious life-activity' of the young Marx. He refers to

it now as 'useful or concrete labour'. This labour is 'common to every social phase of human existence', an 'everlasting Nature-imposed condition of human existence'. This confronts us immediately with a terminological problem, simply because we know that labour, as a distinct activity separate from other life-activities, is not characteristic of all societies. Labour, as a distinct activity, is in fact constituted by the abstraction typical of capitalism. If then, we want to maintain the notion of a human activity that is common to all forms of human existence, we must adopt a more general term, such as *doing*. The term 'useful' also comes up against similar problems, because the clear distinction between useful and non-useful activities is also characteristic of the instrumental reason typical of capitalism. It seems preferable, then, to think of Marx's two-fold nature of labour as consisting of a contrast between abstract labour and *concrete doing*. Concrete doing, then, is an activity that is common to all phases of human existence, but exists in different forms in different phases. In capitalist society, concrete doing exists in the form of abstract labour.

The central issue is not the terms we use, but the distinction between the two aspects of human activity and the relationship between them. The argument to be developed here is that the relation between the two aspects of labour (or doing) is one of non-identity, of misfitting, of living antagonism: there is a constant living antagonism between abstract labour and concrete doing. This point is central to the argument of this book and goes against the overwhelming weight of tradition, which, as we shall see later, regards this relation as unproblematic. The point rests, on the one hand, on the experience of the constant revolt of human activity against the constraints of abstract labour, the constant tension between our power-to-do and the way in which that power is moulded through the dominion of value (the rule of socially necessary labour time). On the other hand, it rests on an understanding of the dialectic relation between form and content, in Marx and in life. To say that something exists in the form of something else means that it exists in that form but is not contained in it without remainder: it overflows from the form, or exists in-against-and-beyond the form. To assume that concrete doing exists simply in the form of abstract labour

is both to deny that dialectical relation and to close our eyes to the antagonism of everyday experience.

We can express this in other words by saying that the relation between concrete doing and abstract labour is ecstatic.¹⁰ Concrete doing is the ecstasy of abstract labour: ecstasy as ek-stasis, standing outside abstract labour while existing within it, standing outside as actual and potential otherness. I am a teacher and produce labour powers for sale on the market, but at the same time I encourage my students to think critically about society. I am a nurse in a private hospital and produce profits for my employers, but at the same time I try to help my patients through some of the most difficult moments of their lives. I work on an assembly line in a car factory and every few seconds that I have free, my fingers are busy practising the chords that I'll be playing on my guitar tonight in the band. I work on a sewing machine making jeans, but my mind is somewhere else, building a new room for myself and my children. I am a student working hard to get good grades in my exams, but I want to find a way of turning my studies against capitalism and towards the creation of a better world. In all these cases, there is a standing outside capitalist labour, a projection against and beyond my entrapment within abstract labour. There is a concrete doing that exists in-against-and-beyond, that exists in ecstatic relation to abstract labour, that already pushes beyond abstract labour, both as project and as actual practice. This ecstatic relation is a matter of everyday experience, not the invention of left-wing intellectuals, not the privileged experience of dedicated militants. It is from this standing-out-beyond (this ek-stasis) that another world will be born, or it will not be born at all.¹¹ This ecstatic space is the space of dignity, the substance of the cracks.¹²

In what follows, we shall focus first on the meaning of abstract labour, that which weaves the social cohesion that holds us entrapped, before turning to the other side.

The abstraction of doing into labour is a historical process of transformation that created the social synthesis of capitalism: primitive accumulation.

