

# CRACK CAPITALISM

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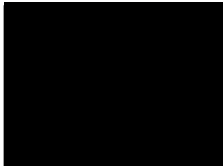
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## The abstraction of doing into labour is the constitution of nature as object.

The driving of people from the land laid the basis for the creation of a proletariat cut off from the means of production and survival, and with it for the generalisation of abstract labour and the rise of capitalism. At the core of Marx's discussion of primitive accumulation is the 'forcible driving of the peasantry from the land' and 'the usurpation of the common lands', starting in the last third of the fifteenth century (1867/1965: 718; 1867/1990: 878).<sup>1</sup> This was (and is) a violent process. Marx cites the infamous Highland clearances in Scotland:

As an example of the method obtaining in the nineteenth century, the 'clearing' made by the Duchess of Sutherland will suffice here. This person, well instructed in economy, resolved, on entering upon her government, to effect a radical cure, and to turn the whole country, whose population had already been, by earlier processes of the like kind, reduced to 15,000, into a sheep-walk. From 1814 to 1820 these 15,000 inhabitants, about 3,000 families, were systematically hunted and rooted out. All their villages were destroyed and burnt, all their fields turned into pasturage. (1867/1965: 731; 1867/1990: 891)

We now, possibly city dwellers for generations, read this and we are shocked. 'Poor people, how they suffered', we think, and we do not understand. We do not understand that the 'poor people' are we.

The tearing of people from the land is perhaps the original and irredeemable sin of capitalism. It is a tearing asunder, a violent separation of humans from the natural conditions of their existence: 'Man *lives* on nature – means that nature is his *body*, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die. That man's physical and spiritual life is linked to

nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature.<sup>2</sup> The constant interchange, or metabolic relation, between humans and nature is central to human existence. When Marx speaks of useful labour (the labour process as opposed to the valorisation process), he says that 'labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature' (Marx 1867/1990: 283).<sup>3</sup> The interaction with nature is a central aspect of human doing.

In pre-capitalist societies, the relation to the living and non-living world around us was generally based on the idea that it was important to maintain some sort of equilibrium. Before cutting down a tree, the woodcutter might ask it for forgiveness: absurd though it may seem to us, this was a recognition of the interdependence of the different forms of life on this planet. Often this relation was understood in magical or religious terms: 'At the basis of magic was an animate conception of nature that did not admit to any separation between matter and spirit and this imagined the cosmos as a living organism, populated by occult forces, where every element was in "sympathetic" relation with the rest' (Federici 2004: 142). These were certainly enchanted, fetishised forms of thought which interposed gods, goddesses and other spirits as mediators in the relation between humans and the non-human world (and an integral part of the patterns of domination in those societies). Nevertheless, these magical or religious forms gave anchorage to a certain equilibrium between humans and the surrounding world. Human doing, before the rise of capitalist labour, was generally based in a respect for this equilibrium.

The driving of people from the land is the forceful separation of humans from their natural surroundings, the breaking of the equilibrium necessary for human survival. This is the creation of what Marx referred to as the 'metabolic rift'<sup>4</sup> between humans and the nature of which we are part, the metabolic rift that now so obviously threatens the very existence of humanity.<sup>5</sup> This rift is inseparable from the abstraction of doing into labour: the former peasants, driven from their land, have no alternative but to sell their labour power to the owners of the means of production. The

very meaning of human activity is transformed: from the daily dialogue with nature it is transformed into the empty carrying-out of instructions – doing becomes labour. The alienation of labour is at once alienation from nature (Foster 2000: 72).

The rift is a dis-enchantment of nature.<sup>6</sup> Nature becomes an object for humans, an object of scientific study, an object of labour, separated from magic and religion. This was not just a shift in thinking, but in fact a long and violent process closely bound up with the suppression and redefinition of women. The witch hunts that were such an important part of primitive accumulation were an attack on the magical vision of the world and the practices associated with it. (Federici 2004: 200ff.) This was accompanied by the rise of a new scientific rationalism that had at its base the constitution of nature as an object quite separate from humans, an object governed by laws that could be discovered by reason.<sup>7</sup> Our relation to the world around us came to be seen as a relation of separation, of distance, of knowledge-about and use or exploitation.

This has profound consequences. Marx and Engels spoke of the resulting ‘idiocy of rural life’ (1848/1976: 188) and the cutting-off of the rural population from ‘all world intercourse, and consequently from all culture’ (1845/1976: 401), but the more serious problem is perhaps not so much what the separation did to the rural population as what it did to the urban population, those deprived of the contact with the land. The separation ‘makes one man into a restricted town-animal, another into a restricted country-animal’ (1845/1976: 64), and it is perhaps the restricted town-animal that does the greater damage, and suffers the greater loss.<sup>8</sup> Ehrenreich (2007: 129ff.) speaks of an ‘epidemic of melancholy’ in Europe in the seventeenth century, which she sees as an aspect of the repression of collective joy, but it does not seem fanciful to connect both the widespread melancholy and the repression of collective joy to the separation of people from the land, the loss of the therapeutic effect of contact with other forms of life and the loss of vitality of the village communities. The enclosure of the land does not just provide an abundant supply of available labour power for the nascent capitalism: it creates a world of city dwellers depressed, impoverished and desensitised by their loss of contact with nature.