Labour did not always exist. It is not in every society that a specific activity considered to be 'labour' is set aside from the general doing of people. Certainly, some sort of activity is required to provide food and the other basic requirements of life, but this is not necessarily an activity regarded as onerous or separated in time from other activities. Thus, Marshal Sahlins, in his *Stone Age Economics*, writes of 'that characteristic palaeolithic rhythm of a day or two on, a day or two off – the latter passed desultorily in camp. Although food collecting is the primary productive activity ... "the majority of the people's time (four to five days per week) is spent in other pursuits, such as resting in camp or visiting other camps (Lee 1969: 74)"' (Sahlins 2004: 23). He also quotes a nineteenth-century observer of the indigenous people of Australia: "'In all ordinary seasons ... they can obtain in two or three hours a sufficient supply of food for the day, but their usual custom is to roam indolently from spot to spot, lazily collecting it as they wander along (Grey 1841, vol. 2: 263).'" In such a society, there is clearly no separation between labour and leisure, which means that neither exists. In pre-capitalist societies, the activities required for social reproduction did not harden into something called *labour*, nor did they occupy the same amount of time. In fifteenth-century France, one out of every four days of the year was an official holiday of some sort, and Ehrenreich comments that 'despite the reputation of what are commonly called "the Middle Ages" as a time of misery and fear, the period from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century can be seen – at least in comparison to the puritanical times that

followed – as one long outdoor party, punctured by bouts of hard labour’ (2007: 92). The Krisis Gruppe argue:

The working hours of a modern white-collar or factory ‘employee’ are longer than the annual or daily time spent on social reproduction by any pre-capitalist or non-capitalist civilisation inside or outside Europe. Such traditional production was not devoted to efficiency, but was characterised by a culture of leisure and relative ‘slowness’. Apart from natural disasters, those societies were able to provide for the basic material needs of their members, in fact even better than has been the case for long periods of modern history or is the case in the horror slums of the present world crisis. (1999/2004: 24, s.9)¹

In pre-capitalist societies, social relations are woven in a different way. People’s activities are brought together socially on the basis of the quality of the specific concrete characteristics of the activities performed, not on the basis of abstracting from those specificities. If one thinks of a simple communal society, for example, there is a socialisation of activities. Tasks are distributed, people do things for the benefit of others, but the principle of sociality is the particular skills of the carpenter or the smith or the cook: ‘In this case the social character of labour is evidently not effected by the labour of the individual assuming the abstract form of universal labour or his product assuming the form of a universal equivalent’ (Marx, 1859/1971: 33–4). The same is true of a feudal society or a society based on slavery: the distribution of tasks is hierarchical but based on the particular qualities of the activity undertaken.

Labour and the abstract sociality of labour is not given by nature. It is the result of a historical process, involving the monetisation of social relations and the spread of the market that at times took place without open conflict,² but that was at its core a bloody and even genocidal process.³ As Marx put it, capital came into the world ‘dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt’ (1867/1965: 760; 1867/1990: 926).

The process is described by Marx at the end of the first volume of *Capital*, in his analysis of primitive or original accumulation, where he talks of the origins of capitalism. The essence of the transition from feudalism to capitalism is a movement of

separation. Through the process of enclosure of land, people are separated from the means of survival (of producing and consuming). They are torn from the old, feudal forms of socialisation, in which they produced for and depended on a very limited number of people, and forced into a new form of socialisation in which they depended directly or indirectly on the market for their survival. Often this process of separation of people from the land was accomplished with great brutality, although sometimes it was the result of serfs fleeing from the feudal community: serfs fled from the lords just as lords expelled the serfs – both fled from the old form of social relations. Either way, the result was the interstitial creation and expansion of a new form of socialisation in which people related to one another through the market, through the exchange of commodities.

This meant the transformation of people's activity, the abstraction of doing into labour. The separation of people from the land was simultaneously the separation of labour from other forms of doing, the learning of a new form of activity called 'labour'. This was not an easy matter: 'The imposition to waste the most of one's lifetime under abstract systemic orders was not always as internalised as today. Rather, it took several centuries of brute force and violence on a large scale to literally torture people into the unconditional service of the labour idol' (Krisis Gruppe 1999/2004: 21, s.9). The closing of the commons, the abolition of traditional rights of hunting, fishing and wood gathering, the series of laws against vagrancy, the poor law and the creation of the workhouses, the armed suppression of one revolt after another: these were the steps that created a society based on labour, this was the reality of the abstraction involved in the creation of abstract labour. The enclosure of land was also an enclosure of bodies in the factories, the creation of a prison of labour.

The imposition of labour often involved the elimination of whole populations. Néstor López (2006) mentions the example of the Yámana, the original inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego, who had lived there, fishing and hunting, for ten thousand years before the arrival of the Europeans. The Europeans killed the seals which had been the main staple of the Yámana diet and put sheep on the land, now defined as private property. Many of the

Yámana were killed simply because they stood in the way of this development, others were turned into labourers. That they were not very good at 'labour' is suggested, however, by this report:

The Yámana are not capable of continuous, daily hard labour, much to the chagrin of European farmers and employers for whom they often work. Their work is more a matter of fits and starts, and in these occasional efforts they can develop considerable energy for a certain time. After that, however, they show a desire for an incalculably long rest period during which they lie about doing nothing, without showing great fatigue ... It is obvious that repeated irregularities of this kind make the European employer despair, but the Indian cannot help it. It is his natural disposition. (Gusinde 1961: 27, quoted in Sahlins 2004: 28)

By the second half of the twentieth century, the Yámana were completely extinct, a whole people wiped out by the violence of labour.

In general, the imposition of labour took the form of the imposition of wage labour. The serfs who were driven from the land found that the only way that they could survive was by selling things on the market, but very often the only thing they had to sell was their own capacity to perform labour. They integrated themselves into the market not by selling coats or linen but their own labour power, to those with sufficient money to buy it. They became the workers employed by the new capitalists. This put them under the direct command of their new employer: they were compelled to obey the orders of the capitalist. What liberal theory hails as the liberation of the serfs was a change in the nature of their servitude: from being serfs under the dominion of their lord, they became workers under the dominion of the capitalist. It is true that they could change from one capitalist to another, but it was (and is) difficult for most people to survive for long without selling their labour power. Historically, this meant the imposition – through centuries of capitalist struggle, the enactment of legislation regulating labour, the use of police violence, the support of religion and education, the use of ever more sophisticated management techniques – of a new discipline in the workplace, the creation of labour as a social habit. The former serfs learnt to labour.

Labour was imposed through the expansion of wage labour.⁴ This is important because it makes clear that what is at issue is not just the shaping of people's activities but the whole structure of socialisation. When I sell my labour power to the capitalist, my labour power becomes a commodity. But this carries in its wake a radical commodification of all aspects of social relations. I no longer have the time (nor the means) to grow my own food or make my own clothes, so the only way I can acquire them is by buying them with money from someone who specialises in producing and selling food. It is when labour power becomes a commodity and capitalist production is born that there is a general commodification of social relations. Everything in society tends to be transformed into a commodity and the connection between the different processes of work is a purely quantitative connection, measured in money. The connection is established through abstracting from the particularities of each activity. The transformation of our doing into labour is at the centre of a new complex of socialisation.

The fact that labour was imposed through the wage relation is also extremely deceptive, in various ways. Most important for our argument, it has created the illusion within the anti-capitalist tradition that the problem with capitalism is the wage relation rather than labour itself. As the Krisis Gruppe put it, 'It was not labour that was regarded as a scandal, but its exploitation by capital' (1999/2004: 16, s.6). In the classic communist tradition, the revolutionary struggle came to be seen as the struggle for the abolition of the wage relation, but not as the struggle for the abolition of labour. Quite the contrary (as we shall see in more detail), the struggle came to be seen as the struggle *of* labour against capital, whereas our argument here is just the opposite: the creation of labour and the creation of capital are the same process,⁵ and the struggle against capital is the struggle against that which produces it, the struggle against labour.

Labour creates capital and it creates capitalism, a world structured on labour. Labour is cruel and dehumanising, the very opposite of that conscious life-activity which is potentially the basis of our humanity, but it is more than that. Labour is a spider that weaves an intricate web of social relations. As we perform labour, we weave a complex prison for ourselves.

This is what makes it so difficult to simply walk away from capital, to *serve no more* and let the tyrant topple. The term 'abstract' reminds us of that. The labour that we perform in the factory, in the office, in the university, is not just drudgery: it is a web-weaving activity, a process of self-entrapment. But the term *abstract* labour also reminds us of something else: that it is just one face of the dual character of doing, and that the other face still awaits us in the shadows. In what follows, we shall look at the web of abstract labour before turning to the dark, to ourselves. In looking at the different faces of the domination of abstract labour, it is important to bear in mind that there is another side, one that is gathering strength.