The enclosure of land is far from being just a past episode: in world terms, the elimination of peasants from the land has never been so torrential as it is today:

The global forces 'pushing' people from the countryside – mechanisation of agriculture in Java and India, food imports in Mexico, Haiti and Kenya, civil war and drought throughout Africa, and everywhere the consolidation of small holdings into large ones and the competition of industrial-scale agribusiness – seem to sustain urbanisation even when the 'pull' of the city is drastically weakened by debt and economic depression. (Davis 2006: 17)

All of this means not only misery for the people involved but that the metabolic rift between humans and nature is constantly growing.

By producing and reproducing the separation between humans and the rest of nature, we produce and reproduce the destruction of our own conditions of existence; in other words, we produce and reproduce the conditions of our own destruction. In this, humans bear a peculiar responsibility that separates us from other forms of life. The metabolic rift that threatens not only our own existence but also the existence of very many (possibly all) other forms of life is the consequence of human action and can be overcome only by a transformation of the ways in which humans live.

It has become very clear that our metabolic interaction with other forms of life and our natural environment is a precondition of human existence and that the future of humanity depends on our ability to overcome the rift we have created. This does not mean, however, that we are the same as other animals. It has become popular to assert that there is no essential difference between humans and other forms of life. This seems to me to be both wrong and dangerous. It is we humans (not the pigs, not the ants) who are destroying the prospects of life on earth and this reflects our peculiarly creative and destructive power. The doing which is central to this book is distinctively human doing, not animal doing. It is necessary to recognise our difference from animals in order to assume fully our peculiar responsibility in overcoming the metabolic rift: we cannot rely on the pigs or ants to do it.<sup>9</sup>

It is little wonder then that many of the movements of recent years have placed at the centre of their struggles the overcoming of the separation between humans and other forms of life. This is the substance of many of the cracks: the development (through organic gardening, permaculture, the creation of botanic gardens, dry toilets, whatever) of a form of living, a form of doing, based on a different relation with nature.<sup>10</sup> The revolt of doing against abstract labour echoes the cry of the sixteenth-century revolutionary, Thomas Müntzer: 'all living things must also become free.'<sup>11</sup>

The abstraction of doing into labour is the externalisation of our power-to-do and the creation of the citizen, politics and the state.

Abstraction is a removal, a displacement, a taking away. All that, and something even more terrible: abstraction is a giving away.

I bake a cake, for myself and my friends. Part of the pleasure of doing it is the feeling of my power. I realise that I am able to make a delicious cake, that I have a power to do something I enjoy. The next time I call in my friends and we make cakes together: again we delight in our abilities, our power-to-do. We feel our power as a verb, as a being-able-to.<sup>1</sup> Then, as we have seen, I decide to make cakes for selling them on the market. After a while I realise that in order to live I need to produce in a certain way and at a certain rhythm. The market measures my baking and that measurement rebounds upon my activity. My doing, we saw, has been transformed into labour and at the same time my power-to-do has been transformed into something else: into an impersonal power over us. We no longer exercise power over our own activity. We have externalised our own power and by doing so we have converted our power-to-do into its opposite, power-over us. Our power as a verb, our being-able-to, has been transformed into power as a noun, a thing outside us. When we see what we have done, we wail and gnash our teeth, but the terrible thing is that we keep on doing it, we repeatedly externalise our power, convert our creative power into an impersonal, alien power over us. We do it repeatedly because we see no other way to survive.<sup>2</sup>

The conversion of doing into abstract labour takes place largely through the expansion of wage labour. The externalisation of power is the same, but even more palpable. I bake a



cake, enjoy doing it, feel my power-to-do. I decide this time that I shall not sell my cakes directly on the market, but I shall sell my capacity to bake cakes, my power to bake, to a large bakery, and in return I receive a wage. This time it is not the market but my employer who measures my work and imposes the rhythms necessary for him to be able to sell the cakes on the market. The power-over has a personal face, but the capitalist is simply the personification of impersonal forces that he does not control. Again we have externalised our own power and by doing so we have converted our power-to-do into a power-over us. Again we do it again day after day: we externalise our power-to-do and convert it into an alien power-over us. What else are we to do when we have been cut off from the means of production, the means of survival?

And after a while we forget the pleasure of creative doing. We even forget that our power-to-do is the substance of power-over, that the power-over of capital depends totally upon our power-to-do, that it is we who create the power that is exercised over us. Our power-to-do becomes invisible: 'power' becomes a noun, synonymous with the power of the powerful, the power of capital, the power of the system.

The repeated and multiple externalisation of our power (and thereby the metamorphosis of power-to into power-over) creates a complex web of social cohesion (capitalist social relations). This web of social cohesion is produced and re-produced by the myriad processes of abstraction of our doing, the externalisation of our power-to-do, and it comes to constitute a complex network of power-over, a web of obligation, compulsion, domination. This is the capitalist society that stands over against us, the social cohesion or synthesis that makes a mockery of our attempts to do something else, tells us that our cracks are the cracks of insanity.

The society that is constituted by abstract labour, by the repeated transformation of our being-able-to into a power-over us, is an antagonistic society. It is based on the frustration of our doing, our thrust to do what we consider necessary or desirable. This fundamental frustration is at the same time a class antagonism, an antagonism between those who are created by and benefit from abstract labour (the capitalists) and those who are forced to perform the abstract labour (the labourers). The

'dull compulsion of economic relations' (Marx 1867/1965: 737; 1867/1990: 899) is never enough to contain this antagonism: it must be backed by the use of force. Our externalisation of power acquires an extra dimension. Power-over, that monster created by the metamorphosis of our power-to-do, duplicates itself. It comes to exist in two distinct forms: the economic and the political. There develops over time an instance separated from society that seeks to secure the social order necessary for the rule of abstract labour. This instance is the state.

It was not always so. In feudal society, for example, there was neither the same externalisation of our power, nor the same separation of the economic and the political. The serf was forced, under pain of punishment, to exercise her capacities on behalf of the lord but there was no loss of the specificity of the activity, and there was no separation between exploitation and the use or threat of force necessary to maintain it. Domination was directly personal and overtly hierarchical. A feudal society is a 'parcelised' society, in which social cohesion is established in the community and under the personal and traditional domination of the lord.

This changed as the lords drove out the peasants to make way for sheep, and as the peasants fled from the tyranny of the lords. Personal bondage no longer held the society together. The new cohesion centred on the abstraction of doing into labour created a new, abstract subject. The serfs, subordinated as a community to their lord, were transformed into individuals, sellers of commodities and especially of the central commodity, labour power. As individual sellers of commodities, they necessarily enjoyed equal rights, rights as equal property-owners, without which the contract of exchange would be impossible. They were transformed into legal subjects.<sup>3</sup> They became (through a process of struggle) equal citizens enjoying equal rights. This is a formal, abstract equality, that tells us nothing of their real situation in life. Citizenship is an abstraction, the consolidation of the abstract individuality inherent in the abstraction of doing into labour. As abstract labourers, we are all equal, all partakers in the social production of the commodity society, a society based upon abstraction, upon indifference to meaning and particularity.

As abstract individuals (and only as abstract individuals) we are citizens and can be represented.

The state is characterised by its separation from society. It does not establish the social cohesion, but acts as a necessary complement to the establishment of that cohesion through the process of exchange. It is a derivative form of abstract labour, constituted by the abstraction of doing into labour. The constitution of the state is at the same time the constitution of the economic and the political as separate spheres, from both of which the abstraction of doing into labour, the transformation of our being-able-to into a power-over us, disappears from view.

The political draws our fire, distracts our attention from the fundamental question of our power-to-do. The state, by its very existence, says in effect, 'I am the force of social cohesion, I am the centre of social determination. If you want to change society, you must focus on me, you must gain control of me.' This is not true. The real determinant of society is hidden behind the state and the economy: it is the way in which our everyday activity is organised, the subordination of our doing to the dictates of abstract labour, that is, of value, money, profit. It is this abstraction which is, after all, the very basis of the existence of the state. If we want to change society, we must stop the subordination of our activity to abstract labour, do something else.

Yet the siren call of the state is enormously forceful. Over and over again, it calls to us that if we want to achieve anything, if we want to change society, we must look at it. It diverts our efforts. The existence of the state as a separate or particular instance is a constant calling to us, a constant seducing of us into a separate sphere of politics. Even if we reject the party as a form of organisation, even if we say we do not want to take power, there is still the constant voice saying 'it is the political that is important, forget the content of your everyday activity, it is politics that matters.' Even many autonomist groups get drawn into this: they focus on the construction of an 'other politics' without seeing that an 'other politics' must be based on the critique of the very separation of politics from the rest of our everyday activity, on the overcoming of the separation of politics from doing.<sup>4</sup>

The state draws us on to a false terrain. But that means that politics draws us on to a false terrain: the very acceptance of politics as a distinct sphere leads us down the wrong road. Bring it all home, bring it home to our activity, our own doing and the way it is organised, what we do each day. The more we advance in our argument, the more we see the importance of Marx's insistence on critique *ad hominem*, the understanding and the changing of the world from the perspective of human activity.

The state, and therefore politics understood as a distinct sphere, is a removal, a displacement, a drawing away of our struggle for a different world. But more than that: it is a creation, a giving away by us. The existence of the state is part of the externalisation of power inherent in the abstraction of doing into labour, part of the transformation of our power-to-do into their power-over. We create and re-create it by paying taxes, by obeying the laws, by voting in elections: but also, by constituting a distinct sphere of the political separate from everyday life. The state is not an external force but an externalised force. We create the state by externalising our power: its power over us is the transformation of our power to do. The critique of the state, then, is the critique of the externalisation of our power, of our own constant creation and re-creation of the state as an authority standing outside us, and of politics as a distinct sphere separated from our daily lives, from our doing and eating and loving.<sup>5</sup>